RELATIONSHIP LITERACY AND POLYAMORY: A QUEER APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

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The field of rhetoric and composition has embraced queer theory and broader understandings of sexual literacy (Alexander) in order to dialogue with students, teachers, theorists and other learners about the problematics of normativity when applied to sexuality. Although discussed in a variety of other academic fields, polyamory—the practice, identity, and theory of an ethical engagement in multiple loving relationships with the full knowledge and consent of all involved—has not yet been broached within rhetoric and composition. This project is the first step in starting such a conversation. By providing a synthesis of the extant scholarship on polyamory across the disciplines and explaining how polyamory can be viewed as an organic outgrowth from current conversations about queerness and identity, I coin the term “relationship literacy” as a way to provoke new dialogues about what it might mean to make and maintain intimate, consensual relationships that do not necessarily fall in line with the status quo. Through the lens of queer theory, I advocate the importation of polyamory studies into rhetoric and composition because it can stimulate existing conversations about feminist pedagogy as well as the generative social justice theories and activisms that form the basis of the field. Through a queer approach to polyamory, new insights in both theory and pedagogy become possible, as scholars and teachers begin to understand the force of mononormativity (Pieper and Bauer) as nearly ubiquitous.
Dedicated to my lifepartner Andrew Trahan. Without your passion, unflinching work ethic, genius, and dedication, this project would not exist. What we said on our wedding day is still as true as it is today: “1,000 years would not be enough!”
I have tried my best to make this work accessible to a broad audience. Throughout the process, I have always been eager to dialogue, collaborate, solicit feedback, and share chapters with those who are interested, no matter their rank, title, or their affiliation. The polyamory movement truly has no borders, and it is a subtle yet powerful vibrational change that is happening across diverse systems. I believe I will live to see the day when relationships will be free to be more fluid and poly/queer people will no longer be hiding, trembling, in closets. The world will at last know the full miracle of love.

Many brain and heart collaborations went into the making of this project. I’m happy to take this moment to thank as many as I can. First and foremost, I’d like to thank all those brave poly and queer people for coming out of the closet and showing your beautiful selves to the world! It is so difficult to stand in the spotlight and be a potential target for cynicism, ignorance, and hate. I know I have felt all those negative emotions being flung at me, and it certainly hasn’t been easy. Thank you for making yourself visible.

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Finally, a thank you to the mind-bogglingly massive network of like-minded people who are working in academe as well as outside of it, working to make Planet Earth a truly peaceful, loving place. You are the ones who understand that words like peace and love are not just words and not just an idealistic dream—but that these words have concrete power and that these words are being embodied, more and more, as we move through the passage of “time.” Though I do not know your name and though we may never shake hands or embrace, I Love You.
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I: NEW DIRECTIONS

“The political writer, then, is the ultimate optimist, believing people are capable of change and using words as one way to try and penetrate the privatism of our lives. A privatism which keeps us back and away from each other, which renders us politically useless.” —Cherrie Moraga

“Could it be that we just don’t know ourselves? That the very words we use to speak ourselves to others obscure as much as they elucidate?” —David L. Wallace

This is a project about love. It’s about relationships—recognizing them, composing them, articulating language for imagining them, and about maintaining them, in loving ways.

It’s about community. It’s about the literacy that is crucial to articulating social formations and making active decisions—rather than passively defaulting to norms—about those formations. My project is about weaving together notions of queerness with polyamory, a word that is composed from both Greek and Latin roots: “poly” meaning many and “amor,” which means love.

Admittedly, though, despite my desire to write of love, community, and brave, active decision-making, this project does have a history that includes fear. I have come to this project through a long series of hedgings. There was a part of me that didn’t want to write about this topic. Originally, upon entering the rhetoric and writing doctoral program at Bowling Green
State University (BGSU), I envisioned writing a dissertation that took—in my mind—“the easy way out” (it would be a dissertation that would still be quite interesting to me but that probably wouldn’t ruffle any feathers): I would write about why queer theory is crucial for the field of rhetoric and composition. And…yet…there was something else, something better (for me), yet something more radical and more potentially disrupting I wanted to discuss. I wanted to talk about a specific emerging community. I wanted to write about polyamory: a relationship orientation and cultural worldwide movement made of people who reject the assumption that love is a finite resource. Thus, to be polyamorous (“poly” for short) is to believe that abundant love, connection, and support is possible within spiritual, sexual, emotional, and/or intellectual relationships between honest, communicative, consenting human beings. As an orientation toward being that is an alternative to monogamy (but not necessarily “against” monogamy—for the relationship style of monogamy is a valid and beneficial choice for some), a key tenant is the notion that it is possible to ethically and responsibly love more than one person simultaneously.

However, a polyamorous person may identify as such no matter what actual form their relationship(s) take. In other words, one does not have to have multiple romantic partners to identify as poly (e.g. sometimes unattached single people self-identify as polyamorous, as a way to signal a general stance of openness to the world and all its possibilities).

For about three years, I have been following conversations about polyamory in the popular as well as subcultural media (such as self-help books, personal memoirs, novels, poetry, online forums, blogs, websites, television programs, films, music, visual art). So far, what I have come to understand is that polyamory is a broad banner, under which a multiplicity of descriptive

1 Many people in the poly movement and in poly studies use the nearly-synonymous terms “ethical nonmonogamy” and/or “consensual nonmonogamy” instead of or in addition to the term polyamory.

2 According to Cardoso (2012), the opposite of polyamory is not monogamy; the opposite of polyamory is actually cheating on one’s partner—because, at base, polyamory is about being honest.
terms and frameworks can be used. In the media, poly has been used as a noun, an adjective and as a kind of umbrella term. The term has been described variously as a sexual orientation (Klesse, 2012), a relationship orientation, a relationship history, an identity, a politics, a cultural movement, a lifestyle, a lovestyle, a healing art (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2009), a romantisexual label (e.g., “I’d like you to meet my poly partner”), a type of event (e.g., “please come to my poly potluck”), a stance (e.g., “are these folks poly-friendly?), an ethical or philosophical worldview, and a general theory for living and loving. There are also multiple formal definitions of polyamory circulating. The definition I like best is given in the glossary of Sexuality:

Polyamory is a state of being, an awareness, and/or a lifestyle that involves mutually acknowledged, simultaneous relationships of a romantic and/or sexual nature between more than two persons. . . . Polyamorous people can be exclusively lesbian, gay, or bisexual, yet their efforts to get past the limitations of monogamy erode set binarisms, including the myth that being part of a closed dyad is the only authentic form of love. (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004, p. 165)

For the first year and a half of my doctoral program, though, I was hesitant, and didn’t discuss the desire to research poly with anyone because I knew the topic was a potential minefield, for two major reasons. First, how could I write about polyamory if I were worried that my audience would automatically assume that I was polyamorous? Secondly, how could I write about a topic that had never before been discussed (other than in passing) in my field? Weren’t dissertations supposed to cover somewhat already-tread ground? Wasn’t my dissertation supposed to merely review the already-existing literature and then simply add my voice to the mix?
However, as time passed, these roadblocks dissolved. In the second year of my doctoral program, I decided to partially come out of the closet—though my lifepartner and I would continue to hide our relationship style from his corporate (and we imagined less understanding) colleagues as well as my conservative religious family\(^3\), we decided to take the bold leap and no longer hide the fact that our relationship was polyamorous and that we both, as individuals, self-identified as poly. At this time, too, we began to get involved with a number of polyamorous social, support, and spiritual groups. Through these connections, we gained confidence in our chosen way. We finally had community! And so, in that second year of my doctoral program, I was no longer afraid: if my audience assumed I was poly because of my dissertation topic, then that would be just fine with me, because I no longer feared potential negative judgment. In terms of the second issue—wondering about whether I should dive into a topic that hadn’t yet been discussed in our field—I received an assurance from a number of mentors (not just from my home department, but mentors working in departments and regions across the United States) who assured me that broaching a new topic within a dissertation was something that graduate students can, in fact, \textit{do}. The key to doing it properly, they said, was simply to show how existing scholarship has paved the way for the new things I want to say.

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I foreshadow my core message; provide my guiding research questions; explain my research design as well as the long-term trajectory of my research on sexuality and polyamory; provide definitions of key terms that have informed this project while offering a snapshot of the main bodies of literature that are the building blocks of this work; preview each chapter’s content; and, lastly, outline why this topic is significant for rhetoric and composition.

\(^3\) It must be noted that while I was in the later stages of drafting this project, I finally came out as poly and queer to my biological family. Most of them, including my mother and father, have reacted with hostility. Due to this, I am currently estranged from a majority of my family members.
Core Message; Core Research Questions

At first glance, it may not seem obvious why discussions about polyamory would be significant for the field of rhetoric and composition. If poly is important, then why has it not yet been discussed in any depth yet? And how might polyamory relate to existing conversations about sexuality and identity that have been happening in our field?

As I began to survey the scholarly writing on polyamory in other fields, I came to realize that polyamory is an extraordinary nexus for a variety of seemingly disparate areas and topics. Polyamory is a massive issue with great potential for even more proliferation. For example, a recent article in the academic journal *Sexualities* argued that anarchism, as a political theory, can be queered by applying the metaphor of polyamory: through polyamory, intellectual anarchists can “find value in relating the ways that we love to the ways that we (might) think” (Shannon & Willis, 2010, p. 435). Indeed, polyamory has a wide range of often surprising applicability; it has been an exciting and radical area of interest since the 1990s across a range of diverse fields: sociology, psychology, law, and theology, to name just a handful. Importing scholarly conversations about polyamory will complexify—“queer,” if you will—the subfield of queer studies within rhetoric and composition. Talking about polyamory in all the various ways it can be talked about—as an identity, a theory, a social movement, a lovestyle—will help us expand our understanding of not only queer relationships, but human relationships and connections more broadly and how these are discursively constructed through intentional language use. In doing so, I hope to answer David L. Wallace’s (2011) call for our field to be a discipline that does not merely pay lip service to social ideals about diversity but rather acts as a real “force for social justice,” figuring out ways we may avoid “contributing to the status quo that systematically marginalizes some groups in our society.” Along with Wallace, I believe “We owe it to our
students and ourselves to engage in the full potential in our field” (p. 8). In incorporating discussion of the marginalized practices and theories of polyamory into our field, I hope that my work will have an impact outside of rhetoric and composition as well, inspiring the kinds of broad, wide-ranging conversations that will be essential to teasing out implications regarding social justice for those working in the humanities and social sciences. Though not all discussions of polyamory in this project or elsewhere will always be focused on the sexual, it is important to note how central sexuality is to talking about polyamory. Although many in the academy take it for granted, it still bears repeating that the link between the sexual and the social is key to exploding oppressively hierarchical situations, the key to revealing the supposedly “natural” relations of human beings with each other. Indeed: “Thinking sexuality as a social relation, then, means understanding sexuality is resolutely social, rather than private, or personal, or trivial” (Weiss, 2011, p. 7).

The work of Jonathan Alexander (2008) has provided a compelling exigency for my own. In *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies*, he argued that we must teach students how to approach the world, and the various texts within that world, with increasing “sexual literacy.” Alexander shows how sexual literacy, a fluency with recognizing and interrogating marginalizing norms regarding sex and sexuality, is important to all scholars and teachers in rhetoric and composition—and not just those engaged in LGBT activism. As he posited, sexual literacy is “the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms” (p. 5). In making a case for the importance of this pedagogy, he notes how “narratives, stories, representations, legal codes, and ways of speaking” make certain ways of
being sexual in the world seem normal or abnormal (p. 123), which is problematic; thus, we must hone our criticism of the “dominant—and often dominating—set of tropes and narrations that organize desire, intimacy, and identity” (p. 19). Inspired by Alexander, in this project I coin the term “relationship literacy,” which refers to a practice, skill, and pedagogical aim. This term will provide a framework for answering my two core research questions, which are: What would be the pedagogical effects and/or benefits of importing the discussion of polyamory into our field of rhetoric and composition? How might polyamory studies impact our field in regards to literate agency?

Relationship literacy refers to the reflexive, critical fluency with which human beings can understand, analyze, discuss, and reflect upon their own as well as others’ relationship styles, choices, practices, values, and ethics. Mononormativity—the false assumption that all people aim to be or should be monogamous (a term usually meaning that one person is limited to loving or intimately relating with only one other person at a time) is one of the negative results of a lack of knowledge about the possibilities and options for relating to others in a sexual, loving, and/or intimate manner. Focusing on relationship literacy within rhetoric and composition pedagogy and theory can have the beneficial effect of exposing mononormativity, as well as other marginalizing norms and assumptions. Monogamy must not be seen as simply a neutral desire or state. Just as Adrienne Rich (1980) famously pointed out that heterosexuality “needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution” (p. 637), so too does the lid need to be wrenched from the supposedly-placid pot of monogamy. Monogamy is indeed a political institution.

In an effort to broaden the limits of what Judith Butler (1990/2010) has referred to as lives that are finally made “possible” and “real” (p. xxiv), this dissertation will focus on discussions of relationship literacy and the specific option of polyamory as a particularly
generative example of a relationship style/identity/orientation/practice with radical implications for how human beings move, love, and can be loved in this world. I seek to reveal polyamory as a catalyst for analyzing how people can more reflectively and reflexively construct various types of relationships, relationships that support lives that are increasingly healthy and loving.

Utilizing the notion of relationship literacy—a practice, a skill, and a pedagogical aim—students and teachers can begin to interrogate constraining norms in the ways that relationships are typically constructed (such as the heterosexual dyad, the nuclear family, the prevalence of divorce and its attendant serial monogamy, etc.), and, in doing so, polyamory can become a general theory that has great practical use in the academy. Polyamory, as a theory of a more equitable culture, is a portrait of the way human culture can be. It is a portrait of social justice that celebrates possibility and option, rather than refusing possibilities and options in advance. I will argue that polyamory studies organically flows from and into already-present explorations of queer theory and social justice that are prevalent across academe and the specific discipline of rhetoric and composition.

Research Design and Trajectory

The dissertation genre is typically meant to act as a covering and a contribution to an already-begun conversation. Yet in delving into polyamory, I will be addressing something that no one in rhetoric and composition has discussed in any significant length, despite the fact that a whole host of other scholarly fields have been analyzing polyamory since the 1990s.

However, I have carefully devised a general strategy to temper the risks of “starting a new conversation” by simply drawing on scholars in our field who have, in essence, paved the way for this conversation. I draw on the work of compositionists and rhetoricians who have queered our field, as I suggest that the kairotic moment is now for discussing polyamory. More
specifically, this project focuses on scholarly conversations that have occurred regarding queer theory, queer sexualities, social justice, as well as the emerging interdisciplinary discussion of polyamory. Limiting the bulk of my research to peer-reviewed scholarship—rather than on the numerous public texts (both popular and subcultural) that have been circulating—may perhaps obviate potential objections from my academic audience who may wonder whether poly is just a passing fad in our culture, destined to become eventually irrelevant or discredited. By centering my analysis on scholarship, I signal the theoretically significant and serious nature of these conversations. However, I would be remiss if I did not at least briefly cite (in Chapter Two) some of the major contributors to the ongoing public conversations. Indeed, polyamory is a fast-growing, heterogeneous, multi-faceted, transnational movement, and there is indeed much room for future work that surveys the daily-increasing archives of text, image, and sound that is daily being produced and circulated across the globe. The exigency of this topic is reflected in the fact that my dissertation blog “The Rhetoric and Composition of Polyamory” <http://rhetcomppolydiss.wordpress.com/> is being followed in countries such as Italy, Germany, Mexico, Netherlands, Israel, Hong Kong, Tailand, Taiwan, Pakistan, Indonesia, and dozens more.

Even though this project focuses on interpreting and incorporating queer and polyamory studies scholarship (and not texts meant for general audiences), I have aimed to write in as clear language as possible, because I agree with Judith Halberstam’s (2011) ethic that the goal of scholarly work must be to “engage” with “ideas that circulate widely in other communities” outside the academy (p. 24). My goal is a revolution in thinking. I am honored that this work will be published within my field, but I also recognize the necessity of circulating it beyond, to readers across occupations and fields of interest. Of course, I have worked with my committee to
compose a document that aligns with the norms and traditions of my field and with standards in
the humanities. At the same time, I have also consulted with friends, partners, former colleagues,
and family members, asking them to read and comment on drafts. I have done this to help ensure
that my work has been composed in such a way that is accessible to broader audiences.
Collaborating with commentators on my blog has also helped carry out this intent.

In addition to reviewing and synthesizing the various bodies of scholarly writing that help
contribute to an understanding of the value of importing polyamory studies into the field of
rhetoric and composition, I will also incorporate a small sample of student writing collected from
“Queer Writing: Communities, Identities, Texts,” an Intermediate Writing course I taught during
Spring 2013 in the English Department at BGSU. In this course, students learn about queer
theory, reflect upon their personal relationships using the lens of relationship literacy, and they
research the transnational polyamory movement and offer their own insights about the nature of
that movement. Throughout the term, students grappled with basic questions. What does “queer”
mean? What is a relationship? What is sexual orientation? What does it mean to be sexual? What
are some cultural assumptions about how romantic relationships should be enacted? In offering
“Queer Writing” as one potential model, I reflect upon ways that teachers may harness the
themes of polyamory, queerness, and love in order to enrich writing classes that are focused on
social justice issues.

This hermeneutically-based dissertation is only the first phase in a longer career of theory
building. As mentioned before, in this specific project I will limit myself to exploring how theory
and pedagogy in rhetoric and composition may be implicated, affected, and enriched by the study

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4 As this project remains focused on the interpretation and analysis of published scholarship, I chose not to perform
in-depth interviews or conduct other empirical research that required HSRB approval; however, I do feel it is
necessary to include the voices of students, as my work does focus on the pedagogical applications of polyamory
and relationship literacy.
of polyamory and relationship literacy. My long-term trajectory is to complete this dissertation as a way to get a solid handle on the available literature on the intersections between queer theory, social justice, and polyamory. After this initial grounding work is complete, I plan on obtaining HSRB approval and formally collecting qualitative research from students and teachers in courses relating to this subject area. The next phase will then be to venture outside the ivory tower, out into communities of lived practice, to perform ethnographic work in polyamorous subcultures, support groups, activist movements and organizations and so on. Therefore, it is clear that this dissertation will play a crucial role in assisting me in embarking on this long-term path: a scholarly career devoted to better understanding how human beings use, understand, and wield language to compose attachments, relationships, ethics, and identities.

Snapshot of Queer Theory

**Basic Definitions**

Depending on the context, queer can refer to a chosen identity label, and/or it can be a mode of seeing the world, being in the world, or analyzing the world. “Queer” has become a significant term in our culture within everyday language/writing/talk, and it has also become a critically significant and contentious term within the academy. Although the term is often in reference to some conversation about sexuality, it is “not exclusively concerned with sexuality” (Rawson, 2010, p. 42).

In reading queer theory across diverse fields, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, I have found that queer theory is trying to describe an ethics, a system of values for understanding and organizing and being in the world that embraces ideas and moments and periods of change and fluidity. Queer is not about being against heterosexuality—it’s about critiquing the very concept of “normal.” And, queer is about disruption at a fundamental level.
As feminist and cultural studies scholar Sara Ahmed (2006) pointed out, “To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things” (p. 161). Yes, to make things queer, to view things from a queer angle, is to emphasize disturbance, disorientation, fluidity, impermanence, and other ambiguous emotions and perspectives—which often feels unpleasant or downright painful, because human beings tend to crave stability, certainty, and predictability. To be queer is to not always know and to be okay with the not knowing.

There are many definitions of “queer.” Some definitions align; some directly contradict each other. Some adopt plain language and some are extraordinarily beautiful. Some work to narrow down a baseline, restrictive understanding of what the core of queer is (some argue that queer can only include nonstraight sexualities and orientations), while others open up the term to a range of possibilities—they seek to include rather than to exclude. One definition I particularly like, due to its broadness, is Judith Halberstam’s (2005), which she offers at the outset of In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives. For her, queer is referring to “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (p. 6). In this definition, there is a lot of room to move, a lot of room to think and play and stretch. In definitions like Halberstam’s, queer theory becomes a productive playing field for a multiplicity of issues, and polyamory appears to be an organic inclusion within this field of thought, a topic that I will discuss more in Chapter Three.

A generalization that can be made about queer is that it is an umbrella term, one that can be used differently, depending on the context—and thus, its power stems from “its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity” (Jagose, 1996/2010, p. 1). Some queer theorists are, in fact, even working to broaden the notion of what “sexual orientation” means. Ahmed, for instance, believes that sexual orientation should not just denote sexual object choice, but rather “as involving
differences in one’s very *relation* [emphasis added] to the world—that is, in how one ‘faces’ the world or is directed toward it” (p. 68). Further, she sharply questions whether orientation should even be a term that we continue to propagate, considering how dominant culture mythologizes the naturalness and stableness of orientation. She believes that orientation is not something with which we are biologically born.

Indeed, orientation is a powerful technology insofar as it constructs desire as a magnetic field: it can imply that we were drawn to certain objects and others *as if* by a force of nature: so women are women insofar as they are oriented toward men and children. The fantasy of natural orientation is an orientation device that organizes worlds around the form of the heterosexual couple, as if it were from this “point” that the world unfolds. . . .

The very idea that bodies “have” a natural orientation is exposed as fantasy in the necessity of the enforcement of that orientation, or its maintenance as a social requirement for intelligible subjectivity. (p. 85)

Along with Ahmed and other queer theorists, we begin to actively strive to expose fantasies of naturalness. We embrace queer theory as a way of viewing the world where one must be open to (ready for) critiquing cultural myths and for interrogating assumptions about the way things are “supposed” to be or the “natural” way things should be. A discussion of queer theory is, therefore, necessary to discussing polyamory and other ways of creating and sustaining romantic relationships—for one of the most ubiquitous, most deeply-embedded cultural myth is the myth of universal monogamy: the idea that monogamy (which usually refers to sexual fidelity, and, in addition, sometimes—depending on who you are talking to—emotional, intellectual, or spiritual fidelity) is the only correct way to engage in romantic, intimate, and/or sexual relating. Queer theory is a powerful framework for exploding such basic myths, for providing critiques regarding
cultural constructions of bodies, desires, and relations. In one of the founding texts of queer theory, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990/2010) maintained that there is no essential self that occupies a gender or sex/sexuality that is prior to culture. The gender or sex/sexuality of a person is *fully and totally* constructed (and constrained) through the discourse of culture—without exception. Yet, she simultaneously reminds us that of the fact that just because these aspects of identity are constructed *does not* make these life-factors have any less real effect in the world. They do matter for daily living—and they matter a great deal! Thus, queer theorists such as Butler do not want to deny the realities of everyday life but, instead, promote dialogue that fosters a greater awareness about how things are constructed. If things that appear natural and inevitable are actually not, then deconstruction of those elements that clash with social justice ethics is possible.

At the ground level, to utilize queer theory is to embrace notions of fluidity and productive confusion about how the world and the people in it appear to be. Appearances are no longer taken for granted (Jagose, 1996/2010). Ambiguity and impermanence are embraced, two concepts I will explore in Chapter Three. In general, queer theorists are hesitant about rigid identity categories, binary oppositions, and they accept the idea that the ethics of a society (as well the individual moral values that individuals hold) are constantly shifting creatures, continually being revised based on new situations, new contexts (and, that this is a good thing!). Change is the norm; in fact, it is not only expected but also welcomed. “Tradition” is never not open for discussion, reinterpretation. In writings with a queer bent, sacred institutions that much of our culture continues to value—such as monogamy, marriage, the nuclear family, biological reproduction, and private property—are all open for debate. No human norm and no human act are above critique.
The Place of Queer Theory in the Academy

No discussion of queer theory can happen without making a nod to feminism, for feminism has been one the primary birth places of queer thought, as notions of gender inequality and inequitable power structures (via categories such as sex, race, class, age, ability, etc.) have formed the basis for feminist inquiries in the past as well as the present (Alexander, 2008, pp. 9–12). Indeed, queer theory and feminism have much in common, as both methodologies aim to reveal and question existing and shifting power relations present within the realms of gender and sexuality in everyday, seemingly mundane situations. Often, queer theorists draw on feminist arguments and vice versa, with each domain continuing to be refreshed and invigorated by the other—though, it must be said, not without sometimes-heated disagreements or debates between them.

In the academy at large, queer theory is an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary inquiry utilized by a wide array of theorists, empirical researchers, administrators, and pedagogues. One of the most well-known advocates for the queer approach—and perhaps the most radical, as well—is literary critic and social theorist Michael Warner. His work has been a touchstone for many of the leading queer theorists for the past two decades. In one of his most oft-cited works, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999), he reminded how sexuality is still, in our institutions, in our public places, in our media, in our culture, very confined. We (our culture) may think we are open and accepting about sex and sexual variety—but, really, we are not. By and large, we (the West, particularly the United States) are a sexophobic culture—where anything that hints of deviation to “normal” sexuality is scorned.

Warner’s attention is heavily focused on providing an ethical framework for queer life and queer activism. In one of his more compelling arguments, Warner argued that the very
The institution of marriage is unethical, because its very purpose is to discriminate, to set some people higher in the hierarchy by bestowing legal and social privileges, as well as often very basic human needs, such as adequate health care, upon some and not on others. He reasoned that this is flat out wrong. He believes, and I agree with him, that all humans deserve equal care and support under social law. Due to this, Warner disagrees with the ongoing push for gays and lesbians to be granted the legal right to wed. Along these lines, one of the main goals of *The Trouble with Normal*, along with much of his other work, such as in his highly influential *Publics and Counterpublics* (2005), is to critique the gay and lesbian movement for trying to be “normal”—for trying to fit in with mainstream, nonqueer American culture (and this goes beyond just the marriage debates, too). In attempting to sympathize with why many gays and lesbians want to be perceived as normal, though, Warner points to the emotion of shame, which he also sees as the driving force behind our homophobic, erotophobic mass culture—a culture predicated upon shaming those who deviate from supposedly “normal” sexual norms. Warner tries to shame shame. And even though there are aspects of Warner’s social justice politics that can be hard for some to swallow (for example, his argument that the institution of legal marriage should not exist), his general stance is in line with what many queer theorists understand about the fluidity and impermanence of sexual identities, acts, desires, and policies. “Any sexual ethics ought to allow for change,” he states (Warner, 1999, p. 10). Warner’s emphasis on change, on ethical evolution, and even on the importance of a society allowing for deviation, is important to understanding how a new concept like relationship literacy is necessary: for in the changing context of many people’s daily lives within polyamorous and other nonmainstream relationship styles, we need a new framework for understanding the importance of understanding how it is
that a plethora of ways of interacting, ways of relating, are a healthy—dare I say necessary—part of society(ies) that seeks to support and understand rather than marginalize and disregard.

Queer theory is, too, about the celebration of the radical potential of sex and desire for empowerment, personal healing, and transformation. The work of Warner and other queer theorists are careful not to place hierarchical values on certain sorts of relationships or certain types of sex acts. Much of the work of Dr. Deborah Anapol (1997, 2010), a key player in polyamory discussions in the popular press (and, admittedly, not a queer theorist), has, unfortunately, been influential in promoting ideas counter to such radical, sex-positive ideals. In what I perceive as her (sometimes subtly and sometimes not-to-subtly) sex-negative approach, she has often boasted about how poly people are more concerned with creating and sustaining committed, long-lasting partnerships rather than engaging in nonchalant, brief, or looser forms of sex. While such sentiments are understandable—Anapol wants to distance the poly identity from the more casual, party-oriented swinger lifestyle as well as create a culture of safer sex in an era where AIDS is still very much a real concern—much of the insights of my project depart from her philosophy, as my work is inherently sex-positive in that, as a queer theorist, I believe that we should not make decisions in advance about which intimate encounters are more valuable or ethical. Sex and sexuality, in all its various forms (whether occurring in a committed partnership or occurring in a short-lived enriching romance or occurring in brief, intense encounters or occurring within the context of a friendship, etc.) is, I believe, to be embraced as a tool and as a “healing art” that connects human beings and helps us to live more peaceably and sustainably on this planet (Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2009). Along with queer theorists like Michael Warner, David Halperin, and Judith Butler, I appreciate the understanding of queer as a sex-positive descriptor that “does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions”—
instead, queer “describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance” (Halperin, 1995, p. 62).

The issue of visibility is important for both traditional identity politics (the aim of which is to raise awareness and garner legal/political rights for particular marginalized groups, the limits of which I will discuss further in Chapter Three) as well as for queer thought and activism. Part of the impetus for this project is to inspire my readers who are queer, polyamorous, and/or engage in nonnormative relationship styles be forthcoming about all parts of their lives in the public realm. Please speak up if you can! Come out of hiding about your chosen identity labels, your loves, your desires, your fantasies, your dreams, your relationships (whether lengthy or brief), and your sexual practices. If, as both Warner and Ahmed argue, the goal of queer theory is to create a world where other options for living are welcomed, then the closet will not make that goal come true. Butler (2010) pushes academics, activists and queers alike to consider the transformative value in increasing the transparency of lives, of creating more open performances, because the “possibilities” for transformation in the ways that humans view gender, sexuality, and other aspects of humanity lay “in the possibility of a failure to repeat” normative cultural scripts (p. 192). Indeed, usually in the background of queer theory is the call for more openness about the ways that some of us choose to live, for this is perhaps the only way that the broader public can both recognize and understand (and hopefully empathize with) the existence of variations to supposed “norms.”

Queers and Social Justice

For queer theorists, the call and push for change seems to be linked to an underlying hope and trust in humanity; and this hope and trust always is linked to other issues of social justice, such as issues of economics/class, race, gender, ability, and other categories. For queer theorists,
trust is placed in each person’s unique abilities, experiences, wisdom, and orientation(s). And, attention is paid to how these intersecting social issues and unique human capacities can contribute to an increased awareness of how we might make the world a more just, equitable place. And, that imagined, hoped-for world is a place of diversity—a place where we celebrate queerness and continually question what is normal, what is right. Ahmed (2006) wrote about how the act of allowing actions and identities to remain queer—by refusing to “straighten” them out—is a deeply hopeful, trusting act. If we “let [people] go, allowing them to acquire new shapes and directions,” then we will allow new ways of being, new ways of being a person, to come into the world that are appropriate for that time and place (p. 172). In this model, an ethics of committing to the queer (which, ideally, will be done by both queers and nonqueers) doesn’t make judgments in advance about how people should live or what is best for them—rather, seeing queerly and committing to the queer is to see that paths of deviation are always very human paths (thus, paths that deserve respect and love). In Ahmed’s framework, no human will then “appear oblique, strange, and out of place” (p. 179). In such a world, productive political revolution is absolutely possible, because there will be a “radical shift in one’s notion of the possible and the real” (Butler, 1990/2010, p. xxiv). In other words, lives and ways of being that were previously unthinkable will become thinkable. In her preface to Gender Trouble (written nine years after the book’s initial publication), Butler justified her work by saying that undoing the myths of gender would:

Open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized. One might wonder what use “opening up possibilities” finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is “impossible,” illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question. (p. viii)
Butler’s discussion of how certain lives can be seen as impossible has a great relevance to the discussion of polyamory, as thousands (some estimate millions) of people are living polyamorous lives—yet, these lives are thought by many to be impossible. The question of what is impossible versus what is possible is an important concern in my own project, as I have firsthand knowledge—garnered from both my personal life and from scholarly research—that many people are not only skeptical about polyamory but they downright believe it is impossible. The biggest obstacle to believing that poly is an actual way of living and being is that many people do not comprehend how the emotion of jealousy can be effectively managed (let alone overcome) in the process of having multiple loves and desires. Therefore, part of my overall project is simply to raise awareness that, yes, polyamory is a real relationship orientation and style. It is a real way of being. It really can be done, successfully, in a way that is agreeable and beneficial to all parties involved. By initiating the term relationship literacy, teacher-scholars in our field can not only learn about a very real current cultural movement, but they can also start to consider how further attention to polyamory studies will impact rhetoric and composition in regards to literate agency.

Ironically, queer theorists—thinkers who usually have social justice goals and issues in the forefront of their minds—often recognize that much of their agency comes from the fact that dominant culture, as a prescriptive force, is bound to fail because life is too complex to allow humans to follow every single rule, every single demand. Butler (1990/2010) beautifully elucidated this idea. She argued that because human beings can never perform gender and other such culturally-constructed acts one hundred percent correctly—that such performances are inherently impossible—that room for error is exactly our room for political agency. In that space of failure there is space for powerful subversion and play (p. 192). Failure can be good.
Impact of Foucault

When thinking about the dynamic interweavings of power, culture, and sexuality over time, no discussion would be complete without mentioning the French historian-philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984), a figure whom David Halperin (1995) has claimed is our most important forerunner of queer theory. Many current queer theorists routinely mention his work as having been a major influence on their thinking, and many early queer theory pioneers in the 1990s—including Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Diana Fuss, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—point to Foucault as being vital for their own thinking about sexuality. Foucault has also been invoked by scholars writing about polyamory, most notably by the Portuguese theorist Daniel Cardoso (2012).

For queer theorists, the most oft-cited are his trilogy *The History of Sexuality*. In the introductory volume⁵, Foucault did not define the history of sexuality in terms of repression (as Warner and many others have done). Rather, Foucault provided an overview of what has been the discursive *production* of knowledge about sex (p. 12); he did not enact the typical bemoaning of how sex is repressed or censored or silenced, but rather demonstrated all the ways that conversations about sex have actually exploded and intensified over the past three centuries. Foucault acknowledged that silence, of course, has existed and does exist regarding sex—however, at the same time: “Sex became something to say. . . .“An immense verbosity is what our civilization has required and organized” (p. 33). So, silence isn’t the whole story.

Indeed, Foucault’s major contribution was to turn the normal logic of repression on its head. According to Foucault, Western society is a society that is ultimately not prudish, not a society that wants to erase sex or pretend it doesn’t exist. Rather, ours is a clever, complex

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⁵ Jonathan Alexander (2008) stated that Foucault’s first volume of *The History of Sexuality* is perhaps the most important publication in the last fifty years about sexuality (p. 39).
game—a fluid (never static) game where we enjoy discussing and engaging in the (supposedly) illicit. Our ongoing “liberation” from the repressions of sex/sexuality is not a liberation at all but rather just another phase in the deployment of sexuality as a mode of both pleasure and knowledge. Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, and the first volume in particular, informs much of the background thinking of this project, and helps to temper what-could-be perhaps overblown notions of repression, as I metareflect upon how the very genre of the dissertation, as well as the highly accessible public blog I have created to accompany it, have allowed me to offer to a wide audience concepts such as relationship literacy and polyamory. There are, indeed, many in the general public as well as those in the academy who view polyamory as a kind of final phase, as a kind of be-all-end-all in the struggle for sexual liberation. While I do suspect that the growing acceptance of polyamory as a possible life-option will be something of a symptom of a larger movement in the process of denormalization, I also want to remember Foucault’s argument that sexuality *has never been just repressed*—rather, human beings have increasingly found ways to open up their lives to the new, to the “abnormal,” to the (often) frightening. At the same time, however, this work of opening up is not done. When normality is not *automatically valued*—in terms of not just sexuality but also in the context of other phenomena—but rather more constantly and consistently reflected upon and questioned and revised, then the human world will be a place where compassion and love form the basis of living, rather than that of fear and hatred.

*Queer theory*—with its focus on nonnormative identities, practices, and ethics—is vital for understanding the relevance of polyamory studies across disciplines as well as for rhetoric and composition scholars in thinking about how polyamory might spark the creation of evolved pedagogies and theories in our field that help learners to actively use discourse to more actively
construct relationships that are empowering, even if those relationships might fall outside the norms of our current cultural paradigm(s). Our field’s enthusiastic adoption of queer theory is what has made it possible for this particular project to even exist. In thinking queerly, I offer the conversation of polyamory as a way to engage in richly complex rhetorics of relationships, sexuality, identity, and social justice.

The Queering of Rhetoric and Composition: A Snapshot

*Overview of Queer Theory and LGBT Presence*

Queer theory and the discussion of LGBT sexuality has been an emergent, exciting topic within rhetoric and composition for the past two decades, and much important work has been done (e.g., Alexander, 2005a, 2005b; Reilly, 2004; Wallace, 2006). In this body of work, cases are made for challenging homophobia in the classroom and various writing spaces. Shared goals include urging composition teacher-scholars to create safe venues for queer students (and queer teachers) to be able to narrate and analyze their lived experiences and cultural insights without fear of persecution. Teacher-scholars emphasize how straight students can learn from the unique subjectivities of gay, lesbian, and queer students. And, as Robert McRuer (2006) has pointed out, queer theory in particular is the result, and is in line with, the “decades-long project in composition theory focusing on the composing process and away from the finished product” because queer theory centers on the messiness, the gaps, the dissonances, the disruptiveness, and the oft-confusion that comes with the focusing on the process—rather than the product—of composing (p. 157).

In Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace’s (2009), “The Queer Turn in Composition Studies: Reviewing and Assessing an Emerging Scholarship,” they noted how paying attention to

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6 Additional notable examples are: Alexander & Banks 2004; Alexander & Gibson, 2004; Barclay, 2004; DeWitt, 1997; Fox, 2007; McKee, 2004; McRuer, 2004; Miller, 1994; Monson & Rhodes, 2004; Peele, 2004; Peters & Swanson, 2004; Regan, 1993
queerness has been and continues to be a powerful intellectual move that “has the potential to help composition theorists, teachers, and students to come to a new understanding of what it means to take literate agency in a postmodern world” (p. 301). They emphasized how talking about queerness with students can help learners see “important connections between our personal stories and the stories that our culture tells about intimacy, identity, and connection” (p. 303).

Alexander and Wallace explained how recent work in queer composition theory and practice has challenged the notion that sexual identity is natural and binary, and, instead, argued (along with the broader community of interdisciplinary queer theorists) that sexuality is socially constructed, fluid, and requires a more complex, dynamic, intersectional understanding. Doing this sort of work, they argued, is necessary to dismantling harmful societal values such as homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. My project, which argues that polyamory can be viewed as a queer approach to thinking and enacting relationships (romantic and otherwise), will, I believe, continue the important work being done in our field to challenge ingrained norms of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity, as Wallace and Alexander have urged. Importing work from polyamory studies as well as advocating for the use of the notion of relationship literacy will help to deconstruct harmful normalizing binaries and hierarchies that minimize the potential of human beings—in all the wonderfully complex, intertwined, weird, stunning, and fantastic ways that human beings can relate to other human beings.

However, it should be noted that not everyone in the field is convinced that issues of queer theory and sexuality have been circulated as much as they could be; additionally, scholars have pointed out how what has been discussed has been, tragically, discussed in not nearly enough depth—which is a major part of what Alexander and Wallace discussed in their aforementioned piece. In a recent College Composition and Communication article, “Cruising
Composition Texts: Negotiating Sexual Difference in First-Year Readers,” Martha Marinara, Jonathan Alexander, William P. Banks, and Samantha Blackmon (2009) surveyed the massive body of popular first-year composition readers. Their analysis uncovered the fact that little attention is paid to complex issues of sex and sexuality. They wrote, “sex and sexuality are not figured as profound or sophisticated objects of study” (p. 276) for first-year composition students—with the exception of sexuality as it relates to rather clichéd gay issues, like gay marriage or sentimental coming out narratives. In their electrifying conclusion—coming on the heels of a nuanced consideration of how racial, ethnic, gendered, classed, and other modes of diversity are growing concerns in the field—the coauthors argued: “it is time to bring a similarly rich, robust, and complex understanding of sexuality and sexual identity to bear on our field’s scholarship and pedagogy” (p. 286).

However, it will not be my main purpose in this project to critique the lack of scholarship on sexuality or the lack of queer theory present within the field (although critiques of this sort can be useful). From my vantage point and for the purposes of this project, there has been a tremendous amount of solid work that has been done. What is missing, however, are robust discussions of the nonmonogamous complexities of sexual, romantic, or other relationships as well as the growing polyamory movement; this is what is more glaringly missing from the field of rhetoric and composition. Yet, at the same time, I do acknowledge the concerns of those such as Alexander who argue that perhaps not enough has been published about queer issues and sexuality—and I respond now by stating that my work is an offering that responds to his call. This project will further the work of queer theorists in our field who have and who are continuing to ask the hard questions about sexuality, identity, equity, and subjectivity.

Agency, Literacy, and Social Justice

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7 They surveyed an impressive 290 readers.
It seems difficult to imagine queer theory, both in its broad interdisciplinary manifestation as well as how it has been applied within our field, without discussions of agency, without discussions of how human beings can act (which includes thinking and writing) with intent or effect in this world. Queer theory has been theorized as a support, a helping hand, an empowering arm for compassion, empathy, and bold agency. And, in rhetoric and composition, notions of agency usually link up with social justice theory, practice, activism, and pedagogy. Thinkers such as Mina Shaughnessy, Mike Rose, Patricia Bizzell, Victor Villanueva, David L. Wallace, and Jacqueline Jones Royster have, throughout their careers, formulated various understandings of how agency might work for students and teachers alike.

In our postmodern landscape, though, the concept of agency has been critiqued. Agency seems difficult to justify, argue for, or believe in, due to today’s ever-increasingly global, yet fragmented world—a place where scholars grow less likely to accept the notion that each human being is a “centered, conscious, rational self” (Cooper, 2011, p. 420). Nonetheless, in interdisciplinary queer theory as well as in analysis of literate agency and rhetorical agency within rhetoric and composition, the notion of agency is defended (or, as Cooper framed it, “rescued”) through revisions to our understandings of social responsibility. Agency has been revised to be seen as a capacity (Bennett, 2001) for making a difference in the world, and it depends on systems of people working individually yet together, using their unique resources that come from memory, experience, and embodied knowledge (Cooper, 2011). In traditional (mistaken) understandings, “literacy” is simply the basic skills involved in reading and writing; literacy is seen “as a fixed unit”—as “defined in and of itself rather than as a dynamic component of a social event, practice, and situation” (Street, 2012, p. 221). However, in the burgeoning work being done in New Literacy Studies, an interdisciplinary effort where language
educators are looking to expand and improve pedagogies based on the understanding that literacies—not the singular “literacy”—is a multiple, rich concept that must be redefined to include increasing attention on learnings, events, and practices that happen—or fail to happen—outside of school walls. Indeed, learning literacy is very much a rhetorical and social process that happens throughout the whole of life (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Gee, 1990; Barber, 1996; Kress, 1997; Maddox, 2001, 2008; Wagner, 2004; Brandt, 2009; Goodwyn & Fuller, 2011; Street, 1984, 2003, 2012; Heath, 2012;). New Literacy researchers, often using ethnographies and case studies, are interested in helping literacy teachers “sort out the operation of ideology in rhetorical agency” (Wallace & Alexander, 2009, p. 795). These researchers argue that literacy acquisition is much more complex than teaching simply grammar and time-honored, conventional texts—instead, more dynamic interactions between wider social systems and educational-school systems need to be taken into account, as well as the adoption of pedagogies involving new media and a wider range of texts need to be introduced into literate learning. Additionally, schools need to be allowed the freedom to develop their own pedagogies based on local context, rather than being given mandatory “top-down approaches to literacy imposed on teachers and schools” (Street, 2102). For New Literacy pedagogues, too, learning cannot exist apart from informal supportive communities outside of formal schooling, and learners’ engagement with collaborative literacy projects are crucial factors in effective literacy acquisition beyond what is provided within school systems (Heath, 2012). Most importantly, students are not viewed as those who come to language learning with a “deficit.” Learning to use language is a process that starts from birth, so every learner comes to the table with preexisting knowledge. New Literacy educators aim to build on everyday meanings and uses of reading and writing with which students are already familiar, such as notebooks, calendars, bills, etc.—and not on traditional
textbooks or literature (Street, 2012, p. 221). Also, building adequate bridges between home life and school life are of particular interest. The expansive way that literacy is being explored by New Literacy educators will be indispensible to teachers, learners, and scholars who hope to broaden notions of how we in rhetoric and composition think of literacy. As this project forwards the notion of relationship literacy, it will be important to refrain from thinking of literacy in static ways—but instead think of literacy as very much an incredibly complex, rhetorical, social, and not-always-located-in-school process. Relationship literacy, as well as Alexander’s notion of sexual literacy, involves multiple sites, events, situations, skills, codes, and ways of being and thinking that highlight the possibility of learners’ agency. Learners can acquire various versions of literacy, and those literacies are ever-evolving; they are never a monolithic static skill-set that we, as teachers, can simply check “done” and move on. Learning about sexuality, identity, relationships, and the agency inherent in all these areas, is truly a life-long process—one that bridges home life and school life.

The issue of agency exists also in the diverse social justice scholarship that has existed within rhetoric and composition since the early 1970s, as scholars have been looking to both empower students, teachers, and the public, as well as expose marginalizing norms in language use. These teacher-scholars are working toward new definitions of literacy, as well as new pedagogies for analyzing oppressive norms in our society as well as in the academy, such as the myth that gaining computers and other technology on a campus automatically benefits students in their education (Selber, 2004) or the myth that composition is a lowly service discipline that does not deserve respect, administrative/departmental support, or decent pay (Miller, 1991). Attention to polyamory and relationship literacy can be seen as a logical, organic outgrowth of the work that began in rhetoric and composition around three decades ago, when scholars began
to take stock and critique gendered, racialized, and classed labor conditions, challenge traditionally dominant paradigms of sexuality, family structure, and gender roles, as well as point out structures and instances of hegemonic cultural maintenance(s). The importation of theorists outside our field who focused on love and freedom—for example, Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (1994), has helped compose a more culturally and politically-savvy field that takes social justice issues as its backbone and, I’d argue, as its lifeblood. Along with Marilyn Cooper (2011), I believe that the concept of agency is an important concept to consider and propagate, as we need it to understand, assign, and value social responsibility, especially as it relates to literacy and learning. This project begins with an underlying understanding that my words will likely reach audiences who hold radically different views for the importance of studying and enacting relationships, especially the value of critiquing sexuality more broadly; thus, underlying this project is my goal to be what Cooper (2011) calls a “responsible rhetor”:

Recognition of an other as someone capable of agency, someone capable of making a difference, is important in persuasion, but rather than creating agency, it is how a rhetor becomes responsible, how a rhetor enables real persuasion. Agency is inescapable: rhetors are agents by virtue of their addressing an audience. They become responsible rhetors by recognizing the audience not only as agents, but as concrete others who have opinions and beliefs grounded in the experiences and perceptions and meanings constructed in their brains. (p. 442)

Through a careful attention to respecting the learning that learners (both undergraduate and graduate learners, as well as faculty learners) have brought with them into each situation, in our scholarship we can forward concepts like relationship literacy and explore questions about the polyamory movement and other relationship options in ways that are responsible. Like New
Literacy educators, we can respect that not all knowledge looks the same. Not all knowledge should be the same.

*Rhetoric and Composition’s Embrace of Queer Theory: A Survey of the Most Critical Scholarship*

Probably the source that best detailed the implications for the queering of rhetoric and composition is David Wallace’s (2009) recent *College Composition and Communication* article “Alternative Rhetoric and Morality: Writing from the Margins.” Drawing on the work of Sedgwick, Wallace reminded us that oppressions “have consequences for all society” (p. 23)—not just for those people occupying minority groups. Through queer ways of seeing, we can generate a “collective exercise of agency” that works to “take action to understand our complicity in the oppression of others and to educate ourselves in the use of new discursive practices” (p. 23). Wallace bravely indicted our field: “I believe as a discipline we have tolerated homophobia and heterosexism in our classrooms [and] our composition programs” (34). Bold statements like his help to lay the groundwork for discussions about the hegemony of mononormativity in both our field’s theory and pedagogical practice.

In reflecting upon the historical legacy of our field, probably the most important text about queerness and sexuality thus far has been Harriet Malinowitz’s (1995) *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities.* In this tide-turning book, Malinowitz proposes something seemingly simple, yet radical—that “composition find out about its lesbian and gay students” so that we can create “an academic environment in which the complexities of lesbian and gay subjectivity can enter public discourse,” so that “fear” can be diminished (pp. 6–7). This is the first full-length treatment that “explores what it means to make LGBT people and experiences a part of writing pedagogy in a proactive way,” rather than
just exploring how to avoid blatant cases of homophobia in the classroom and the issues
surrounding whether or not queer writing teachers should be openly so (Alexander & Wallace,
2009, pp. 305–309). Here Malinowitz described gay/lesbian experience as a valid intellectual
content area for writing classes, as well as in the pages of our field’s scholarship. One of the
major aims of her text is to reveal the workings of heteronormativity (albeit, usually
unconscious) within classrooms. It seems that the *kairotic* moment of the mid-nineties, when
heteronormativity emerged as a pressing focus within the larger social justice turn within our
field, is perhaps similar to the moment we reside in now, perched upon fascinating and radical
discussions of mononormativity—which is, I believe, a concept every bit as crucial as
heteronormativity.

A repeated theme, especially in the earlier work in the field, was the lived rhetorical
situation of how a writing teacher should deal with her/his queer identity. Mary Elliot’s 1996
*College English* article, “Coming out in the Classroom: A Return to the Hard Place,” focused on
the fear that comes with coming out of the closet, both in the classroom as a queer teacher and
also outside of the classroom as a faculty member. The author wrestled with whether or not a
queer teacher should come out during a composition course, but, along with Harriet Malinowitz,
she insisted that the classroom is *not a politically neutral place anyway*—thus, coming out is
“simply setting one ideology alongside another;” and the key is to then help “students make
critical distinctions between them” (p. 702). Ultimately, Elliot’s work supported gay and lesbian
teachers revealing their identity to their students, and the major takeaway from this article is the
reminder that it is understandable if coming out entails major emotion, such as fear or anxiety,
because this is, sadly, a homophobic world.
Zan Meyer Gonçalves’ *Sexuality and the Politics of Ethos in the Writing Classroom* (2005) also advocates for frank revelations of queer identity in the classroom and on campus (by both students and teachers), in an effort to help nonqueer students come to understand the lives of people with nonnormative sexualities, as well as for all students to understand how the personal connects—and is always heavily implicated by—the public. However, Karen Kopelson’s (2002) article “Dis/Integrating the Gay/Queer Binary: ‘Reconstructed Identity Politics’ for a Performative Pedagogy” (appearing in a special issue of *College English* for lesbian and gay studies/queer pedagogy) argues that “coming out” is to simply reify a problematic binary system, where heterosexual is defined as the norm and homosexual is defined as the abnormal opposite.\(^8\) Here Kopelson cites Elliot and Malinowitz as being key players in the identity politics camp, a camp based on out-of-the-closet proudness. This identity camp, Kopelson notes, is often seen as in opposition to the queer theory/performative camp birthed by thinkers such as Judith Butler. In sum, the central goal of this generally-hopeful article by Kopelson is to refuse the notion that there really is a rift between these two camps—rather, drawing on Derrida, Kopelson argues that it “is only through the power of identity’s frame that we can mine the power of that which will escape and expand its structure” (pp. 31–32). In other words, queer and performative theories are not warring against (and should not war against) identity politics, but they are simply *emerging* from them. It is an organic evolution.

Amy E. Winans’ (2006) “Queering Pedagogy in the English Classroom: Engaging with the Places Where Thinking Stops” made an impact on the way many writing teachers think about

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\(^8\) It is interesting to note that Kopelson has later admitted that she has grown to feel some ambiguity about the position she took in this 2002 article. In her 2006 chapter “Of Ambiguity and Erasure: The Perils of Performative Pedagogy” she confessed that while she still sees the merit of teachers performing a politics of neutrality (not overtly coming out during a course) in order to obviate “unproductive student resistance” (p. 565), she stated that she was increasingly doubtful about that position, questioning whether there may indeed be particular moments where the rhetorical act of coming out might actually benefit students’ learning.
creating courses that include queer content and issues of sexuality. Winans urged English teachers to go beyond the merely additive approach: as well as broaching discussions of sexuality and sexual orientation, teachers need to lead students in exploring tensions and conflicts between and among discourses. She proposes a pedagogy of “deconstructing normality” (p. 118), a pedagogy I’d imagine Michael Warner would approve of. “Ultimately,” she stated, “queer pedagogy entails decentering dominant cultural assumptions, exploring the facets of the geography of normalization, and interrogating the self and the implications of affiliation” (p. 107). Winans drew on the definition of “queer” given by David M. Halperin, a definition that has had a major impact in my choice to place polyamory within a queer lens. Queer means “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (as cited in Winans, 2006, p. 107). Indeed, polyamory is seen by most people as abnormal, as illegitimate, as nondominant.

In this project, my goal is not to normalize polyamory (to make it seem safe or in line with traditional approaches to relationships); rather, my goal is to show how productive discussions of polyamory as well as lived daily performances of polyamory can boost the possibility of agency for those learning and teaching literacy along with social justice issues. My goal is not to make polyamory a dominant practice—if by dominant we understand dominant to mean dominating. No. Do I hope this dissertation will inform as well as pique the interest of academics about polyamory as a potential life-option or as a possible research subject or as a legitimate practice or theory? Yes, absolutely. However, if we take the definition of “legitimate” to mean justified or made appropriate or standard by law, then I do not have hopes for my project as such. I will leave legal matters to the legal scholars. Thus, while this is a potential limitation of my project, it does, however, leave open room for those working in law fields to continue studying polyamory as well as other nonnormative relationships—something which is already
happening, as evidenced by some exciting graduate work (e.g., Morgan & Olijnyk, 2011), as well as work by more advanced scholars in this area (e.g., Strassberg, 2003; Emens, 2004; Black, 2006; Calder, 2009). My project is not about legal matters, but rather about advancing a social, non-legal understanding of the value of honoring, exploring, critiquing, understanding, and proliferating relationship practices and orientations that stand outside the mainstream, the “normal.” In addition, I’d state that critiquing the assumed, knee-jerk approval of being normal or wanting to be normal is also a part of my project.

Within the queering of rhetoric and composition, Judith Butler’s theory of performativity has been highly influential. In the collaborative piece “Bi, Butch, and Bar Dyke: Pedagogical Performances of Class, Gender, and Sexuality” (2000) the authors present a set of three narratives that explore the way three feminist, queer teachers of writing perform their various identities within the classroom and the academy at large. This piece speaks to the power of telling personal narratives, but in nontraditional ways that expose how identities and personalities are not static, but often contradictory and in flux. Also, the discussion of bisexuality in this piece (pp. 70–78) is a useful starting place to consider how such an identity—one that is often compared to polyamory in its openness and nonstatic nature—is a kind of difference within difference, a kind of marginalized identity within the marginal. In Chapters Four and Five, I discuss how polyamory can be seen as one sort of way to live within the larger framework of nonmonogamy, while bisexuality can be seen along parallel lines, as a different way of enacting nonhetero sexuality.

Another text heavily influenced by frameworks of performativity, as well as other ideas by Judith Butler, is Assuming a Body, by feminist rhetorician Gayle Salamon (2010). In this work she analyzed the tensions between concrete bodily materiality and the more ephemeral
mind as she explored the immensely complex interweaving between language, identity, sexuality, and embodiment. For her, sexuality is wonderfully ambiguous—just as the body is—and it’s a positive force because it breaks the boundaries of separateness between human beings, drawing us more fully into the social, collective world. A key focus is her indictment of queer studies and women’s studies, for, in her view, they have not yet embraced trans(gender)(sexual) studies, which she argues is an exciting place of performative, creative, radically-transformative possibility. Salamon maintains that to be a trans person is to compose oneself courageously and loosely, through the act of holding “one’s body and one’s self open to the possibilities of what one cannot know or anticipate in advance” (p. 92). Such an embrace of not knowing and impermanence are crucial for discussions about queerness and polyamory, which I will discuss further in Chapter Three.

The Composition Studies article “Writing Inqueeries: Bodies, Queer Theory, and An Experimental Writing Class” by Jennifer DiGrazia and Michel Boucher (2007) particularly inspired my teacherly spirit. Drawing on Foucault, Malinowitz, and prominent queer theorists, these teachers reported on a course they taught, in which students not only read and wrote about queer theory but also queered the act of writing itself—through blurring genres and blurring traditional alphanumeric text. In this safe space, students composed queer texts that asked “the audience to acknowledge the contingency of norms” (p. 27), both in the wider world and also within writing processes. This article has had a great impact on how I created the “Queer Writing” course that I taught. In the final chapter, I explain how students queered their writing by looking at writing in a more creative, loose, fluid, and nonnormative fashion.

It seems fitting that I end my review of this literature with the source that is the most crucial when it comes to crafting my case for an attention to relationship literacy and an
*Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies* makes a case for
our attention to not just queer subjectivities, but also to discussion of sex and sexuality more
broadly. Alexander, the foremost scholar in our field who has explored issues of sexuality, offers
insights that are at once playful, revolutionary, and comprehensive. In *Literacy, Sexuality,
Pedagogy* he points out that the insights from the field of critical sexuality studies have not yet
significantly begun to be imported into our field—and they should be. While he maintains
gratefulness that queer theory has become more and more of a familiar presence within the pages
of our scholarly journals, a greater attention to sexuality studies within rhetoric and composition
would beneficially rile the traditional, nearly static way we continue to think about sexuality:
mostly only in terms of gayness or straightness. No doubt, both Alexander and I agree that even
though the increasing importation of queer theory has been extremely fruitful, we should move
to, now, *look beyond it*, to interrogate the myriad ways that sex/sexuality shapes the way humans
(whether straight, gay, or whatever) filter, understand, shape, speak, and write our world.

*Gaps in the Scholarship: Moving Forward*

In the field of rhetoric and composition, whenever monogamy or nonmonogamy is
mentioned, it is usually mentioned only in passing. For example, in Jonathan Doucette’s (2011)
article “Composing Queers: The Subversive Potential of the Writing Center,” where he briefly
mentioned how his time as a student at a conservative liberal arts college impressed upon him the
belief that the only morally correct and “natural” relationship was monogamous and
heterosexual.

While being grateful for the body of Jonathan Alexander’s work, I must point out that it
does not deeply engage with the analysis of relationship styles, practices, and options that go
beyond the typical modes and labels of LGBTQ relating: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer. Even though Alexander is aware of polyamory as a growing practice, he mentions the term polyamory only in passing three times\(^9\) in his most-recent major work, *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy*. These brief mentions of polyamory are not elaborated upon or even adequately defined—his vague definition comes only through the paraphrasing of one of his students, where the student simply defines polyamory as “adding additional partners” (p. 169). Alexander’s assumption that his audience already understands what the term polyamory means is a problematic assumption, considering that rhetoric and composition has not yet produced scholarship dedicated to the issue. An additional problem is that he, at one moment in the text, quickly lumped the term in along with other sexual practices that I and many other poly activists have deep ethical reservations about, such as prostitution and polygamy\(^10\), perhaps unintentionally rendering polyamory into a seemingly unethical, questionable practice.

Interestingly enough, though, if scholars in rhetoric and composition were to move their thinking beyond the narrows of LGBT politics, this move would not be *that* shocking. In fact, this move has been prefigured by our field’s collective turn to consider *not just* the typical racial categories of “other” (Black, Latino/Latina, Asian, etc.), but to turn our critical gaze back, upon many of *ourselves*, upon the supposed norm of whiteness. Those who might object to my project as not having a solid basis in our field’s past scholarship might consider Alexander’s call to look at sexuality studies as a way to see how sexuality (including straight sexuality) works in a larger sense beyond just queer sexuality; additionally, these objectors then could also certainly point to the critique-of-whiteness-turn as another calming point of comparison. Indeed, as rhetoric and

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\(^9\) Fortunately, the term polyamory is listed in his index in this work. The three mentions are on pages 28–29, 76, and 169.

\(^10\) Polygamy: an often nonegalitarian, patriarchal relationship style where one man holds multiple wives—wives who are allowed sexual contact only with their husband and not each other or anyone else.
composition scholars have called for interrogations of straights and whiteness, so too my project makes a similar move by calling for an interrogation of that which currently seems invisible and/or above question: monogamy. Indeed, Alexander’s move of taking straights and notions of sexuality broadly writ as an available category of analysis has been a tremendously invigorating rhetorical departure—and it invites more invigorating, line-bending and mind-bending moves. Just as whites have race, so most straights are engaged in sexuality. Further, sex is not only an act, but it is also a discursive production. Wide masses of both straight and queer people blog about sex, read op-ed pieces about sex, ask their friends advice about sex, participate on online forums where they offer narratives of their sexual experiences. They even construct new-and-improved versions of their virtual selves on dating websites. Sexuality is a major life concern for most of the world’s population—and it is even something that asexual people (those who do not physically or mentally desire or engage in sex) must face, because they must come to terms with their minority status within culture and then determine ways to carefully communicate those desires, while also advocating for both safety and respect from others.11 In my project, therefore, I will make some unique yet also not totally-out-the-blue moves, turning back our gaze onto straights as a performance of sexuality and monogamy as a performance of sexuality—two ways of being that are not often analyzed. And queers will not be let off the hook in my project, either. Granted, yes, queers may be seen as deviant because of their object choice or their gender expressions; however, a great many queers are also engaged in normative, nondeviant monogamy by default—simply because they do not see that there are other options, such as polyamory. By describing polyamory as a potential queer identity and showing the discursive power inherent in teaching and learning relationship literacy, scholars in

11 For more about asexuality, please visit the world’s most popular source for asexual information and networking: <http://www.asexuality.org/home/>
our field, as well as the students those scholars will teach, will be able to enjoy a widened perspective on sexuality in general, understanding how language can be harnessed to create a more complex understanding of how people can relate, build relationships, sustain relationships, and create ethical, sustainable, beneficial ways of connecting and knowing in this world.

Returning our discussion to Alexander’s work, his admittance that sex can seem like a scary subject, especially in the classroom, is a necessary reminder. However, as he states, if we are to build learners’ sexual literacy, then we must be willing to speak frankly and openly about sex:

we must necessarily keep in mind that approaching sex and sexuality in the classroom seems at times a “risky business.” Part of the sense of danger or risk comes inevitably from a continued sense of sex and sexuality as ‘taboo’ subjects, best left to the realm of the private. But more broadly, questioning the stories we tell about ourselves, either individually or collectively, involves an inherent amount of risk. Put another way, “pedagogic curiosity” often runs counter to the sense with which many students (and some teachers) come into the classroom: the sense that Freire captures in the “banking model” of education, or the sense that instructors have knowledge to impart to students— not the sense that students and instructors together will explore difficult terrain, learning about it as they proceed. So, when it comes to thinking about sex and sexuality and their complex intertwining with literacy, with the very way in which we represent ourselves to ourselves and one another, then the going is bound to be rough. We are dealing with highly personal material, even as we are asking students to consider the most personal aspects of ourselves as also densely and deeply public and political. (p. 180)
Along with compositionist Gonçalves (2005), Alexander argues that sexuality should not be seen as a purely private matter—despite the fact that such thinking continues to be a dominant “truth.” Sex and sexuality should be discussed more frequently in rhetoric and composition scholarship, in our composition classrooms, and also beyond academy walls. Narratives of our lives need to be told, and told more often, and told more loudly. Our stories about sex are important. Alexander reminds us that, whether we want to admit it or not, sex and sexuality are “key components” of our lives (p. 1). In *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy*, as well as in his broader body of work, he explicitly argues against the notion that sex/sexuality is a matter not fit for academic and public discourse; he has urged: “Suggestion that certain kinds of experiences should not be discussed publicly, such as sex and sexuality, is to foreclose on the fullest understanding we might have of the human experience, both individually and collectively” (2008, p. 184). I agree, wholeheartedly.

In surveying the work that has been done in rhetoric and composition regarding sexuality, literacy, agency/social justice, and queer identity, it becomes clear that the time is ripe for more nuanced discussions of how language can be utilized to plan, forge, maintain, and analyze human relationships. We can ask ourselves how polyamory might be a good starting place for thinking about the ways that queer theory’s emphasis on flexibility, fluidity, equity, and ethics might help us to imagine a future where more and more people feel safe in creating the kinds of relationships that are most beneficial for a life filled with possibility. In this kind of world, mononormativity would disappear, being replaced by a growing awareness that deviation from typical ways of living are a sign of healthy, creative communities.

**Snapshot: The Emerging Interdisciplinary Discussions of Polyamory**

*Fields of Conversation; Fields of Silence*
Polyamory is becoming a focal point for academic discussions of sexuality, identity, and social justice—a conversation that is morphing toward rather surprising, radical directions at the start of this twenty-first century. These transnational conversations—most prominently in the United States, Australia, and the UK—12—are happening at conferences and in articles, special issues of scholarly journals, books, and edited collections.

Over the past two decades, polyamory has been analyzed in academic fields such as Communication Studies (Stassen, 2010), Human Development (Jordal, 2011), Health and Education (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010), Psychology (Rust, 2003; Weitzman, 2006), Sociology (Sheff, 2005; Wosick-Correa, 2007), Sexuality Studies (Willey, 2006), Family Studies (Bettinger, 2006), Theology (Robinson, 2009) and Women’s Studies (Zambrano, 1999).13 The conversation is still what I would deem in the emergent phase. In my research thus far, which includes a two-year long review of existing scholarship across fields, I have not found anyone who has broached the topic of polyamory within the field of rhetoric and composition.

The literature review I conducted included an extensive search of graduate dissertations and theses via the databases ProQuest and WordCat, as well as the search engine Google Scholar. A solid amount of exciting work has been done, with the topic of polyamory being most prevalent in the fields of psychology and sociology. While student scholars in rhetoric and composition have been (so far) silent on the issue of polyamory, there have been two completed projects done by graduate students and another by an honors undergraduate, from the broader

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12 It must be noted that, thus far, that both the interdisciplinary and popular discourse on polyamory has been shaped and produced mostly by Anglophones—although, this is starting to change, as evidenced by the recent eruption of discourse on poly in Portugal.

13 The sources referenced here do not represent the full range of sources published on polyamory; they are meant to be notable examples.
field of English Studies\textsuperscript{14}. In 2005, Lydia Alexander, from the University of North Texas, wrote a masters thesis about modern and contemporary queer and feminist poetry; one of the central discussions in this work was how polyamory might serve as a fruitful analogy for how some poetry creates worlds and selves that are multiple, flexible, and open. Emily Bannon, of Northern Arizona University, in 2012, composed a creative thesis, a novella, called “Ab Beta,” an exploration of the boundaries and limitations of a young polyamorous woman. Zoe Billinkoff of Brown University, completed an honors thesis in creative writing titled “Essential Epidural: The Dilemma of Polyamory.” I have also been in contact (thanks to the networking possible through my dissertation blog) with two masters students working in literary studies, one from the United States and one from Canada, who are currently in-progress on their theses that discuss polyamory.

Interestingly, our neighbor in literary studies Michael Warner often dances around the topic of polyamory, shedding light on ways of being that are outside monogamous norms. In \textit{The Trouble with Normal} (1999), although not explicitly mentioning the term polyamory, he does, a handful of times, mention how relationships should be thought of as “adventures” which can contain not just two people, but multiple (pp. 90, 102, 115). In painting a portrait of queerness that often goes beyond the normative dyad, he celebrates queer cultures’ insistence on a broader range of language to describe relationship options; as an example, he poked fun at the “impoverished vocabulary of straight culture,” which mandates “that people should be either husbands or wives or (nonsexual) friends” (p. 116). Another neighbor, Judith Butler (who, like Warner, often publishes scholarship in literary studies), has also advocated nonmonogamous

\textsuperscript{14} In my survey of graduate work, I have done exhaustive searches in the databases ProQuest and WorldCat, as well as GoogleScholar. I found roughly thirty dissertations and theses that discuss polyamory (these works mention the word “polyamory” or “polyamorous” in the title, abstract, or keyword). These projects come from fields such as Early Childhood Studies, Psychology, Social and Cultural Anthropology, Sexuality Studies, Ethnic and Multicultural Studies, Sociology, Social Work, Women’s Studies, Religious Studies, Law, among others.
approaches to living and awareness for other ways of intimate relating outside the exclusive dyad. For example, in *Undoing Gender* (2004) she, throughout the course of the book, mentions nonmonogamy as a possibility for nonnormative sexual identities/practices that, unfortunately, are not only stigmatized by our society, but also that these ways of love and these intimacies are not even seen as being real. They are seen as impossible. Arguing that we need to expand our notion of what the sexual human is, she wrote:

> Nevertheless, those who live outside the conjugal frame or maintain modes of social organization for sexuality that are neither monogamous nor quasi-marital are more and more considered unreal, and their loves and losses less than “true” loves and “true” losses. The derealization of this domain of human intimacy and sociality works by denying reality and truth to the relations at issue. (pp. 26–27).

Butler, Warner, and other queer theorists working within literary studies have called attention to the strictures of monogamy as a problem—often, an invisible problem. A problem that has not yet received enough critical attention by the academy and beyond.

*Issues Within Polyamory Conversations*

One of the major foci of scholarly writers working on the issue of polyamory is breaking away from the numerous popular self-help and nonfiction writings that have been published on the topic. Scholarly writers, both graduate students and more established scholars, have begun to bring a critical lens to thinking about polyamory above and beyond activism, the nuts and bolts of living polyamorously, and simply praising the relationship style. In Jin Haritaworn, Chin-ju Lin, and Christian Klesse’s introduction to the special issue on polyamory in the journal *Sexualities* (whose primary audience is scholars from the field of sexualities studies), the editors stated that they chose articles that examine polyamory and nonmonogamy under the spotlight of
“an intersectional perspective” regarding power which “draws on black, postcolonial and anti-racist feminist theories, which highlight the need to examine different axes of oppression, especially gender, race/ethnicity and class, as interrelated rather than separate divisions or contradictions” (p. 516). (Thinkers in our own field, such as David Wallace, have also argued for an intersectional approach in dealing with issues of sexuality.) In this article, and often among other work that deals with polyamory, there is an explicit sex-positive, radical approach to sexuality, which includes “narratives of emotional and sexual abundance and collective care [which] may provide real alternatives to capitalist and patriarchal ideologies of personal ownership and scarcity” (p. 519).

Yet, despite the push for more critical, more distanced scholarly analyses on polyamory, scholarly writers are still apt to use a great deal of the intimate and personal within their pieces. This is so for Nathan Patrick Rumbukkana (2004), who writes about his firsthand experience with the Trent Polyamory Society, a university discussion and social group. Rambukkana analyzed how the politics of bisexuality have parallels with the politics of polyamory (a theme that reappears often in discussions of polyamory), due to their discourses both being of a “liminal nature—their position between conditions that many conceive of as mutually exclusive (i.e., gay/straight, radical/mainstream)” (p. 144). The author argued, at the end of the piece, that he did not think that a polyamorous identity necessarily translates into “queer” identity because the “clear vector” of the definition of “queer” is: “queer is not straight” (p. 151), a point with which I strongly disagree. Queer is based, at its core, about not just who one sleeps with but also about bending and rethinking cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality, and other ways of being in the world. Queer is broad, and maybe it can be (sexually) straight, sometimes. Queer is playing with cultural traditions. In response to his definition, something I will tackle further in Chapter
Three, I’d point out that the very act of stating a “clear vector” (bottom-line definition) of “queer” is antithetical to what queerness is all about, what queerness is trying to do. In thinking through Rambukkana’s rigid definition of queer, it becomes clear that this project hinges on my own careful definition of queer, one that must be broad enough to be useful for ongoing enactments of queer. I don’t want my definition to shut down all that queer can/could do.

Definitions of queer will be important for negotiating how poly discussions might have a place within queer scholarship and queer classrooms. If queer can be translated beyond just the sexual aspects of being human, then how might queerness and polyamory be seen as a ways that stretch our very understanding of what it means to be a human being? How might a queer classroom be a classroom that begs us to rethink the very notion of what a classroom does and is? These are questions I will address in the final three chapters of this project.

Despite fascinating conversations like those above, I do not mean to give the impression that polyamory as a topic within discussions of identity or sexuality have been ubiquitous across fields. In fact, poly often does not appear in places where a brief mention (at the very least) would make sense. For example, in Lisa M. Diamond’s psychological account of women’s shifting sexual acts and identities in Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire (2008), the term polyamory was not mentioned even once in the book, despite the fact that a number of her research participants discuss making (what seems like healthy) nonmonogamous arrangements with partners.

With that having been said, however, it is clear from even a cursory review of recent articles, books, and dissertations/theses across a number of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences that polyamory is a topic that has already made an impact on how scholars
understand sexuality. It is time to import this awesome scholarship into our own field, and apply it to our understandings of sexuality, queerness, and literate agency.

Outline of Chapters

In the next chapter, I describe the emerging interdisciplinary discussion of polyamory, pointing out significant themes and offering suggestions for future research. The third chapter provides an extensive discussion of the history of queer theory, reviewing those theorists who have had the most impact on my thinking. I discuss how discussions of polyamory are an organic outgrowth of the conversations begun by these insightful queer scholars. In the fourth chapter, I discuss the ways in which the field of rhetoric and composition has taken up queer theory into its thinking, as well as discussing gaps and possibilities yet to be realized, particularly in terms of how the concepts of mononormativity and relationship literacy might shed light upon our (limited) understandings of hegemony. Finally, in the last chapter, I answer the question: How might polyamory inform the work of pedagogues within the field, and in what ways do the reflective and analytical components of writing allow learners to expand their relationship literacy?

This Project’s Significance

Overall, when surveying the scholarship of queer theory as well as the interdisciplinary field of polyamory studies, it becomes clear that the two major goals of this project are to explain why a queer approach to polyamory is/would be a compelling area of research in my field, as well as point out areas of potential future inquiry. In other words, a goal of my project will be to sketch out lines and questions that others may follow and respond to. Because my work is the first of its kind in rhetoric and composition, more nuanced accounts of polyamory and
relationship literacy will have to be filled in by fellow like-minded feminists, queer theorists, social activists, and other teachers and scholars after me. My job is simply to set the stage.
II: THE INTERDISCIPLINARY FIELD OF POLY SCHOLARSHIP

“Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives.” –Gloria E. Anzaldúa

Chapter Aims

Because polyamory is an entirely new conversation for most in rhetoric and composition, it is necessary to provide an overview of what has been published in academia on polyamory. If rhetoric and composition does indeed heed my call to further pursue this area of research, then teachers, theorists, and researchers will need to be equipped with a solid understanding of what has been published thus far. By seeing how scholars have analyzed the identity, practice, and culture of polyamory as well as the problematics of mononormativity, the broader notion of relationship literacy can come to be viewed as an important concept for both theory and pedagogy. Scholarship on polyamory can be seen as a natural fit into already-begun conversations in rhetoric and composition regarding literacy, social justice, queerness, and the problematics of heteronormativity. However, my work calls for new work. This chapter can be seen, therefore, as a kind of bridge, a kind of bridge to “other realities” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 1).

This chapter begins with a brief summary of how polyamory has been celebrated in the popular media. Next, I synthesize the scholarly sources available on the topic and then provide general recommendations for future research across fields.

Polyamory in the Popular Media
In the early 1990s, polyamory emerged as a topic of conversation, both in academe and in the popular media. In 1995, the first full-length book appeared with a major focus on polyamory (Lano & Parry). In 2004, the term entered Oxford University Press’ *Sexuality: The Essential Glossary*. By 2006, the term “polyamory” was adopted by the Oxford English Dictionary.

Simple searches of the World Wide Web can begin to indicate just how quickly discussions about this alternative relational style/identity are proliferating. For instance, in March 2005, scholars Ani Ritchie and Meg Barker, using Google and the search term “polyamory” reported results of around 170,000 (p. 588). Eight years later, in March 2013, my Google search generated ten times the number of results: at approximately 1,710,000 links.

Indeed, during the progress of this project I found myself sometimes relieved (for the sake of simplicity) that I had narrowed my scope to focus on scholarly conversations—for nearly weekly (or sometimes daily, it seemed!), new discussions, analyses, mentions, whispers, and red-hot controversies were popping up in venues such as local newspaper articles (e.g., Miller, 2010), national newspaper articles (e.g., Fraser, 2012) syndicated columns (Savage, 2012), popular magazines (e.g., Pappas, 2013), national television news programs such as ABC’s *20/20* and *Dateline*, as well as film, radio and other print and online sources. More and more conferences, festivals, meetings, and other networking events for poly people were being hosted than ever before. New websites were being built, devoted exclusively to the topic—some prominent examples from the dozens available are: Loving More (http://www.lovemore.com/), The Polyamory Media Association (http://www.polymediaassociation.com/), Polytical: Polyamory and Non-Monogamy in the UK (http://polytical.org/), and the World Polyamory Association (http://worldpolyamoryassociation.net/). In fact, one could argue that polyamory has finally hit “the big time,” as evidenced by the successful new docudrama on the major cable
network Showtime, *Polyamory: Married and Dating*, which recently aired its second season. To summarize, it’s been challenging to keep up with the buzz. So much is being said, across so many lands and in so many formats.

Before synthesizing the published scholarship on polyamory, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of some the most heavily-referenced popular books on the topic, as numerous other popular (and sometimes academic) sources tend to utilize these as pillars—or, at the very least, background information—for their arguments. These sources, a majority of which are authored by feminist women, can be summarized as falling under the self-help/instructional nonfiction genre. In these, there is a predominant focus on “individual choice and personal agency” (Noël, 2006), as well as the celebration of polyamory as a proud, conscious identity or orientation.

*The Ethical Slut* by Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy (1997; 2009) is commonly referred to as “the poly bible.” In this groundbreaking text, Easton and Hardy reclaim the term slut, transforming its negative meaning and connotation into a positive identity label, referring to an ethical, honest, adventurous person who celebrates and enjoys sex—without shame and without secrecy.

Dr. Deborah Anapol, a clinical psychologist and one of the founding mothers of the polyamory movement, contributed two crucial books—*Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits* (1997) and *Polyamory in the Twenty-First Century* (2010). In these texts, Anapol provides practical strategies that poly people can use (or prospective poly people can consider) in their day-to-day lives. Subjects include: how to come out of the closet as a poly person, how to deal

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15 For a comprehensive up-to-date summary of the 35 popular poly books (or poly-related books) published since 1984, please see this list in the popular site “Polyamory in the News”:
with the various variations of jealousy, how to find and build an “intentional family” (1997, p. 111), how to network with other poly people, and how to deal with child custody issues.

Lastly, Tristan Taormino’s *Opening Up* (2008) explores polyamory and open relationships by offering concrete profiles and narratives of people who are engaged in nontraditional, ethically nonmonogamous styles of relating. She offers readers numerous rich, concrete responses to the question “just how do they do it?” (p. xiv), understanding that living outside norms can be made a bit easier if roadmaps and models, such as those contained within her book, are available to the public.

Despite critiques that these as well as other important popular texts in the poly movement are deeply flawed because they limit their dialogue to a too-narrow celebration of identity politics and fail to address “issues of systemic inequity” that appear in the hierarchies of race, class, gender, etc., (Noël, 2006, p. 617), I assert that these writings need to be remembered, considered, and valued, for they remain crucial in the proliferation of knowledge(s) about options and possibilities regarding new ways of thinking and doing relationships. Other popular texts like *What Does Polyamory Look Like?* (Chapman, 2010), *Gaia and the New Politics of Love* (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2009), *The Polyamory Handbook: A User’s Guide* (2008), *Poly Communication Survival Kit* (McGarey, 2004), and *Polyamory: Roadmaps for the Clueless and Hopeful* (Ravenscroft, 2004) work to disrupt the dominant script that the heterosexual monogamous dyad is the only ethical model for forming romantic/intimate/sexual attachments and for building families. Educators working toward more expanded, dynamic understandings of relationship literacy may find that these sources—though often lacking more nuanced, intellectual, and/or “progressive” (Noël, 2006, p. 617) analytical arguments regarding
postmodern understandings of societal oppression\textsuperscript{16}—may be useful in classrooms, cultural rhetorics analyses, historical understandings of human sexuality, as well as for researchers, intellectuals, writers, and the brave pioneers who are learning that “it is possible to honestly and respectfully love more than one” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2009, p. xii).

Scholars Analyze Polyamory

Admittedly, less has been published on the academic front than in the popular media.\textsuperscript{17} Yet, it would be accurate to state that the field of polyamory studies is an exciting, fast growing field. As Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge (2010a) commented in their editors’ introduction to the groundbreaking collection \textit{Understanding Non-Monogamies}, a transnational scholarly collection, both “general and academic interest in openly non-monogamous styles of relating have exploded in the past decade” (p. 3).\textsuperscript{18}

Scholarship on the topic of nonmonogamy has been a fascinating research field since the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s\textsuperscript{19}, the historical period in which alternative lifestyles such as swinging, group marriage, and communes were, with some regularity, discussed at academic conferences and in publications, mainly in the social sciences (Rubin, 2001). Polyamory began as a research area of its own, starting around the early 1990s, and scholars doing this work have often cited the longer history of inquiry into nonmonogamous lifestyles and

\textsuperscript{16} I have found these critiques of the self-help genre by scholars such as Noël (2006) and Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse (2006) to be problematic, because the self-help genre begins with the premise that individual agency is—at least somewhat—possible, and that societal, large-scale change \textit{begins with transforming one’s own actions and attitudes}. Self-help writers, especially those in the poly movement, tend to write from an understanding that mirrors the Zen Buddhist philosophy that societal progress can only be achieved by attention, first, to each person’s own heart and state of mind (for more on this, please see Thich Nhat Hanh, 2005). As Buddhist monk Brad Warner has put it, “The idea in Zen is that the best way to truly do good for the world at large is to get yourself together” (2010, pp. 36–37). Thus, to use an analogy: when scholars critique self-help writers for not engaging in the kinds of critical thinking common to academia, it is similar to the act of critiquing religion for not being scientific enough. The two fields have vastly different intentions.

\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps this is due not to polyamory being less important to academics than the general population, but more to the slower nature of scholarly publishing.

\textsuperscript{18} For a thorough review of recent scholarship on nonmonogamies, see Barker and Langdridge (2010b).

\textsuperscript{19} For a fascinating critique about how the “critique of monogamy” has lately become more “muted” in feminist scholarship, see Jackson & Scott (2004).
practices as being essential to their work on polyamory. Polyamory studies have been particularly significant in the fields of psychology and sociology, in helping researchers understand topics such as how certain emotions (jealousy, love, desire, and so on) work, as well as how nonnormative families that include more than two adults structure their lives.

Groundbreaking events—such as the 2006 special issue of the British-based journal *Sexualities* devoted exclusively to polyamory as well as the first annual International Academic Polyamory Conference (held February 15, 2013 in Berkeley, CA)—reveal how, perhaps, polyamory is at a critical tipping point, hanging in the balance between being a “new” conversation and one that has already been blazed. There is even a Yahoo discussion group dedicated to sharing information about polyamory scholarship (PolyResearchers, 2009); at present, the group has a membership of over 400 polyamory researchers worldwide, and its members are from a broad number of academic fields such as sociology, women’s studies, religious studies, physics, and anthropology.

The study of polyamory can best be understood through an outline of the prominent themes that appear throughout the published poly literature. In the following subsections, I cite published sources on polyamory found within academic scholarship since the term first appeared in writing by the spiritual teacher Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart (in collaboration with her partner Oberon) in her May 1990 article “A Bouquet of Lovers.”

*Let’s Get Political!*

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20 The term “polyfidelity” (meaning: more than two people in a committed, long-term relationship) is actually older than the term polyamory. Polyfidelity dates back to its invention by the Kerista Commune in San Francisco, California, since around the late 1960s (Pines & Aronson, 1981). Also, while most sources attribute the term polyamory to Zell-Ravenheart’s 1990 article, it is ultimately unclear when exactly the term polyamory was coined verbally, as it probably had been circulating in spoken conversations some time before 1990. Additionally, it is important to note that the term “polyamorous” (used as an adjective, not as in Zell’s noun-version) has been traced in writing as far back as 1953. For a detailed history of the terms polyamorous and polyamory, please see the Portuguese communications scholar Cardoso (2011).
One of the most recurrent themes is the persuasive appeal that poly writings and poly philosophies need to take a more political focus. In making this argument, scholars often call for building activist coalitions with other minority groups, social justice groups, or other organizations of people who oppose hegemonies and oppressive structural relations in various forms. Ultimately, the idea is that dialoguing about issues rather than identities is more important. In the chapter “What’s Queer About Non-Monogamy Now?” Eleanor Wilkinson (2010), a doctoral student in the field of geography, critiques the available popular writing on polyamory, stating that, currently, dialogues are typically limited to simply praising, celebrating, or circulating expanded choices for creating a positive erotic life. Her aim is to inspire poly people/advocates to go further, by including in poly dialogues recognition of the links between compulsory monogamy, appeals to normativity, oppressive capitalism, and environmental responsibility. She writes:

I am increasingly tired in these debates in hearing that the ‘personal is political’; I claim that non-monogamy has been reduced to a matter of private choice and individual freedom: and that in fact, in many instances the personal has replaced the political. This is not a wish to return back to a traditional definition of the ‘political’ that exists ‘up there’ but that we need to place our personal intimate relations into wider structural inequalities that we may be helping to uphold. Popular polyamory’s focus on confluent love falls into a wider ‘pseudo-psychologization’ of society, an obsession with the individual, our personal relationships, with little concern or time to think how our personal actions play out onto wider issues. (p. 245)

Wilkinson’s political vision is a framework where personal lives are not seen as private, but as public “sites of resistance”—bases from which “we can challenge wider hierarchies of power”
Moving beyond private identities and private/particular rights-based concerns help queer and poly theorists in the mission of, as Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2011) put it, “articulating a queer ethics” and “creating more opportunities for strategic discourse with other groups seeking to enhance their experience of freedom in our society” (198).

Other scholars writing in this vein have called for building bridges with other activist and political groups, placing various degrees of emphasis around coming together to discuss, educate, and advocate specific issues. For example, in the article “Progressive Polyamory: Considering Issues of Diversity,” human sexualities scholar Melita J. Noël (2006) calls for expanded understandings of what constitutes healthy relationships, families, and communities. She writes, “When current polyamorists, as theorists, practitioners, and activists, commit to connecting troubling issues about relationships and families with issues of systemic inequity and oppression in these areas, then a more collaborative, progressive polyamory could emerge” (p. 617). In their collective interest in the “social constructedness of intimacy,” Jin Haritaworn, Chin-ju Lin, and Christian Klesse (2006) urge scholars to address polyamory from a nuanced politicized awareness of the intersectional nature of identities—thus, scholars need to ask questions about how factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class are “interrelated rather than separable divisions or contradictions” (p. 516).

Within calls to create scholarship that takes a more overtly political/activist stance, there has been a subtheme that utilizes the framework of anarchy, a system of thinking used to “critique and dismantle all institutionalized hierarchies” (Shannon & Willis, 2010, p. 434). In making the case that coalition and bridge-building with other groups working for social change is crucial to evolution of the poly movement, the chapter “Love without Borders?: Intimacy, Identity and the State of Compulsory Monogamy” by Jamie Heckert (2010), a sociology
researcher, argues that ideas such as monogamy and nonmonogamy cannot be defined monolithically (nor should they be viewed as ethical versus unethical, nor should they be reduced to a hierarchy of opposites); rather, these terms should be seen as a radically over-simplified states of being and living. Instead of these limiting terms, he proposes an “erotic continuum” (p. 259), a notion he adapted from feminist Adrienne Rich’s term “lesbian continuum.” As there are many ways to practice nonmonogamy (with polyamory being only one choice among many), an erotic continuum resists “the reduction and erasure of possibilities” (p. 259) and “may offer an energizing and empowering contribution to anarchism and to practices of freedom by any other name” (p. 260).

Deric Shannon, a professor of justice studies, and Abbey Willis, a graduate student in sociology, utilize polyamory as a metaphor for thinking about how to keep anarchistic thinking a viable, relevant, and progressive political theory (2010). They remind that any theory can get stale and robotic if not often infused with ideas from a variety of systems of thought. As polyamory brings to light the fact that having multiple partners can productively complexify and enhance many people’s lives, the authors argue that anarchist scholars must remain open to reflecting upon and utilizing other political theories and ideas—“we can have multiple partners when it comes to political theory,” they assert (2010, p. 438). To keep anarchism a radical method of societal change and critique:

[W]e suggest that we step outside of anarchism and borrow liberally (radically?) from many perspectives. We suggest that we develop multiple relationships with a variety of theories so we can act creatively depending on the context of the struggle we are involved in. As feminists, antiracists, radical environmentalists, libertarian socialists, and a host of other ‘political identities’ we are well aware of how inadequate any one perspective is to
describe ourselves, our relationship with political ideas, and a complex and radical political project that could not possibly be contained within a single theory or identity. (p. 440)

While the sometimes-sweeping nature of calls for more politization beyond “the personal is political” sometimes strikes me as short-sighted or somewhat irrelevant to certain authors’ generic goals (see #16 footnote), I do agree that, overall, calls for coalition-building with groups around issues of deep societal change are incredibly needed. Although it is a bit too early to generalize about the effects of these various calls, it seems that, in the past few years, a more political bent in conversations about polyamory have already begun to happen in the academic realm. For example, four years after Noël’s (2006) critique that writings on polyamory fail to address oppressive “systemic privileges and benefits” (p. 604), the 2010 collection Understanding Non-Monogamies was published, with many of its articles focused on some interesting political, often activist connections, between various interest groups who are working to disrupt systemic inequities. For instance, the chapter “Developing a ‘Responsible’ Foster Care Praxis: Poly as a Framework for Examining Power and Propriety in Family Contexts” by Damien W. Riggs (2010), an Australian psychology researcher, aimed to expose the myths surrounding how families “should” be structured. He highlighted how legal and moral debates around how foster care should be enacted can be enhanced by using poly insights for critiquing “normative kinship models” (p. 196). Riggs argued that the social practice of foster care is all about navigating multiple relationships “that are respectful and supportive” (p. 189). In moving away from simply arguing about and from the narrow interests of a single group, Riggs connects the concerns of poly people/supporters to the concerns of those invested in improving the foster care system.
What poly relationship practices offer us, then, in all their contested and multiple forms, is an understanding of caring for others that fundamentally locates us all in a relationship to a range of people, all of whom stand in differing positions to our own, and to all of whom we are variously accountable. (p. 196)

A second example of scholarship from the Barker and Langdridge collection that has a more explicitly bent is the provocative piece “Disability and Polyamory: Exploring the Edges of Interdependence, Gender and Queer Issues in Non-Monogamous Relationships” by Alessandra (Alex) Iantaffi (2010), a family therapist and professor in human sexuality. By drawing upon the narrative of her own life—as a polyamorous, genderqueer person dealing with the challenge of a chronic illness—s/he critiqued the “overculture” which tends to erase “exquisite edges and paradoxes” (p. 164), Iantaffi urged a renewed and expanded look at the value of considering intersectionality when theorizing issues such as polyamory.

Again, while it is perhaps too early to make definitive statements about the overall effectiveness or response to calls for more savvy political accounts of hierarchy and oppression as well as appeals to poly theorists for coalition-building across issues, it is safe to say that scholarship on polyamory is increasingly utilizing more nuanced political insights, as it works to reveal the inner workings of mononormativity. As many queer compositionists and queer rhetoricians in our field, such as David Wallace (2009) remind us, the concept of intersectionality is crucial for exposing and revising false assumptions about the way identity and agency work. In the classroom and in our scholarship, rhetoric and composition has made collective efforts to show how oppression oppresses at various points along economic, racial, locational, educational, and other axes. The new discussion of relationship literacy, via the lens of polyamory, would usher in more robust understandings of human relationships, as well as
further Alexander’s (2008) call for the teaching and learning of sexual literacy, the idea that sex and sexuality are indeed fit subjects for the public sphere. Along with Alexander, I believe that intimate dialogues regarding human desire and connection should not be closeted to the private realm, but rather exposed and discussed in the public journals and classrooms of rhetoric and composition. Sex, sexuality, intimacy, connection, desire, need, affection, and love matter. They matter because they are, ultimately, creative forces for making change, for transforming the world. If we import the interdisciplinary scholarly conversations about polyamory and mononormativity, we in rhetoric and composition can add our own unique perspectives, as we indeed have valuable insights to offer regarding the way humans creatively use discourse to achieve power and knowledge.

_The Hegemonic Force of Mononormativity_

Collaborators Marianne Pieper and Robin Bauer (2005) originally coined the term “mononormativity” at an interdisciplinary conference on the topic of polyamory at the University of Hamburg. Five years later, Bauer (2010) provided an extended, thought-provoking definition of the term in her chapter, “Non-Monogamy in Queer BDSM Communities: Putting the Sex Back into Alternative Relationship Practices and Discourse.”21 She wrote that mononormativity is a “mechanism . . . that is effective in social worlds and scientific discourses alike” (p. 145), and the “mono-normative matrix” is:

[A] complex power relation, which (re)produces hierarchically arranged patterns of intimate relationships and devalues, marginalizes, excludes and ‘others’ those patterns of intimacy which do not correspond to the normative apparatus of the monogamous model.

21 Please see Barker (2005b) for more on connections between polyamory and BDSM—an umbrella term which stands for bondage and discipline; dominance and submission; sadism and masochism; as well as a range of other sensation and role-playing sexual practices and identities. It is interesting to note, too, that a recent major ethnographic, anthropological study of a BDSM community in the San Francisco area included many participants who identified as polyamorous (Weiss, 2011).
Mono-normativity is based on the taken-for-granted allegation that monogamy and couple-shaped arranged relationships are the principle of social relations per se, an essential foundation of human existence and the elementary, almost natural pattern of living together. From this perspective, every relationship which does not represent this pattern, is being ascribed the status of the other, of deviation, of pathology, in need of explanation or is being ignored, hidden, avoided and marginalized. Mono-normativity is historically linked with heteronormativity in complex ways. (p. 145)

The term mononormativity has proved invaluable, for scholars use it to explore the complex webs that create human systems of morality, ethics, as well as legal structures. Mononormativity helps us make sense of why polyamory is such a pressing and relevant issue for those scholars concerned with social justice. In rhetoric and composition, heteronormativity has been shown to be a restrictive, destructive force—one that silences and shames students, teachers, and other literate learners. In attending to the realities of mononormativity, rhetoric and composition can join other academic fields in exploring how new voices can be heard—new voices that tell narratives and ways of living and loving that do not conform to the traditional monogamous dyadic form. In recognizing and truly hearing these new voices, both empathy and curiosity will result. Scholars in rhetoric and composition may then ask: How might relationship literacy help us understand the choices people make (or do not make, or cannot make, or try but fail to make) regarding relationships, and how are those choices constrained by cultural norms regarding the taken-for-granted monogamous couple, the “almost natural pattern of living together” (Bauer, 2010, p. 145).

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, an Australian scholar-teacher in social diversity in the field of health and education, has been one of the foremost thinkers to bring attention to the hegemonic
force of mononormativity. In her text *Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools* (2010), Pallotta-Chiarolli challenges traditional notions of sexual orientation by drawing on qualitative research with bisexuals, polyamorists, “multipartnered families” (those who belong to families that include polyamorists) and “multisexual families” (those who belong to families who include queer-identified members) (p. 2). Participants in her study describe various strategies of handling their various identities, practices, and family situations; they describe “passing” (purposely staying in the closet because the dangers of coming out appear too great), “bordering” (carefully negotiating which people will know and which won’t know the truth of one’s identity or family structure), or bravely “polluting”—which means coming out of the closet and, thus, challenging the cultural-status quo for relationships. Drawing on the borderland theories of feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, Pallotta-Chiarolli argued that polyamory should be viewed as a border identity, one which is, unfortunately, marginalized in schools and communities (perhaps even more so than gays and lesbians) due to mononormativity: the flawed culturally-constructed assumption that everyone who desires sexual acts or romantic partnership must be in (or, at least, strive to be in) a sexually-fidelitous dyad.

Another publication to shed light on the theme of mononormativity is by social anthropology scholar Shalanda Phillips (2010) in her chapter “There Were Three in the Bed: Discursive Desire and the Sex Lives of Swingers.” She critiqued how swingers are often portrayed in sharp contrast to poly folks—with swingers portrayed as “normal” people but poly people being portrayed as naïve, weird hippies (p. 83). Phillips thinks this portrayal is unfair and inaccurate. Ultimately, the goal of the chapter is to dispel common myths of swinging and to

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22 At the time of this writing (March 2013), *Border Sexualities* is one of the two book-length texts to focus on polyamory. The other is a monograph about gay and bisexual negotiated nonmonogamies and polyamories (Klesse, 2007a). *Border Sexualities* is an expansion of Pallotta-Chiarolli’s earlier articles on the subject of polyfamilies and schooling (2006; 2010b).
celebrate swinging as a radical, norm-bending practice that has the potential to “foster new ways to challenge mononormativity” (p. 86).

Explorations of mononormativity as well as the related term compulsory monogamy, a term adapted from Adrienne Rich’s term “compulsory heterosexuality” (Heckert, 2010) are quite ubiquitous across the published poly scholarship. The term is indeed valuable as it helps to bridge gaps across perhaps seemingly-divergent fields. For example, in rhetoric and composition, Jonathan Alexander’s frequent critique of heteronormativity can be used as a logical, productive basis for those in the field to begin conversations about mononormativity (for more on this, please see Chapter Four). Without existing acceptance of the realities of heteronormativity, it might be difficult for rhetoricians and compositionists to understand why importing interdisciplinary discussions of polyamory might be relevant. Just as heteronormativity negatively impacts not just queers, so too does compulsory monogamy disadvantage “not just the polyamorists, but a whole host of people whose lives and loves fall outside of this conventional dyadic ideal” (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 243).

The Language of Polyamory

Probably the theme that has the most on-the-surface applicability to our field is the discussion of new terms, new languages that are emerging from practitioners of polyamory as well as the scholars who research it. Often in this work scholars make a nod to the LGBTQ movement, reminding how important language has been to nonheterosexual people “to express their identities and experiences and to claim community, rights and recognition” (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 585.). The same is true for poly people. In strategically adopting new terminology or reclaiming terms such as “slut” (Klesse, 2006b), poly is coming to be seen as a
legitimate force in our culture—one that expresses new kinds of identities and practices while also claiming respect, recognition.

There is a thread of scholarship that seeks to expose and explain how the neologisms created by poly people not only describe reality but also create reality. The new words make not only thought but also action possible. In the article “‘There Aren’t Words for What We Do or How We Feel So We Have to Make Them Up’: Constructing Polyamorous Languages in a Culture of Compulsory Monogamy,” cultural studies scholar Ani Ritchie and psychology scholar Meg Barker (2006) note how the relationship between language and action is a fluid process, occurring multi-directionally. In other words: sometimes action happens first, and then language must be invented in order to express what happened; or, new language is invented that can then “enable new ways of experiencing” relationships. Granted, existing notions of sexual identities and sexual values in existing language may shape and constrain life experiences, yet communities and people boldly “also invent, alter and reclaim language in order to fit experiences for which there is no existing language” (p. 586).

Studying a variety of online poly communities and resources, Ritchie and Barker (2006) discuss terms that have been invented by poly-identified practitioners and activists, such as “metamour” (a title referring to the positive relationship between the partners of a polyamorous person), “wibble/wibbly/wibbling” (describing an emotion that happens when one person feels upset or nervous about their partner’s relationship with someone else), and “compersion” (meaning the joy that a person feels when their lover is being intimate with someone else). Terms such as these often work to explicitly replace words that reflect dominant, mononormative views. Metamour can be seen to replace the dominant language of affairs and infidelities: in using the respectful term metamour, the partner of a partner is not “the other
woman” or the “mistress”—on the contrary, this person is a valued member of a loving community, and a person who is fully known to all, not lurking in shadows. The terms “wibble” or “wibbly” or “wibbling” are a way of expressing anxiety; it allows a partner to ask for clarification or reassurance without resorting to name calling, rage, or other negative emotions, connotations, or actions of jealousy or possessiveness, two mind-states that the poly community actively eschews. The term compersion works along similar lines, for it is a word that allows people to actively imagine alternatives to jealousy. (People who want to practice compersion can ask themselves questions such as: “If my partners’ happiness is important to me, why should I get upset if others can make them happy? What is more important to me, my partners’ happiness or who gets the credit?” [McCullough & Hall, 2003]) Indeed, jealousy does not have to be automatic, innate, or inescapable; rather, practicing and learning the value of compersion can both negate feelings of jealousy already felt or help train the mind to, in the present or future, react positively to a lover’s other loves. Terms like compersion do important societal work. As Ritchie and Barker (2006) stated, compersion is a powerful, intentional discursive act that “challenges the traditional understanding of jealousy… and can potentially enable those in polyamorous communities to rethink their experiences and emotions” (p. 596). Utilizing terms like compersion in one’s everyday life is a skillful means to bring about a different, more positive and constructive emotional reactions in the future, and it can also be used to reflect upon and possibly re-see the past in a new light. Compersion, metamour, and wibbly help poly people, supporters of alternative styles of relating, and educators and theorists interested in bringing about new paradigms23 in human interaction to rewrite the scripts of mononormative culture—a culture predicated on possessive, often violent and noncompassionate ways of interacting.

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23 For a fascinating discussion of how Kuhn’s notion of “paradigm shift” can be applied to the polyamory movement, see Zambrano (1999).
Other terms relating to polyamory have been coined not only by poly practitioners themselves, but also by the scholars who study them and their communities. Robin Bauer, a lecturer in queer studies and gender and science studies in Germany, invented “poly voyeurism,” a term “which can be understood as an erotic version of compersion” (2010, p. 151). Elisabeth Sheff, a sociologist focusing on sexual minorities and polyamorous families, devised “polyaffective” to “describe emotionally intimate, non-sexual relationships among polyamorists” (2006, p. 640). New terms like these aid scholars in understanding and describing the new affective, situational, practical, and theoretical terrain of this style of intimate relating.

Not all scholarship, however, points to the rosy potential of language to create empowered agents. In Mark Finn and Helen Malson’s (2008) “Speaking of Home Truth: (Re)productions of Dyadic-Containment in Non-Monogamous Relationships,” the researchers utilized the qualitative method of discourse analysis to problematize how even in ostensibly “open” relationships, participants used language in ways that unintentionally reproduced the emotional paradigms of closed, often paranoid monogamy, where the dyad is seen as the inside, authentic, solid, stable core and predictably safe haven—while all secondary relationships or other relational contexts (both real and imaginary) are described as outside, inauthentic, fragmented, transitory, shaky. Thus, all relationships outside the dyad are given less priority and value, as well as often seen as risky or downright hostile and dangerous. Drawing on previous poly scholarship by those such as Klesse (2006), they point out how, often, nonnormative relationships are not really so nonnormative after all—for, in fact, normative scripts for intimate relationships often play a huge factor in how these supposedly-alternative relationships are organized. In other words, it is difficult (and perhaps impossible?) to step entirely outside the culture in which one finds oneself. Finn and Malson challenge poly and nonmonogamous
practitioners and theorists to move beyond the implicitly hierarchical language of inside (safe) versus outside (dangerous). Warning about the dangers of excluding, fearing, and preemptively blocking other possibilities for human relating, the authors urge a radical disruption of the “reifying regime” of coupledom. They argue, convincingly, that humans should embrace unpredictability rather than trying to constantly pretend they are safe via the language of the supposedly safe dyad; by transgressing “the codes and restricted flows of relationality” we relinquish “a tranquilizing relation to the principle of containment that produces a sedentary order and minimizes differences” (p. 532). In other words, the language of mononormativity is not an advanced, skillful tool for social progress.

Exploring the concept of relationship literacy in rhetoric and composition will further Finn and Malson’s work on exposing the hierarchical language of inside versus outside. When the couple form is exposed as the form that is automatically given higher status, priority, and legitimacy, then we might ask questions about how social justice theories/projects might be aided by expanding the forms of relationships and the “flows of relationality” (Finn and Malson, 2008, p. 532) that are accorded value. By letting go of the fears that intimate relationships outside a dyad form are somehow risky, hostile, or dangerous, we can begin to open up, to more broad and diverse groups, our attention and care. We might even begin to see the relational flows that have been blocked, because an aggressive, fearful hierarchy has been stuck in place for so long. For example, how might our current prizing of the dyad or nuclear family—seen as the core of safety and moral goodness—be actually working to create an Us Versus Them mentality. This kind of us (inside) versus them (outside) mentality creates fragmentation, hostility, and injustice more broadly, as it fuels wars (e.g., our country is the best and so we must compete with foreigners), fuels poverty (e.g., our family is the best and most important unit so we must use all
our resources for our own needs and not share any with outsiders), and fuels degradation of the earth (e.g., humans are the best and so it doesn’t matter how we treat the land as long as it supports us). Relationship literacy can help to expose the fallacies of such a fragmented way of viewing relationality, and help open up the possibilities for relating in this twenty-first century. When there is no longer suspicion of the outside/other, then true social change and true social progress can occur, whether we are talking about literate agency within our field or beyond.

It must be stated, too, that an important (albeit perhaps obvious) theme that runs throughout the scholarly literature on polyamory is the need to define the term itself. What is polyamory? What is not polyamory? Often, scholars offer remarks upon the suitability of the term “polyamory” over other terms, such as nonmonogamy. For example, Ritchie and Barker (2006) insightfully mused that the term polyamory might be preferable to nonmonogamy “since it is a category in itself and not just defined in contrast to the dominant way of doing relationships. In a sense [the term polyamory] might be argued to undermine mononormativity” (p. 590). Sociologist Paula C. Rust makes a similar case about the suitability of the term:

Once we have rejected the cultural idealization of monogamy in favor of an approach that values a variety of relational forms, the term nonmonogamy no longer seems appropriate because of the negative connotations implicitly in defining something in terms of what it is not rather than what it is. In recent years, the term polyamory has begun to replace nonmonogamy among individuals who wish to symbolize linguistically their rejection of monogamy as the only ideal form of relating. (p. 480)

In the extant scholarship on polyamory, the definition of polyamory is always covered within the opening paragraphs of the piece, often in the first few sentences. The definition is not taken for granted, as polyamory is indeed a new term in our culture. On many occasions, an
important aspect of that act of defining is answering the question: how does polyamory relate to other types of relationships that might be categorized under the general banner of nonmonogamy? Many scholars are careful to describe how poly is subtly, moderately, significantly, or even radically different from other forms of nonmonogamous relating, most notably as opposed to cheating\textsuperscript{24}, swinging, open relationships, Mormon polygamy, polygyny\textsuperscript{25}, and polyandry\textsuperscript{26}. In making this distinction up front, scholars ward off potential criticisms that polyamory is the same as these other forms of relating (especially since as the topics of cheating, swinging, open relationships, and Mormon polygamy have already enjoyed a solid amount of scholarly attention, most notably within sociology and psychology, for more than half a century).

Additionally, with this linguistic act of definitional distancing also sometimes comes a related discussion of how polyamory is an ethical choice (e.g., Sheff, 2006, p. 621). In this way, scholars attempt to legitimate polyamory as not only a real practice, identity, or “lovestyle” (Munson & Stelboum, 1999, p. 1) that is gaining currency in the world, but also to depathologize polyamory. This linguistic thread of depathologization can be seen especially in work by those in the therapy–psychology field, whose aim is to offer advice to professionals in how best to counsel clients who are poly (Davidson, 2002; Rust, 2003; Bettinger, 2005; Weitzman, 2006; Easton, 2010).

It is important to note, too, that some adroit scholars have critiqued the radical distinctions made between different forms of consensual non-monogamy.\textsuperscript{27} They have shown how, in an effort to linguistically distance themselves from other forms of nonmonogamy, a kind of

\textsuperscript{24} Some scholars have duly noted how the very term cheating is an interesting point of analysis, as a cheater is someone who “is actually cheating the rules of monogamy itself” (Mint, 2004, p. 62).

\textsuperscript{25} Polygyny is a mating system (or marriage arrangement) where a male has more than one female partner.

\textsuperscript{26} Polyandry is a mating system (or marriage arrangement) where a female has more than one male partner; this arrangement is popular in Polynesian cultures.

\textsuperscript{27} Obviously, “consensual nonmonogamy” does not include the practice of cheating, since at least one of the partners did not agree to the situation of intimacy outside the dyad.
hierarchical categorizing is occurring—where polyamory is placed on the highest ethical pedestal while other forms nonmonogamy are seen as less ethical and, thus, minoritized. For instance, in their insightful, provocative analysis “Deconstructing Monogamy,” cultural anthropologist Katherine Frank and sociologist John DeLamater (2010) subtly critiqued the notion that nonmonogamous relationship styles are radically different from one another:

Swingers and polyamorists are often quick to disown each other despite the potential overlaps in practices and beliefs. Polyamorists may be critical of the supposed focus on recreational sex and emotional monogamy expressed by swingers or of the kinds of consumption and gendered display engaged in at swingers’ parties or events. Swingers may not identify with the political or aesthetic choices made by polyamorists, and argue that a distaste for individuals who engage in recreational sex reflects conservative cultural attitudes. (p. 20)

Just as this instinct to disown other groups and draw definite lines in the sand is tempting, Frank and DeLamater (2010) reflected upon how scholars often have the opposite problem with discussing monogamy—often, all monogamists are lumped into a single category, even though doing so is a false grouping. Yes, there is a complex system of mononormativity, but there are, in practice, *countless ways to enact monogamy in one’s daily life*. Each dyad is totally unique, creating its own set of conditions, boundaries, assumptions, and expectations.

Along these lines, defining monogamy—or, at least, trying to!—is also an important linguistic key in the scholarship on polyamory. Indeed, monogamy is a term that, although widely-practiced and often unconsciously adhered to, still needs definition, for the purposes of analysis and critique. In the chapter “The Power Dynamics of Cheating: Effects of Polyamory
and Bisexuality,” monogamy is defined as not just sexual conduct, but a whole system of appearances and social customs:

The appearance of monogamy is very important in our culture, and we generally feel the need to maintain a certain monogamous decorum in view of friends and acquaintances (in addition to the actual partner). The purpose of this decorum is to avoid gossip, scorn, scandal, and possibly exposure to the partner. (In my experience, the social group is often more critical than the monogamous partner.) The actual level and manner of imposed self-restriction varies greatly depending on the social circle and situation, but our culture attaches sexual or romantic meaning to a whole host of actions that are not explicitly sexual or romantic. Some of these actions are: traveling with a person, spending a lot of time with one person at a party, helping someone financially, talking about someone when they are not present, spending time alone with someone, meeting their parents, holding hands, and of course flirting, touching, or smiling too much. All of these actions are signifiers of a possible sexual relationship in our culture, and this is what makes them socially dangerous. . . . Our culture sets us up with a false choice: we are faithful or we are cheating. Both options are highly scripted and allow the operation of power through restrictions. However, this false choice hides the fact that monogamy and cheating form a single ideological system, and it is possible to step outside of the system. (Mint, 2004, pp. 59–60).

In definitional discussions like these—which parallel discussions of mononormativity—monogamy becomes unhinged as a simple, easy-to-define thing. Instead, the concept of monogamy is deconstructed as a powerful, complex array of forces, attitudes, practices, and values. Foucault and Freud are two figures regularly invoked in these linguistic discussions, as
their work helps scholars consider how relations between power and sex act as too-often hidden mechanisms of control and force within culture (e.g., see Al-Zubi, 2004).

In defining and complexifying both monogamy and polyamory, scholars have been quick to point out, too, how these terms in their singular form are actually woefully inadequate to describe the realities of mono and poly lives. Editors Barker and Langridge (2010a), for example, call this linguistic deficit to our attention in their editors’ introduction to *Understanding Non-Monogamies* by cautioning researchers “against taking one group of non-monogamous people, practices or ideologies as representative. . . . hence the use of the plural ‘non-monogamies’ rather than the singular non-monogamy in the title of the current book” (pp. 5–6). Just as there is not a single way to do nonmonogamy/polyamory, there is also not a single way to do monogamy. Referring again to the previous definitional discussion of monogamy, many actions fall under the broad banner of cheating within the system of monogamy, such as traveling with a person, spending a lot of time with one person at a party, helping someone financially, and so on (Mint, 2004, p. 60). While some dyads might have rules against something as simple as smiling or eye contact, other couples might allow a range of emotional, spiritual, intellectual and even certain agreed-upon physical intimacies to take place outside their relationship. Just as polyamory is not singular but rather a plural form of decision-making regarding “establishing ground rules for the conduct of sexual or romantic relationship” (Rust, 2003, p. 488), so too should we understand monogamy to be *not* a simple practice, identity, orientation, or relational style, but a complex form that entails various and sometimes disparate rules, assumptions, and agreements made by individuals, partners, and societal groups—all embedded within a complex history. To this end, scholars have pointed to the term “new monogamy,” a term being circulated recently in the popular media “which often works as a sort of catchall for relationships that do
not completely prohibit extradyadic eroticism, regardless of the self-proclaimed [monogamous] identities of the participants” (Frank & DeLamater, 2010, p. 15). In new monogamy, flexibility is a hallmark of the dyadic relationship, even though the people in those relationships still publicly proclaim their relationship to be a “monogamous” one. In rhetoric and composition classrooms and scholarship, discussions of relationship literacy might include discussions of this new monogamy, as well as the various creative forms that monogamy, nonmonogamy, and polyamory might take. Expanding our consciousness beyond the false duality of monogamy versus nonmonogamy is part and parcel of the project of teaching and learning relationship literacy.

All in all, the language that has sprung from the poly movement is a force to be reckoned with. Scholars from fields that focus on language and discourse—such as linguistics, literary studies, rhetoric and composition, creative writing, and communication—would be well advised to pay particular attention, for poly practitioners and theorists are rapidly transforming some of the assumptions that human beings have held, for perhaps centuries, regarding intimate relationships. New ideas in language—for example, that the emotion of jealousy is no longer to be quite so dreaded because it can be actively channeled into compersion—not only change how we see ourselves and our intimate circle(s), but these new ideas change how we see the world as a whole…and, it prompts us to consider what glorious possibilities that world might contain. (It’s a new world indeed.)

Probably the most striking commonality in all the poly literature is the notion that this new language is, at core, creating a new language of empathy, a new language of compassion that can be put to daily, actual use, even if we do not openly claim a poly identity. When we can simply recognize the idea that it is not a negative thing for our lovers to perhaps, one day (or
even today) desire to be connected to others—then who knows what is possible? When we can, perhaps, go beyond that, even, by allowing our lover to love others, then who knows what else is possible? The language of polyamory creates new kinds of hopes—and academe is a prime place to analyze those hopes, and asking, also, how these new thoughts might change what it means to be “human.”

Love, Spirituality, and Other Themes

There are a number of other prominent themes within the poly literature. Due to length restrictions of this chapter, these themes will not be discussed in as much detail. However, they are still important, and I hope my brief discussion here might prompt scholars to build upon and complexify these themes in their work.

Conversations about love have been very central. In the academic collection *Plural Loves: Designs for Bi and Poly Living*, edited by the feminist activist-scholar Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio—a self-identified polyamorous person and a participant-observer in various polyamorous communities—love is continually revisited as a productive angle from which to reveal and celebrate polyamory as a way of life that has the potential to, and indeed is already working to, transform negative patriarchal structures. In this collection, which explores the “intersections of and convergences between bisexuality and polyamory” (2004, p. 3), love is portrayed as a healing, connecting resource that is not scarce or limited, but rather as abundant, as available to anyone willing to take the leap into living polyamorously. Additionally, poly is

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28This question of the changing human is a concern that has been central to Judith Butler’s work for decades.

29The themes I previously discussed at length were chosen because they seemed to hold the most promise in regard to starting conversations about relationship literacy.

30*Plural Loves* was copublished simultaneously as the *Journal of Bisexuality*, 4(3/4), a peer-reviewed academic journal, which is edited by scholars and offers essays by both academics as well as activists and others not necessarily affiliated with universities. Thus, the *Journal of Bisexuality* does important work by straddling the (often seemingly wide!) divide between academia and the broader public of intellectuals, writers, and activists. The collection *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader* does something similar, as well: copublished as the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 3(1/2), this collection brings together the voices of academics, artists, psychologists, and other professionals and writers to discuss the impact of polyamory on the lesbian community.
seen as an approach to not just romantic life—but also to living peacefully with *all* humans, no matter whether a friend, a family member, a coworker, an acquaintance, a stranger. For instance, in the chapter “In the Forecourt of Paradise: A Report on the Possible Love-Erotic Future of Humankind,” Konstanza (2004) argued that monogamy is actually a way of being in the world that creates less love rather than more. Within *Plural Loves* as well as across much of the extant scholarship, we see love touted as not just a romantic term or issue, but as a much more inclusive field of possibility that prompts questions such as: “Does our [cultural] focus/preoccupation with romantic love distract (if not prevent) us from imagining bonds with others? How does romantic love work against or temporarily divert from other forms of love—familial love, love for friends, neighbors, community, or love of the planet?” (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 253). In addition, scholars who openly claim their poly identity often make it a point to clear up the question of how a person can love more than one person at a time, drawing simple, concrete explanations from their own lives:

> It is puzzling that I am so often questioned about my ability to love two women simultaneously. I would never think to challenge a parent’s capacity to love a partner and a child, or multiple children at the same time. I believe that each of us is capable of loving as many humans and animals as our hearts can stretch to embrace. My myocardium currently houses two lovers, two Maltese dogs, and seven especially dear lifelong friends. (Gartrell, 1999, p. 32)
In answering the question as to whether a person can “really” love more than one person, scholars also often critique the way U.S. and western nations tend to prioritize romantisexual love and intimacy over friendship (Mushroom, 1999; Rothblum, 1999).

Writers who are willing to engage the (perhaps risky or taboo?) topic of love also tend to explore the spiritual dimensions of polyamory (Robins, 2004; Sartorius, 2004), or how poly communities tend to stem from a heritage of “alternative spiritualties” such as Neopagan and Earth-centered spiritualties (Aviram, 2010, p. 90). Progressive forms of spirituality (as distinct from monotheistic religion, which has undertones of oppressive, destructive capitalism—for more on this connection, see Anderlini-D’Onofrio’s [2006] introduction to Plural Loves) are cited in connection with poly identities and practices, forms of spirituality which tend to take into account the delicate yet pervasive connections between loving, relationality, eco-friendly practices, as well as have an awareness of basic principles derived from postmodernism and feminism.

Related to this is the strand of research that deals with explicating the complicated positioning of sexuality within discourses of love. Some scholars point out how the polyamory movement would not even be a movement at all if sex were not involved. If polys were to keep their love platonic and non-sexual, being poly would not be a controversy at all—in fact, it would probably be applauded by many (McCullough & Hall, 2003). In other words, sexuality must be at the center of discourses on monogamy, nonmonogamy, and polyamory, as sexuality is the dominant discourse for categorizing, prioritizing, and evaluating relationships. In Kristin S. Scherrers’s piece “Asexual Relationships: What Does Asexuality Have to do with Polyamory?” she reminds us that sexual acts are often the major defining criteria in ranking relationships.

31 For more on how patriarchal concepts of “the erotic” have traditionally excluded connections, coalitions, and joys shared between females, please see Rich’s (1980) classic essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”
Drawing on survey research, Scherrer’s participants discuss how concepts like monogamy are “virtually unintelligible outside of its relationship to sexual behavior” (p. 157). In attending to relationship literacy, scholars, students, and teachers can begin to tease out assumptions about what “makes” a relationship. Does sex have to be included for a relationship to be intimate? Must there be sex present in the relationships that are prioritized in one’s life? In what ways are nonsexual friendships devalued if sex is not involved? Further, what actions must occur for the relationship to “count” as sexual—does merely kissing count? What about cuddling? Holding hands? Massages? What about sharing ice cream out of the same bowl? What about energetic orgasms? What about sharing secrets? What about texting messages like “I love you?” or sharing other declarations of love and care? With the lens of relationship literacy, questions like these become fascinating focal points into analyzing how people create, maintain, define, and categorize relationships.

Other recurring themes across the scholarship are: polyfamilies and parenting (Halpern, 1999; Iantaffi, 2006; Riggs, 2006; Sheff, 2010); the coding of monogamy as stable/normal/mature as opposed to nonmonogamy which is coded as flimsy/abnormal/immature (Saxey, 2010); the power dynamics of gender/class/race in conjunction with polyamory (Ho, 2006; Sheff, 2005; Willey, 2006; Willey, 2010); the distinction between monogamy and serial monogamy (Dal Vera, 1999; Deer, 1999); poly as a “relationship orientation” or “identity” (Barker, 2005a); calls for radical sexpositive practices and cultures (Hall, 1999; Anapol, 2004); poly discourse in relation to the current gay marriage debates (McPheeters, 1999; Emens, 2004; Aviram, 2007); how polyamory is marginalized within other minority sexual cultures (Loulan, 1999; See, 2004); polyamory as a potentially powerful feminist practice or source of feminine empowerment (Allegra, 1999; Ritchie & Barker, 2005; Ritchie & Barker, 2007; Klesse, 2010;
Cardoso, 2012); coming out of the closet as poly (Rambukkana, 2004); the history of polyamory as embedded in other counter-cultures (Kitaka, 1999; Siegel, 1999); the practical advantages of living polyamorously (Martin, 1999; Orleans, 1999); the intersections between trans and poly identities (Richards, 2010); polyamory as a “queer” culture or identity (for more on this, please see Chapter Three); the pervasiveness across cultures of the idea of sexuality as sinful or shameful (Stelboum, 1999; Francis, 2004); the various models for doing polyamory such as the primary/secondary model or the polyfidelity model (Labriola, 1999); mainstream media representations of poly (Ritchie, 2010; Wilkinson, 2010); poly depicted in artistic works (Bryant, 2004); reviews of popular texts about polyamory (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2004); agreements/rules within poly relationships (Wosick-Correa, 2010); polyamory and nonmonogamy as breaking “sexual scripts” (Adam, 2010); and masturbation as a potentially queer, polyamorous act (Dodson, 2004; Francis, 2004).

It is important to note, too, that polyamory is often mentioned as a subtheme or in passing (or even sometimes seemingly buried within an endnote or footnote) within scholarship on nonmonogamous practices and identities. Due to the scope of this project, I was unable to review all published sources on nonmonogamy—however, in the work I did analyze it seems clear that the scholars working in this broad field have an understanding of polyamory as a significant and unique area of inquiry within (or alongside of) nonmonogamy research.

Through calls for a more politicized vision of polyamory, as well as explorations of the hegemonic force of mononormativity and the countering, radical forces of neologisms springing from poly practitioners and theorists, scholars across disciplines have urged a re-thinking of how humans do and can do relationships. In rhetoric and composition, extant conversations about the

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32 Psychotherapist Meg Barker, arguably the foremost poly scholar, has published an array of work on in the intersections between sadomasochism/kink, queer identities, open relationships, and/or nonmonogamous intimacies. For the sake of this project, however, I centered my research on her work that focuses on polyamory.
dangers of heteronormativity and the creative forces of queerness coalesce to form a firm base on which we may begin to think about the implications of polyamory. Using concepts such as relationship literacy, we can, perhaps, reveal the default, normative ways of organizing relationships between human beings, and asking what new narratives we might tell, what new dialogues we might engage in, what new languages we might use to conceptualize these new queer ways of living and loving.

The Future

A methodological problem has arisen throughout every one of the qualitative studies I reviewed: the problem of not obtaining enough participant variety. Again and again, participant groups are comprised of mostly middle-class, well-educated, able-bodied Whites. At this point, it is unclear whether failures to obtain a wide range of participants is due more to the fact that polyamory as a practice/identity has not yet spread to those outside the white, middle-class, educated, able-bodied categories and communities, or, if the problem instead lies with the researchers not being able to put into motion the right kinds of connections, the right kinds of networks to reach other kinds of participants due to unfortunate racialized histories and influences (and other hierarchies impeding connection). No matter the reason, however, this lack of participant variety in the qualitative data works to create a portrait of polyamory as a White, educated, able-bodied and predominantly “middle-class Western discourse” (Rambukkana, 2010, p. 238). In my own personal experience with polyamorous communities, this portrait does not seem entirely accurate, however. For example, at a monthly private (invite-only) poly support/social group that I attend, at least half of the participants would be categorized as working class and have not had more than a high school education or a few years at a trade school, with many either unemployed or underemployed. There are also a number of affluent
attendees (a few millionaires, in fact). Also, at this support group—which meets in rural northwest Ohio—there are a number of African American and Native American attendees, which is surprising considering the mostly White population in the surrounding towns. In addition, there are a relatively significant number of attendees who are differently-abled (either due to injuries or chronic illnesses), and many of these people cannot work typical jobs, either relying on economic support from their spouses or from government aid. Granted, my comments here are not based on any formal data; however, I do point this out as a way to add weight to my call that researchers aim to fill the large methodological holes that currently exist in the scholarship. We need more information about poly people who are nonwhite, differently-abled, and from educational and class backgrounds other than the middle class.

Researchers in rhetoric and composition would do well to consider conducting qualitative work, such as ethnographic studies of polyamorous communities (both virtual and in-person), as well as publishing narratives and autoethnographic accounts of their own experiences with polyamory or other non-normative ways of doing relationships, as the “relatively unknown nature of polyamorous practices and communities makes qualitative, and especially ethnographic, research an appropriate methodological choice” (Sheff, 2007, p. 112). The pioneering autoethnographic work of Sheff, where she discusses her personal involvement (both intellectually and sexually) in poly communities, can be used a model for such future studies. Significant effort must be made to contact participants and groups who are not white, not middle class, not able-bodied, and from various educational backgrounds. Key questions that could be asked of poly-identified or poly-practicing participants are: What types of people comprise your poly friends, loves, and networks? What types of people are not present in your networks, and why? In asking participants themselves to directly weigh-in on the composition of polyamorous
communities (in other words, involving participants in discussions of methodological issues), we might begin to get a better picture of how knowledge of polyamory, as an option, spreads. Who knows about polyamory? How did they come to know? At what point in their life did they come to know? What blocked their knowing or subtly hindered their knowing about polyamory before they knew? How long did it take for participants to learn about poly before actively engaging in polyamorous practices or identifying as poly or coming out of the closet as poly? When participants came out as poly, what words did they use to describe themselves, and were these words intended to create a sense that, even though poly, their lives and loves were “normal”—or did participants use language to critique the dominant mandate that people should strive to be normal? In qualitative/ethnographic work, these questions can help shed light on just what kind of people comprise poly communities and how those communities came into being.

The problem of not obtaining enough participant variety is not always overlooked or hidden, though. Some researchers openly admit to these limitations in their methodology sections, and sometimes they even offer possible—often intriguing—hypotheses for their being unable to obtain a more diverse population sample (e.g., Sheff, 2006, p. 624). Future qualitative work should continue the task of attempting to find more diverse populations to study beyond simply White/middle-class/able-bodied/university educated, and in addition, should begin to work to test the available hypotheses (or even new offer new hypotheses and then test those) to explain the lack of diversity portrayed by research studies. It is entirely possible that, even if researchers tried more creative ways of creating a more diverse population sample that the portrait of poly communities would remain the same. Sheff and Hammers (2011) reminds us that “we must consider that, on some level, there might not be anything to be done about the dearth of people of colour [and people of other diverse categories] in samples of sexual minorities”
because those people just might not opt to participate in public poly communities/networks and just might not self-identify as poly, even though their behaviors might be quite similar to self-identified polys (p. 217–218). If that is the case, then the research questions need to change, and we need to ask more questions about how race and class and other factors impact the way people behave or identify (or not) in poly ways. We can ask questions like: How does being Asian affect one’s choice to have multiple partners? How do notions of choice and agency relate to race/ethnicity? How does being working-class impact one’s knowledge of the term polyamory? Does education relate to one’s self-identification or one’s coming out as poly? How does being disabled affect sexual practices in dyads or groups? How might being elderly affect participation in public poly events or organizations?

Another important area for future research: poly scholars can make more explicit connections between forms of consensual nonmonogamy. Swinging, open relationships, fuck buddies, polyamory, and other variations might not be so wildly different from each other. And while there has been tremendous pressure in gay male communities to form “settled-down” monogamous couples, there is also, as reflected in the self-help literature, many gay males who practice various versions of nonmonogamy and open relationships (Klesse, 2007b). Indeed, “There is a continued need to explore consensual non-monogamy both generally and relating to particular identities or categorizations . . . as it is indeed overlooked in much traditional sociological research on marriage” (Frank & DeLamater, 2010, p. 20). While distinctions and differences are important to point out, we often miss some common-ground-building that could happen through *an attention to what people have in common* rather than what they don’t. By utilizing the concept of relationship literacy as a creative force for understanding the creative ways of knowing and engaging with others, we can ask, in celebration: what are the similarities,
the overlaps in ideals, practices, traditions? Here are some examples. Both polyamorists and swingers are frustrated by a very sex-negative mainstream culture, a culture that places high priority on sexual exclusivity; both swingers and pols enjoy engaging in new, exciting, free-spirited sexual acts beyond normative expectations and limits. The two groups of polyamorists and consensual polygamists both explore sexual networks and intimate connections between people in ways that break traditional boundaries of the dyad form. Along with the political theme of the need to engage in coalition-building (e.g., Noël, 2006; Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006), it is important to remember that however important categorization is as well as the recognition of difference (made possible through the thought-vehicles of feminism, anti-racist scholarship, engaged critical pedagogies, as I will discuss in Chapters Four and Five), it is equally important to realize when people and groups share common ground. In doing so, we feel closer to one another and feel less isolated in our quest to achieve social and individual progress.

Further, it is important to create scholarship that makes more of an effort to point out the similarities between the seemingly incompatible monogamous identities/practices and poly identities/practices. A few examples: both polyamory and traditional dyadic marriage explore connecting, loving, evolving, and relating in often profound, long-term ways. Polyamory and casual dating or fuck buddies actually have much in common too, as both are explorations of sexuality without placing limitations on the other person.

Finally, I believe that more needs to be done to focus on the sex-radical and sex-positive politics of polyamory. Although some might not like to admit it, Gayle Rubin’s 1984 assertion that Western culture is generally sex-negative still holds very true today in 2013. Sex/sexuality still is seen with an ultimate “suspicion,” as a “dangerous, destructive, negative

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33 For more on the origins of “sex-positive” therapeutic perspectives in relation to bisexuality and polyamory, please see Queen (1996).
force”—especially if that sex/sexuality is expressed in ways that deviate from cultural norms and morals (p. 278). Consequently, both popular and academic narratives and analyses tend to portray polyamory as an act of long-term love relationship (similar to a marriage or life-partnership relationship) or as a kind of relation that is totally different from “casual,” short-term sex. This anxious positioning seems necessary if we think about Rubin’s (1984) insight that “sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent” (p. 278). Thus, in order to deflect potential criticism, poly activists and poly theorists are careful to portray extra-dyadic sexual practices as credible, as justifiable, as worthy within the paradigm of a generally sex-negative culture that only sees sex as honorable if it meets one of the criteria for exemption, such as, for instance, marriage or love (p. 278). This preemptive defense, also, makes logical sense because polyamory evolved from the 1960s practitioners of polyfidelity (a form of group marriage/commitment that tends to restrict sex/sexuality to only inside the group), which placed greater importance on emotional relating and relationships that, ideally, last for the long-term (Wheeler, 2011, p. 23). Thus, this defense of polyamory as a long-term, committed, “serious” relational style can be seen as a philosophical holdover from polyfidelity. However, I do want to, at the same time, caution academics and activists from assuming that merely engaging sexual acts does not, then, guarantee that any political stance is being taken, whether progressive or conservative (Halberstam, 2011, p. 151). Thus, engaging in polyamorous sex/uality is not necessarily a radical political act. What matters is the intention behind or in advance of the sex, and whether or not its practitioners are able to articulate to others those intentions.

Along with Andrew Samuels (2010), I want to question the judgment made about the value of relational time in regard to healthy, positive forms and expressions of sexuality. Samuels’ critique seems right to me—that we may begin to understand the positive aspects of
sex/intimacy shared between friends, casual acquaintances, or even strangers in light of what one might call a “mystical experience” (p. 216). Taking a positive spin on the term promiscuous, Samuels has written: “There’s something numinous about promiscuous experience as many readers will know. Overwhelming physical attraction produces feelings of awe and wonderment and trembling. There is a sort of God aroused, a primitive, chthonic (that is, rooted in the earth), early, elemental God. There is an unfettered experience of the divine” (p. 216). Further, I want to challenge scholars to consider the hidden values and norms that attend thinking any kind of sex as automatically shameful, dirty, risky, problematic. The potential dangers of increased sexual activity is a valid argument against more freer forms of love—yet, as scholars such as Munson (2010) have pointed out, monogamy is not necessarily any safer than polyamory in terms of risk for STI transmission. Unlike monogamous couples (where, by the way, it is entirely possible that at least one of the partners is secretly engaging in sexual acts with others—according to recent statistics, the likelihood that one spouse will have an affair over the course of a marriage ranges from 20 percent to 25 percent), poly people cannot assume that they are safe. This might not sound like a good thing, but it actually is. In my personal experience with a variety of online and in-person poly communities, networks, and friendship circles, I have been astounded to see new poly members (often formerly monogamous) undergo a radical, rapid education. New people in poly communities, often for the first time, begin to enact safer sex practices and create boundaries and long term planning with the health and wellbeing in mind of not just themselves, but their partners and the larger, extended networks of polys within which they engage. There are

34 For a compelling critique of the global “health care” paradigm that mistakenly focuses on allopathic hypotheses to explain and control conditions such as AIDS, please see Anderlini-D’Onofrio’s account (2009, pp. 59–103). Ultimately, she argues that polyamory can be seen as a healing art, and not something to be feared on account of the—as she sees it—mistaken mainstream understandings of health, the body, and ecology.

35 For more interesting statistics and estimates such as these, please see the chapter “Communication and Marital Infidelity” (Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004, pp. 59–61)
a variety of preparedness strategies that polys can take, such as implementing closed poly tribes or polyfidelitous families, weekly or monthly STI-status reports given to all concerned parties, open and honest dialogue with partners before sexual acts occur, the use of toys in place of oral or manual stimulation, and regular medical screenings. In making these calls for more sex-positive understandings of sexuality, I do not wish to claim that all sex is inherently unproblematic. Sex is a sensitive and powerful issue and act. I do not, further, wish to unintentionally reify the binary of sex-as-good as opposed to sex-as-bad. What is my intention is to inspire scholars to take a more expansive approach to sexuality, approaches that take into account the possibility for sex to be a healing, connective force, rather than an automatically risky or dangerous one. Using the concept of relationship literacy, we may begin to realize how normative understandings of sexual mores place any sex outside of a long-term dyad form as inherently negative, unethical, or problematic. Revising these assumptions will open up new spaces for dialogue to occur about relationship forms, identities, and practices that begin from a place of optimism for how sexuality can be a powerful, creative, ultimately healing and connective act. In recalling my previous comments about revising the us (safe inside) versus them (dangerous outside) mentality, we can begin to view sexuality and intimacy as energies that bring people together in love, rather than those which expose us to harm.

A related notion about time is questioning why experiments with nonmonogamy or polyamory are often tried by people but then denigrated or abandoned when relationships end. The bisexual activist Alison Rowan (1995) has convincingly written about this perplexity. Here is one particularly compelling passage:

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36 For more on STI’s, safer sex issues, and navigating the health care system as poly, please see Wheeler (2011, pp. 59–60).
There is one more thing that non-monogamy, or my constant defense of it, has taught me, and that is about the success of relationships. This actually came to me after running a workshop on non-monogamy where out of 30 people, at least half said that they had tried non-monogamy once, “but it had failed”. This phrase got stuck in my mind until I had to work out what was wrong with it. What did they mean by failed? What does anybody mean by the word when they’re talking about relationships? They mean the relationship ended. Which is very odd when you come to think of it. A meal is a failure because it doesn’t taste nice, not because you ran out of food to eat, but a relationship can “fail” even if it’s fun all the way through, because a meal isn’t supposed to last forever and a relationship is if you’re monogamous. But if you’re not monogamous this [theory] just doesn’t work anymore. (p. 18)

If the time aspect of judging relational quality is exposed in further scholarship, perhaps bridges could be built between those who have (at one point in time) tentatively tried polyamory or nonmonogamy and those who proclaim a poly and nonmonogamous identity. Perhaps if we deconstruct the myth of relationships as only “successful” if they last “forever,” then more productive dialogue can be had between those who have experienced serial monogamy, swinging, and other types of adventures without necessarily choosing the label “poly” or “ethically nonmonogamous.” Along with Rowan (2010), I believe it will be incredibly productive—in ways that I cannot even begin to foresee—that “people abandon longevity as the sole measure of the success of a relationship” (p. 18).

Another important strand of thought to be pursued in research regarding human sexuality, ethics, social justice, anti-normativity, or anarchist thought is a more thorough distinction between a simple rejection of monogamy and a rejection of mononormativity. This relates to
calls for more overt politicization/activism in poly writings/theory outlined in the previous section. As Wilkinson (2010) notes, a rejection of monogamy in one’s personal life is not enough—scholars need to “address the false assumption that those who practice non-monogamy will have an inherent commitment to wider political change” (p. 242). As many in the polyamory movement have attempted to portray themselves in normative ways in the popular media, in order to gain recognition and acceptance from the broader public, Wilkinson points out the flaws inherent in this approach, for such an approach fails to make societal change on a truly radical, foundational level. Along with Wilkinson, I argue that “there is a need to differentiate between a rejection of monogamy and a rejection of ‘mononormativity’ . . . By making this distinction we can begin to map out a vision of what a politics of anti-normativity could become (while separating it from the rather more ‘normative’ lifestyles of those who may simply be non-monogamous). (p. 243)

Finally, more work needs to be done to estimate the numbers of people who are in polyamorous relationships or identify as poly. Too often, only vague statements are made, such as: polyamory “is progressively more common than generally imagined” (Black, 2006, p. 498). Currently, researchers do not have solid numbers for just how many poly people there are in the United States, and elsewhere. Leading poly researchers such as Meg Barker (2013), in her most recent book Rewriting the Rules: An Integrative Guide to Love, Sex, and Relationships cites sociological and psychological studies that estimate—based on what seems to be somewhat limited and outdated data—that the proportion of people in nonmonogamous relationships vary from 15–28 percent of heterosexuals to around 50 percent of bisexual and gay men (p. 103). There are other statistics (Weitzman, 2006) that focus on polyamorous people specifically, but,

37 The poly–BDSM activist Raven Keldera has estimated that, based on his personal experience, there are many gay men who practice polyamory or claim a poly identity, but those men are not very visible because they are involved in the more underground leather communities (2010, p. 110).
again, these numbers seem to be based upon limited and rather narrow sample(s) of the population (most often from the researchers’ pools of clients or past clients in therapy):

Page (2004) found that 33% of her bisexual sample of 217 participants were involved in a polyamorous relationship, and 54% considered this type of relationship ideal. West (1996) reported that 20% of her lesbian respondents were polyamorous, while Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that 28% of the lesbian couples in their sample were. Blumstein and Schwartz found that 65% of the gay male couples in their study were polyamorous, and that 15–28% of their heterosexual couples had “an understanding that allows nonmonogamy under some circumstances.” (pp. 141–142)

These statistics are a good start, but we need more information. It’s important that researchers have more concrete figures for the specific practice/identity of poly, and not just nonmonogamy. We need more statistics quantifying how prevalent open poly relationships are, as well as more subtle, closeted practices of polyamory by those who do not necessarily publicly identify as poly. Understanding how widespread poly identities, practices, and philosophies are will help provide impetus for ongoing research. In addition, broader studies in the social sciences about love and intimacy need to begin to take into account what Hidalgo, Barber, and Hunter (2007) refer to as the dyadic imaginary, which is an “ideology or hegemonic concept that renders non-dyadic intimate and sexual relationship forms invisible and unnatural” (p. 173). Empirical studies about how people do intimacy and love must include, at the very least, nods to how those in multiple relationships might compose their lives. Multiple relationships must not continue to be invisible or portrayed as unnatural. The methodologies in these studies must, therefore, go beyond choosing just couples as research subjects.
Like the term polyamory, understanding of the term mononormativity is just beginning to blossom across the academy. In conjunction with already-existing and well-accepted terms like compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity, I believe the term mononormativity has the potential to be influential in spreading the word about polyamory as an ethical relationship lovestyle, as well as giving learners across disciplines some much-needed vocabulary for explorations of relationship literacy. For rhetoric and composition in particular, mononormativity helps us ask some tough questions about language. What are “relationships”? What kinds of “normal” relationships does our culture value? What is the difference between a “lover” and a “friend”? What is the difference between a “partner” and a “lifepartner” or a “girlfriend” and a “boyfriend”? Does the poly terms of “primary” partner and “secondary” partner(s) serve a practical function for organizing how one will spend one’s time and energy, or does this terminology simply reify a problematic hierarchical system? What does monogamy and polyamory have to do with eros and ethics? What is my personal definition of love and what sorts of love do I want to cultivate in my life? What are the possible options for loving? Or, as feminist Sonia Johnson (1991) has put it, “What would love look like in freedom?” (p. 113).
III: QUEER PLUS POLY: A RADICAL EMBRACING

“And everywhere we go, we are charged with telling stories and
making meaning—giving sense to ourselves and the world around
us. And the meanings we invoke and the worlds we craft mesh and
flow, but remain emergent: never fixed, always indeterminate,
ceaselessly contested. Change is ubiquitous: we are always
becoming, never arriving; and the social order heaves as a vast
negotiated web of dialogue and conversation.” —Ken Plummer

Placing Polyamory within Queer Theory

Where might polyamory find a home? Where might it belong? Where can we begin?

There are, no doubt, other possible answers than the one I am proposing. However, for
the sake of this project, I suggest placing polyamory within the discourse of queer theory\(^{38}\) as a
sensible choice. As a vibrant catalyst in rhetoric and composition for transforming the way
students, teachers, literacy learners, and language users think about the sexual self in relation to
others, queer theory provides the impetus from which we can think, write, and talk about
polyamory.

I am not the first scholar to point out the queer–poly connection (e.g., Anderlini
D’Onofrio, 2009; Bauer, 2010). As Eleanor Wilkinson affirms, polyamory—as well as broader

\(^{38}\) For the sake of simplicity, I write “queer theory” to also encompass the related fields of “gay and lesbian studies”
as well as “LGBT studies.” Granted, sometimes scholars intentionally self-place their work within one of these
registers in order to distance themselves from the others, yet the overlap between the missions of these subfields is
so strikingly similar (with goals ultimately being the creation of a nonhomophobic, and ultimately egalitarian society
where sexual acts and sexual identifications are not constrained by intolerance, fear, hatred, ignorance, and law) that
it seems reasonable to use the shorthand “queer” to describe this work. I would be remiss, however, if I did not
mention that some theorists and activists actively reject the term queer for various reasons, such as the fear that
using the term will unintentionally erase the various (often hard-won) identities comprised within it. For more on the
various hesitations against the using of queer/queer theory, please see Barker et al. (2009).
discussions of nonmonogamy—do not denote merely a private and “personal sexual preference,” but rather these discussions can have and perhaps need to have a “broader queer political agenda” (2010, p. 243). As I will demonstrate in this chapter, queer theory is the strong, yet malleable clay from which to shape discussions about polyamory, because both realms focus on the radical embracing of ambiguity, impermanence, and desire, as well as voicing questions regarding normative assumptions about what the concepts “family” and “love” might mean.

The transdisciplinary contributions to queer theory have their roots in the gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Due to the struggles that came from infighting\(^{39}\), the previously-derogatory term “queer” was reclaimed in the 1990s\(^{40}\) as a way to build affective, intellectual, and practical bridges between gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, transgenders, as well as those who do not claim or quite fit into any of these categories but in some way step outside the sexual or gendered norms of mainstream society. In addition, “queer” became the mantra for more radical sexual liberationists (those interested in critiquing structural, widespread inequities as well as those advocating sexuality as a method for personal and social healing), in contrast to those gays and lesbians dedicated to a liberal reformist politics—a politics centered on combating individual prejudice, advocating for legal rights, and spreading the basic idea that gays and lesbians are normal folks.

In the academy, queer theory was a way for scholars and activists to “convey commonality, while not denying difference” (Lehr, 1999, p. 85). It was a way to inspire coalitions across marginalized groups. It was, and is, a way to move beyond a limited and

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\(^{39}\) Gay men often vehemently disagreed with lesbian politics and vice versa; lesbians often weren’t welcoming to the bisexual agenda; and so on.

\(^{40}\) It is interesting to note that this is the same decade the term polyamory was coined.
limiting identity politics—a methodology that tends to waste time and energy worrying about who should be included and who should be excluded from a particular group—and, instead, fosters open dialogue and strong action across diverse groups (Young, 1995). And, while queer movements and queer thought do aim to deconstruct taken-for-granted notions such as “identity” and “orientation,” queer is also about the making of new ways of thinking and being, new ways of figuring and conceptualizing. As Elizabeth Freeman (2010) has so eloquently expressed, “To me, ‘queer’ cannot signal a purely deconstructive move or position of pure negativity” (p. xxi). Indeed. It is more than just that. Queer is a rallying signifier for action, courage, transformation—ultimately, for a movement toward a more egalitarian futurity. Queer is a radically new way of thinking: a kind of thought that goes beyond current possibilities in thought. One that cries out for experiments, for change, for rhetorical spaces and places that seem to be impolite, that seem to enact a fundamentally “antisocial force” (Edelman, 2004, p. 39).

Numerous academic fields have taken up queer theory as a way to fine-tune and push-forward pressing social justice concerns about how humans should best organize their lives with each other. Queer theory is, ultimately, a broad series of questions concerned with ethics—that is, questions about the standards or codes that individuals would be wise to live by within the larger communities of which they are part. As scholars such as Sullivan (2003) and Warner

Even though I do caution against limiting social justice work in sexuality to just identity politics, I do want to state that I am aware and nervous about queer theorists unintentionally erasing the very real lived experiences and struggles of being sexual in this still-unjust world. Scholars in bisexuality studies such as Susan Feldman (2012) have critiqued how queer theory has been dominated by the essentialist/constructionist binary, which is a system of thought that mistakenly decries all identity politics as essentialist (read backwards). I agree with Feldman that the essentialist/constructionist binary has not been helpful for queer theory’s aim of dismantling problematic structures of sexuality and gender. We need a more nuanced, nonbinary account of sexuality. In addition, I’d like to argue that, perhaps in some contexts, identity politics can be a productive method for social change, and these efforts should not be dismissed as simply silly and essentialist. For example, while I wholeheartedly agree with Warner’s (1999) radical notion that gay marriage can unintentionally marginalize other sexual minorities who fall outside the range of the “normal,” I do, also and simultaneously, support gays and lesbians in their seeking the opportunity to become legally wed, as such changes in law can be seen as one step further along in the overall evolution of human consciousness. In other words, I can simultaneously forward and critique both a more radical queer understanding such as Warner’s as well as celebrate the lesbian/gay marriage political movement.
(1999; 2005) have pointed out, queer theory stretches past issues of just sex/sexuality/gender, working to critique normalizing ways of thinking and being. Queer theorists ask broad questions; for example: How can human beings—with such a wonderful spectrum of passions, needs, hopes, desires, and pursuits between them—live together more peaceably, more intelligently, more productively, more sustainably, more lovingly? As its “primary strategy,” above all, queer theory throws into question assumed ideas about what is “natural.” How might human beings productively denaturalize what seems, on the surface, natural? (Jagose, 1996/2010, p. 98). How might concepts such as natural and normal be deconstructed, exposed for the delimiting concepts that they truly are?

Emerging initially from LGBT studies and feminist studies, queer theory has had an enormous reach, continuing to influence poststructuralist critical theorists in social sciences and humanities fields such as history, law, geography, anthropology, economics, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, communication studies, political science, education, linguistics, history, English studies—and, perhaps surprisingly, queer theory has even extended into “hard” scientific fields such as zoology and architecture. Within rhetoric and composition, queer theory continues to impact a number of foci, such as (but certainly not limited to) first-year writing pedagogy (e.g., Marinara et al., 2009), writing center scholarship (e.g., Denny, 2005) feminist/critical pedagogies (e.g., Gibson et al., 2000), new media studies (e.g., Alexander & Rhodes, 2012), feminist rhetoric (e.g., Rawson, 2010), and queer rhetoric (e.g., Wallace, 2009). My hope is that this project will help usher in new dialogues within our field—that of, perhaps, “relationship literacy studies”, an area simultaneously birthed by and giving birth to new insights in queer theory within rhetoric and composition.

Getting to the Roots
The word “radical” comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning “root.” So, to get radical is to get to the root of the matter, to go to the origin or to the heart. Radical is what we cannot do without: What we cannot pretend does not exist.

Polyamory studies and queer theory have a great many meanings and implications for a great many scholars. (Some have staked their entire careers on these areas.) As such, particular definitions, denotations, connotations, coalitions, questions, and critiques abound. There are many ways to “do” polyamory, both in theory and in practice, and there are many ways to approach—and be approach by—queer theory. Therefore, to assert *one* method or *one* avenue of linking these two massive galaxies would be problematic. However, one can offer a (admittedly tentative, admittedly provisional) view of the commonalities shared by both queer theory and polyamory studies. One can strip away the top layers to reveal something of the root underneath.

To understand poly and to understand queer, one is faced with a radical redefinition of what is most rich, what is most revealing in life. And, to understand them, together—to think of them in a blended manner—is to stand face-to-face with a radical ontology: that life is best lived by embracing ambiguity and impermanence. To *be*, then, is to *be ambiguous*; to *be*, then, is to never stay still (or to try to stay still) but *always change*, to be *open to change*. And in these ways, human beings *desire*.

This is a difficult proposition. I do not think it would be going out on too much of a limb (justified by even the most cursory and mundane of glances across the state of the affairs across academe) that many postmodern scholars (myself included), so accustomed to theorizing on paper that there is no ultimate Truth and no stable Self, have difficulty putting these lofty theories into everyday practice. It’s easier said than done. Not knowing is painful; change is painful. This seems to be the paradox of the human condition, in fact: Many of us, both scholars
and laypeople, intellectually understand, as Socrates did, that the only true wisdom is in accepting that one knows nothing—yet, emotionally speaking, it’s tough to truly live one’s daily life with that principle guiding one’s actions and reactions. Most humans want to believe that they have amassed some amount of knowledge, even if only a slight bit. Most want to believe that they have sweated and labored and toiled for at least a tiny amount of truth—at the very least, within one’s own specific niche or academic subfield.

So, if the root of wisdom is in the knowing that we don’t know, then what, we ask, can wisdom really be? What does it look like? What can we do about it? What is the point of our lives? Further, even though we may intellectually realize that death (the ultimate expression of impermanence) is our fate, then why do human beings go to such extraordinary measures to pretend as though it will not happen? Even in our very ordinary lexicon we constantly assuage the fear of death, by making extraordinary yet ordinary statements such as, “My darling, I will be with you forever.”

But the rewards of remembering and embracing ambiguity and impermanence are great.

Ambiguity, Impermanence, and Desire in Queer and Poly Thinking

Ambiguity is uncertainty. With ambiguity, there are no absolutes in meaning; there is no grand “The End” dancing across the screen. Through ambiguity, there is the learning to embrace what is murky, grey, complicated, never quite finished. Through ambiguity, there is not the fleeing from but rather the moving toward intellectual paradoxes—for paradox helps begin to loosen our anxious grasping for what is true versus what is false; helps us begin, instead, to settle more deeply into the sheer beauty and productivity of lingering in the questions.

Queer theory helps us ask newer and more fascinating, yet, paradoxically, more basic questions. Judith Butler (1990/2010), one of the foremothers of queer theory, for instance, has
been interested in not taking for granted a person’s sex (male or female) as a natural, merely biological type or unproblematic category. Rather, she asked (and still asks): What is “sex”? What is “gender”? How are the two related or unrelated? What does rhetoric, what does discursivity do to bodies in terms of how we see them, how we interpret them, how we make them? What does it mean to make a body and what is the meaning of desire? Through her work, Butler makes the human body more and more ambiguous, more and more denaturalized. The feeling of reading her work is like walking into a dimly-lit house you’ve lived in for twenty years—with all the furniture rearranged! Granted, stubbed toes may be temporarily frustrating (or even intensely painful)—yet through the potent act of peering more deeply at what had before been obvious (bodies, genders, sexualities, relations), it is possible to see with fresh eyes. This is how queer theory harnesses the ambiguous in order to ask provocative questions about what it means to be an ethical and empowered human being, being in the world with others. In Chapter Five, I discuss how queer theory helps us build pedagogies where ambiguousness is channeled as a value in order to guide students in asking questions about their own place as ethical, empowered actors, relating in the world with others.

Seeing, thinking, writing, and loving queerly is an epistemology for placing explicit value on diversity and difference. Particularly in bisexuality studies—a field that has been influential in demonstrating sexuality as queerly fluid rather than rigidly fixed—scholars have intentionally rejected the outmoded psychological model of deviance/pathology in favor of a sex-positive model that celebrates a variety of bodily and psychic expressions and desires “as healthy, legitimate sources of pleasure rather than as pathologies” (Queen, 1996, p. 120). For queer theory, queer lives, queer communities, queer practices and in a range of queer activism(s),

42 The deviance/pathology model is still, unfortunately, a widely accepted way of interpreting sexual bodies and actions, as evidenced by the continued valuing of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) by the psychological community.
diversity and pleasure are not energies to be automatically wary of; rather, diversity and pleasure can have revitalizing, radical power.

Desire stems from the possibility of pleasure; diversity is the juice that brings sweetness into our lives. Without recognition or a valuing of diversity, what is desired is sameness, a state of un-discovery (for what can we truly learn from clones of ourselves?) and, ultimately, a death-like state. Butler (2004) described desire, in all its humanly complex, ambiguous, and perhaps-contradictory glory:

Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of another, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. And so when we speak about my sexuality or my gender, as we do (and as we must) we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another or, indeed, by virtue of another. (p. 19)

Here we see desire so beautifully and lyrically depicted as the force by which we come together: out of isolation as discrete individuals and into community. Here we see how desire, the radical energy of life, brings us forward, perhaps trembling, in “ways of being for another.” With this view, we cannot pretend what we desire does not matter. Desire seems to be, in fact, at the root of what it means to be a human being, as we see that to be is: to be with others.

As an organizing principle, desire is celebrated at the root of both queer and poly discourses. With this particular construction of desire, fundamental ambiguity arises about what
sorts of pleasures and what sorts of relationships will work. What works for one may not—and probably won’t—work for another. And what works for one one week or year or decade might not hold (and probably won’t) over time. Thus, the goal of feeling stable (an illusion anyway) is eschewed in favor of a radical embracing of impermanence in both queer and poly thinking.

Quite simply, impermanence is the understanding that all of life is change, is literally composed of change, and to pretend otherwise is blindness. For queer theorists, to radically embrace impermanence is to accept that the desire for a particular gender or a specific type of partner-body morphs over time; further, our notion of personal “integrity” should not be seen as sticking to the same static set of values over time—but rather integrity and personal morality should encompass the acceptance that a person’s moral compass will (and actually must!) change over time (Moorhead, 1999, p. 329). As polyamory researchers such as Heckert (2010) have noted, to radically embrace impermanence is to be serene in the acceptance that romantic relationships and configurations expand (to include more people), contract (when breakups happen), move, mutate, and change in a multiplicity of ways over time, as the people involved change—and that to deny this reality is to battle an impossible battle against the law of impermanence. Relationship literacy, a concept I will discuss more in the next two chapters, is a way to explore the impermanent nature of relationships. With a more complex and nuanced vocabulary for analyses of the various pulls we have towards and apart from each other, human beings break out of the shell of binary thinking (either a person is gay or straight; either a person is having sex or they are not; etc.) as well as mononormativity. Through thinking through the lens of relationship literacy, it is easier to grasp the diversity of ways that human beings can ethically express their loves and desires.
Through queer theory’s insights, monogamy is deconstructed. As I discussed in the previous chapter, there is not just one monogamy, but many monogamies—many ways of creating relationships that have various boundaries in place (boundaries that might differ and probably do differ from the boundary choices others have made). Through queer and poly theories, we see that the opposite of monogamy is not polyamory—rather, we see that the opposite of monogamy is cheating, is deceiving another (Cardoso, 2012). Relationship literacy assists with seeing shades of color in relationality that some have never perceived before.

Taking into account the role of impermanence in the human lifecycle, the traditional notion in identity politics of “sexual orientation” becomes, consequently, less of a useful concept: for a person’s needs, desires, pleasures, and preferences can now be seen as queerly fluid. For queer and poly thinkers, to be boxed-in by notions such as a fixed, unchanging orientation (essentially, the modernist notion of a Stable Self) disallows the potential feeling of “disorientation,” which, according to Sara Ahmed (2006), can be an ultimately productive feeling of not-knowing: a feeling that “can offer us the hope of new directions” (p. 158). Ahmed’s view of disorientation emphasizes change and impermanence as positive forces; it is akin to stumbling around in that ambiguous house in the dark—the potential pain of stubbed toes is worth it. Disorientation allows for a seeing with fresh eyes and also getting un-stuck from patterns that have become, for various reasons, stale.

What scholars can learn, then, from queer and poly theories is a radical lesson in the reality of diversity. (It helps us get further beyond mere lip service to diversity.) Not everyone will enjoy the same sexual acts. Not everyone will desire the same gender. (Not everyone will even care about gender!) Not every relationship will last the same period of time. Not everyone will want relationship(s) at all points of their lifespan. Not everyone will benefit from specific
forms of sexual, romantic, or intimate bonds with others. Therefore, in the ambiguous, impermanent, desiring world of the queer and of the poly, driving questions about sex and sexuality as well as related issues about gender and power cannot ever be put to a full stop. It is, rather, our obligation as ethical scholars in rhetoric and composition to continue asking questions, to continue spinning plural possible meanings and interpretations about what it is that bodies and hearts do when they cohabitate in the world and when they come, quite closely, together. Relationship literacy is the lens with which this work of asking questions about diversity and spinning diverse meanings can be done.

Negotiating Polyamory: Dealing with Ambiguity and Impermanence

As with other marginalized ways of living, those who openly embrace a poly or queer life intentionally embrace a life of challenge. These paths can be tough. These identities, these ontologies, can be difficult not only because they are ways of being in and knowing of the world that sharply break with received cultural mores about the “correct” way to do relationships, but also because poly-ness and queer-ness, at their most radical, ask its practitioners to not only not flee from ambiguity and impermanence but to, in fact, step into those confusing emotions and places because of what they can teach. Such lessons, while often quite intellectually stimulating and/or politically inspiring, can be emotionally taxing to the extreme.

For many polys (and I include myself in this grouping), relationship hierarchy is rejected in favor of a more egalitarian ambiguity regarding status. Terms such as “primary partner” or “secondary partner”—utilized by some polyamorists and other nonmonogamists—are eschewed: All partners are accorded equal status in the eyes of their beloved(s). While this is no doubt an advanced ethical practice from a feminist and anarchist philosophical standpoint, such a stance can be difficult to undertake in the reality of day-to-day living—especially in our U.S. culture,
where we are daily bombarded with Hallmark cards, wedding invitations, novels, advertising, movies, television shows, and other cultural discourse that subtly imply or outright proclaim that there must be, at the very least, a “best” person for each of us. (These cultural messages can be as subtle as the design of Facebook only allowing for listing one romantic partner, or as blatant as state laws declaring that marriage can only be between two people.) Researchers Finn and Malson (2008), using discourse analysis, have documented how in many ostensibly “open” relationships, couples use rhetoric which constructs the “inside” dyad as the “safe haven” while all other relationships are seen as the more risky (even potentially dangerous), less “authentic” relationships. They argue—and I agree—that in order to really and actually challenge the homogenizing ideology of mononormativity, nonmonogamous practitioners need to stop worshiping at the altar of The Couple and, instead, transgress the typically “restricted flows of relationality” (p. 532) in favor of new, creative expressions and emotional connections between people. No doubt, ambiguity and impermanence seem to be vital aspects of the project Finn and Malson describe. In abstaining from declaring who is the “best” or “only” or “most,” egalitarian polyamorists hold themselves open to the increasing possibility—dare I say magic—of living a life where desire is respected (and not suppressed) as an energetic force of fruitful creation, and where a diversity of partnerships and relationships over the lifecycle is celebrated. Poly philosophy, just like queer philosophy, acknowledges that humans cannot know in advance what it is our future holds. Moreover, lamenting and groaning over this lack of future-knowledge is a waste of time. Instead, polyamorists who avoid relationship hierarchies, through their use of intentional egalitarian rhetoric, do not even make the gesture at attempting to “predict” or “guess” at the future in terms of who it will be that will be occupying meaningful positions. The future and the faces remain, (terrifyingly but also splendidly) ambiguous. Yet, this does not
release our responsibility to actively work to create social situations that are ever-more progressive, ever more at the heart of a radical democracy. Rhetoricians and compositionists can incorporate an appreciation for impermanence and ambiguity without sacrificing their political, social justice aims. Butler (2004) reminded humans to hold ourselves open to what we don’t know; she intuits that there is a perhaps strange but yet immensely powerful understanding that comes with juxtaposing “the future” (understanding that it is, at base, totally ambiguous and impossible to know or predict) with the goal-driven tasks of working with others to create evolved social conditions:

[T]o assume responsibility for a future is not to know its direction fully in advance, since the future, especially the future with and for others, requires a certain openness and unknowingness. It also implies that a certain agonism and contestation will and must be in play. They must be in play for politics to become democratic…Democracy does not speak in unison; its tunes are dissonant, and necessarily so. It is not a predictable process; it must be undergone, as a passion must be undergone. It may also be that life itself becomes foreclosed when the right way is decided in advance, or when we impose what is right for everyone, without finding a way to enter into community and discover the “right” in the midst of cultural translation. It may be that what is “right” and what is “good” consist in staying open to the tensions that best the most fundamental categories we require, to know unknowingness at the core of what we know, and what we need, and to recognize the sign of life—and its prospects. (pp. 226–227)

Yet, despite the ethical soundness of philosophies such as Butler’s, daily mundane living has a tendency of testing even the noblest aims. Rejecting normative language such as “primary” or “best” or “only” can be intensely challenging. This is especially the case for couples who open
up their relationship after having been monogamous for a period of time (which is a common way many people begin their poly journeys). Even after the decision to open up or become poly has been made (whatever terminology the couple deems appropriate), negotiating the aftermath of being (seemingly suddenly) bombarded by ever more cultural messages that paint their decision in a negative light can be trying, to say the least. Often, family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues offer no support for their relationship transition—and, in many cases, privately or publicly condemn. It cannot be denied that in the current paradigm of capitalist competition and mononormativity, human beings are conditioned from a young age to strive to be “number one.” To attain best-ness. To strive to be the winner. We are conditioned to need to stand out, to draw attention to ourselves—and this is often done through securing a mate: someone who has agreed to “forsake all others.” Monogamy is often about, at a root level, the self-congratulatory sense of: I am the best for, at the very least, this one other person. I am this person’s moon and sun. Often, this “forsaking of others” (which lets the partner know that he or she “won”) is done out of an attempt to prove to one’s partner and to the wider society that this relationship is a valid one. Monogamy is usually the most prominent normative criteria for judging whether one’s community should sanction a dyad. As Butler (2004) has pointed out, “those who live outside the conjugal frame or maintain modes of organization for sexuality that are neither monogamous nor quasi-marital are more and more considered unreal, and their loves and losses less than ‘true’ loves and ‘true’ losses” (pp. 26–27). Learning the lessons of relationship literacy can help expose the normative values that dictate that a relationship that is romantic, intimate, and/or sexual should be monogamous. Through the aid of queer theory, it is possible to see the normativizing discourse that decries diverse forms of relationality; it is

43 It is a common occurrence that poly people, when upon first learning about the sheer existence of polyamory or when coming out of the closet as poly seem to, suddenly, begin to perceive all the dense myriad cultural messages promoting monogamy as the “only” way to romantically relate. This revelation can feel like quite a shock.
possible to begin to question why polyamorous and ethically nonmonogamous ways of relating are typically automatically judged as fake, transitory, uncommitted, unloving, childish, coercive, or any number of negatively-charged adjectives.

Dealing with jealousy is another important area where ambiguity and impermanence are not only accepted but embraced for the lessons they can potentially teach. In polyamory studies, researchers document the various ways that poly-identified people do not simply flee from or easily capitulate to the green-eyed monster, but rather bravely face this vexing emotion head-on. In the monogamous paradigm, jealousy is a rather clear-cut emotion, traditionally indicating that one’s partner has done something wrong. In short, feeling jealousy indicates that something is going wrong with one’s partner (not with one’s self). Jealousy is then interpreted, in some way, as being abandoned or betrayed by one’s partner. The mononormative understanding of jealousy is not an ambiguous one, and, thus, it often leads to an emotional (self-righteous) outburst of some sort, or perhaps even retribution by the “wronged” partner. In the monogamous paradigm, the goal is not for the one who feels jealousy to do anything to change her/his reactions or mindset, but rather the goal is to either leave the relationship, or, to get the “bad” partner to, in some way, change her/his behavior.

Through a focus on relationship literacy, polyamorous communities can be analyzed for how they re-work traditional, normative notions of jealousy. Here the emotion is not so clear-cut. As theorists Easton (2010), Konstanza (2004), Ray (2004), and Ferrer (2008) have reasoned, jealousy cannot be simply boiled down to a straightforward negative emotion. Rather it is a complex “umbrella term for multiple painful or frightening feelings” that serve as a “signpost” (Easton, 2010, p. 208–211) for internal growth that needs to be done by the one experiencing the jealousy. Through facing the painful (often excruciating) and submerged feelings of lack,
insecurity, anxiety, and worthlessness that are the root cause of jealousy (not the partner’s actions), polyamorists utilize jealousy and the corresponding knowledge of their ambiguous position within the relationship—in polyamory, there are no promises of being the “only”—as an opportunity for personal and/or spiritual evolution. In polyamory, many loves means many opportunities to re-face the challenge of jealousy and the ultimate ambiguity of where one stands in one’s relation to oneself and to others. *Polyamory is not about sticking one’s head in the sand or pointing accusatory fingers. Polyamory is a mirror.*

It must be noted, though, that this concept of internal growth via harnessing the emotion of jealousy does not necessarily preclude the possibility of ending the relationship. Often, critics of polyamory argue that asking the jealous person to take responsibility for their jealousy is like blaming the victim. This is an understandable viewpoint; however, a majority of poly people would argue (myself included) that this is not the case. Polyamorous communities have realized the inherent *potential agency* that lies within fully experiencing and reckoning with the emotion of jealousy; often, dealing with multiple rounds of jealousy can lead people to create new philosophies, ethics, relationships, and experiences in their lives that are more in tune with their idea of a satisfying life, free of emotional turbulence. In other words, facing one’s own jealousy as an internal process can lead to insights that create a life that is, paradoxically, free or nearly-free from jealousy and other painful emotions. A life without jealousy (or a life with little jealousy) is a life that is self-assured. A life where’s one’s ultimate worthiness is known, felt.

For polyamory to be an ethical practice, its practitioners must continually challenge themselves by asking critical, self-reflexive questions about the fundamental tension between commitment versus freedom (Barker, 2013). Feminist and psychoanalytic critic Jessica Benjamin, in her exploration of the perils and joys of sexuality and relationships, suggested how
love can be both a positive bonding force—but also, in some cases, a negative force of domination. The key is not to ignore, discount, or run from this situation, but rather to “embrace this paradox”:

Perhaps the most fateful paradox is the one posed by our simultaneous need for recognition and independence: that the other subject is outside our control and yet we need him. To embrace this paradox is the first step toward unraveling the bonds of love. This means not to undo our ties to others but rather to disentangle them; to make of them not shackles but circuits of recognition. (p. 221)

Through brave critical reflection, jealousy can be utilized as a skillful tool for helping humans to “disentangle” the various “circuits” that connect us. In attuning ourselves to a broader notion of what is possible in relationships, through incorporating relationship literacy and poly discourse into our modes of knowing in rhetoric and composition, jealousy is not the enemy, not ever the enemy. Instead, the enemy is self-ignorance and a lack of feeling one’s indisputable worthiness.

Navigating the question of whether or not to come out of the closet as a poly or nonmonogamous person can be a lesson in embracing (or, at the very least, dealing with) ambiguity. Distinct from coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender/transexual, a “relational coming out” (Aoki, 2006) involves a less-clear path and process due to the fact that there are drastically fewer publications on polyamory and less visible communities of specifically-poly support. Unlike the story of gay rights, with its grounding in symbolic, rallying historical turning points such as Stonewall, the AIDS crisis (which brought together gays and lesbians for the first time, working toward a common cause), or Massachusetts legalizing same-sex marriage, polyamory’s story is just beginning. The rallying symbols and turning points are,

44 It is interesting to note how ubiquitous this phrase—“coming out”—has become. As Sedgwick (1990) has noted, the frequent use of the term, seemingly “floating free from its gay origins” actually, paradoxically, points to how deeply embedded discourses about homo/hetero identity have become in our mass culture (p. 72).
as of yet, still unclear. Thus, practicing polyamory, much less publicly proclaiming a poly identity, is akin to stumbling around in the dark, bumping one’s head at seemingly every turn. In sum, the road for public (as opposed to private) life as a poly person is one less mapped. It is an ambiguous road, requiring nerve, and perhaps a bit of audacity too. And, it is empowering to contemplate that, just as the first gays were proudly coming out post-Stonewall—no longer cowering in closets—so too are the first wave of polys stepping out into the broad daylight. As mentioned in Chapter Two, polyamory is indeed becoming something of a burgeoning movement, as evidenced by intensifying media and scholarly attention. As a polyamorous person, part of my impetus for coming out (and risking so much) is precisely the fact that this is so much uncharted, ambiguous territory. I admit: I want my life to be big. I want to contribute to history, to movement, to evolution, to change—I want to be a helpful, active part of the first waves who spoke up about the possibility of loving many. And, in my academic work, in this academic project, to bring polyamory into the discourse of rhetoric and composition is a gamble—but it’s a gamble that trusts in impermanence. What queer theory has taught us, as rhetoricians, as compositionists, can not only not be ignored—but we must move and stretch with it, as it asks us to look in new directions. The deconstructionist energy of queer theory asks that we deconstruct not just gender issues in relationships, but also the number of how many we are “supposed” to love. Again, this is a bit of a gamble (any new conversation is a gamble, in its moment of inception)—but I believe it’s a gamble our field is hungry for, since feminists, for over four decades, have evolved the way we think, write, and teach by showing us how patriarchal systems are enforced via concepts of gender and sexuality. Critiquing gender roles and sexual paradigms have led to invaluable insights, and building upon these insights, using relationship literacy, seems to be the next step.
Granted, yes, the archetype of the Happy Monogamous Couple has been powerful—but, many scholars in our field have already enthusiastically imported the works of Judith Butler and Michael Warner, thinkers who have, for decades now, been more than hinting at the normativizing pulls of our culture that smear the act of love beyond the bounds of the closed dyad. Granted, yes, compulsory monogamy has been powerful, true—but it is, like any force, one that is malleable and subject to history’s rewriting; it is one that is sure to move and flex and evolve with time. This is something of which I am sure. Here I am reminded of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, writing her revolutionary antihomophobic *Epistemology of the Closet* in 1990, a book which helped to usher in queer theory. I think of how our field recently commemorated her, how in “Prompts, Props & Performativities,” leading scholars in our field articulated her impact, as a “[l]egendary groundbreaker” (McBeth et al, 2012, para. 1). I am reminded of how her desire in *Epistemology* was to daringly broach the topic of homophobia; how her aim was, despite the risk, to make “a few heads explode” (p. xviii). And, I think: the time to talk about polyamory has come. It’s time for some heads exploding, despite the risk. It’s time, through incorporating poly discourse into queer theory, to ask about the true limits of relationships. Where are the true limits of love, of support? What are the actual options for our lives? What are the options that do not seem like options because they are invisible? What are the “ways in which composition undergirds heteronormativity” (McRuer, 2006, p. 149), and what are the ways in which composition theory, pedagogy, and practice also undergirds mononormativity? It is time to explore such questions.

Additionally, from an intellectual (less activist) point of view, one might understand the question of whether or not to come out of the closet as actually secondary in importance to analyzing the rational processes necessary in *making this decision*. In other words, perhaps
scholars might be less interested in the coming out moment itself but more in “the complex social processes involved in the tellings” (Plummer, 1995, p. 13). Let me explain. Asking and answering the question “should I come out?” requires an extraordinary amount of rhetorical skill. In order to consider transgressing the public borders of normative dyadic monogamy, many questions must be answered. Am I emotionally prepared for the (any) outcome of my coming out? Am I materially prepared for the (any) outcome of my coming out? What will I do or say if those to whom I come out disagree or take offense at my identity? What will I do or say if those to whom I come out ignore my coming out or write it off as insignificant? Who can I trust? Who must I trust? Are there some groups/individuals that I actively intend to stay closeted to? Why? How? What setting might be the safest space to speak up in? Who are my allies? Who are likely to attack me? What other sexual minority groups might I receive advice or support from? Is the time indeed right for the telling of my sexual story, or should I wait? Are there actual audiences ripe to receive my story, or will I be simply telling my story to deaf ears? Will my story be heard and received by “receptive and appreciative” listeners; will my story be endorsed and circulated by “a wider community of support” (Plummer, 1995, p. 120)? Those interested in acquiring relationship literacy can begin to understand the complexity in such moments of questioning.

In discussing the rhetorical processes of gays and lesbians telling their sexual stories, the insights of social science researcher Ken Plummer about coming out can be readily applied to the challenge of poly people coming out as well. He reminded us that telling stories to others about our sexual selves is always a risky business, that “the outcome of telling a story is never clear in advance but always under different degrees of contestation and conflict” (p. 28). Yet, telling these sexual stories and coming out is vastly necessary because these rhetorical acts are artful, skillful moments “concerned with establishing a sense of who one really is—an identity which
ideally exists not just for oneself alone, but which is also at home in the wider world” (pp. 85–86). In other words, one is more “at home” when one is more at ease, honest, and vocal about one’s sexual and relational desires. In the slow, painful, and often-recursive process that is coming out, polys (and queers, too) negotiate the rhetorical contexts of their particular time and place. They weigh options. They face fears. They ask rich, deeply complex perplexities about relationships, love, power, legality, employment, family, and freedom that many others do not think to question or receive the opportunity to question in perhaps such a meaningful way. To ask these kinds of queer questions is to make what is typically in the background appear, suddenly, into front view. To see queerly is to do what many others aren’t yet doing—which is to “notice the background” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 168): To bring what is normally behind into the foreground, available (finally) for viewing and asking.

As radical educator Paulo Freire (1970/2009) revealed, the only way to truly learn is for people to engage in questions that directly relate to their own life, that are deeply meaningful for living their own experiences and circumstances. Being poly forces such social questions—and, indeed, it can be stated that the poly life and the queer life is one of an ongoing radical education in uncovering the dense networks of power that underlie so much of our mundane everyday.

To face the challenges (and opportunities!) of impermanence and ambiguity, polys and queers as well as the researchers studying and advocating for them, must think in new ways. In her discussion of debunking the myth that the traditional nuclear family is a superior form relational grouping (a point I will touch on in more detail in the next section), Valerie Lehr (1999) urged queers, as well as those interested in bringing about broad social reforms, to move beyond mere identity politics:
The critical question facing groups harmed by the dominant ideological assertion—that only a certain form of family is capable of meeting needs for care and producing individuals capable of moral behavior within a democratic society—is whether they can construct a counternarrative of family and private life with the potential to combat the narratives of “good mother,” “good father,” and “good citizen” to which conservatives appeal. The goal of articulating a new narrative means that each of the separate groups currently harmed needs to move away from trying to gain resources and power by proving that they can enact current norms. It also requires that these groups move beyond fixed understandings of identity and group, recognizing instead that the identity groups organizing today are historical constructions. Although these groups may sometimes need to appeal to a common identity, this identity itself only exists through exclusion, generally of those who are least able or willing to conform to the dominant constructions of society that in other ways oppress the group as a whole. (pp. 137–138)

This message is persuasive, and similar to Warner’s (1999) in calling attention to the futility and even danger in sexual/relational dissidents trying to become “normal.”

If we agree that jumping on the “normal” bandwagon is a problematic move in terms of social justice and nonhierarchical social movements, the embracing of ambiguity and impermanence will be required in order to intentionally forge coalitions across groups. In this queer world-making, ambiguity, not certainty, is the valued form. In this queer world, impermanence is a reality to be welcomed. In this world, there is no such thing as normal. Through telling our sexual stories out loud and out proud with the aim of evolving the culture
around us to be a more loving and ultimately humane place, social worlds are reshaped and “textured by a seamless web of stories emerging everywhere through interaction: holding people together, pulling people apart, making societies work” (Plummer, 1995, p. 5). Change is the name of the game. And the celebration of ambiguity lets us look beyond our little labels and our little egos and work together, to see what we have in common among us. (In the final chapter, I will discuss how this looking-for-commonalities is a major intellectual move in the queer/poly studies course I taught.) Trans people need to work with poly people and poly people need to work with the disabled and the disabled need to work with immigrants and immigrants need to work with the elderly and the elderly need to work with youth and youth need to work with bisexuals and bisexuals need to work with the various people practicing diverse forms of nonmonogamy. The religious need to work with other religions or with those who are atheist or agnostic. Those who are vegan need to work with carnivores. Academics need to work with those in the public sphere. The pedagogue needs to work with the administrator and the administrator needs to remember the needs of the student. In the limited and limiting world of identity, of labels, there are too many roadblocks for living meaningful radical work. Yet, if we take Lehr’s (1999) advice and look beyond exclusionary identity politics, there is potentially no “outside”—for all are welcome to engage in the common goal of crafting a broad-based ethics, one where individuals are not left on their own to fend for themselves in a competitive marketplace but rather are supported in a compassionate human family where the quality of life is defined not by how many “rights” we are each accorded and not by how steep of a bank

45 Of course, there are many positive and negative ways to interpret the concept of “ego.” For the purposes of this project, I am drawing on the metaphysical philosopher Eckhart Tolle’s (2008) description of the ego as a force that produces the illusion that people can understand themselves by analyzing their collection of past and present thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. For Tolle, and for Lacan (1997) as well, the ego is simply a very persuasive desire to provide the self a sense of coherence; the ego is the wish that a person can know herself/himself as not only a real, but also as very important. However, it is my understanding that who a person really “is” is something infinitely deeper, and no doubt even more mysterious and wondrous than what the ego might imagine.
account we can amass but, instead, by how we care for one another. This is the queer world I envision, a queer world that is still somewhat ahead of this project but also in the very current process of being made by this project and others like it. Now. In this future-current world, difference in what boxes we might tick off or even disagreement on specific political issues does not stifle forward motion. We will (do) ask: ‘Can we work together in this political struggle?’ rather than ‘Are you a member of my box?’” (Kaplan, 1995, p. 277).

This is a world energized by “spiritual activism,” a force that asks us to let go of identity labels/ego and live in the tension, paradox, and ambiguity of living our personal unique lives while also letting our actions be guided by the acknowledgement of the “radical interconnectedness” of all human beings:

Unlike “New Age” versions of spirituality, which focus almost exclusively on the personal (so that the goals become acquiring increased wealth, a “good life,” or other solipsistic materialist items), spiritual activism begins with the personal yet moves outward, acknowledging our radical interconnectedness. This is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation. What a contrast: while identity politics requires holding onto specific categories of identity, spiritual activism demands that we let them go. (Keating, 2002, p. 18).

In the queer world where spiritual activism is the energy by which we live and draw strength, the human is not slotted into a single or even multiple identity categories (such as gay, straight, bi, poly, etc. etc. etc.), straining for individual “rights”46, but rather the human is

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46 As scholars such as Lehr (1999) have pointed out, political action based on the goal of acquiring “rights” is actually not an effective strategy, as rights do not automatically mean individuals will be empowered, as true agency is often constrained by broader social inequities and contradictory, oppressive government policies. For example, a
celebrated for her/his ambiguity and contributes to and is supported by larger networks of compassion and care. The human sees his or her own impermanence (some relationships will not last a lifetime; our passions and desires and needs will change over time; death really will come) and smiles.

Changing Understandings of Family (and Love)

Queer and poly theorists have often revealed how the notion of family is not “natural and eternal” (Freeman, 2010, p. 48). Rather, the notion of family encompasses highly-situated acts, affinities, groupings, events, representations, and symbols all born from various rhetorical contexts. Thus, there is not “the” family, but rather many families. There is not one way to come together in love and support, but many ways to unite. Researchers, particularly in the social sciences, have been confirming that something new is happening, that there is a “broader process of change” that is happening: Not only are lesbian and gay families beginning to receive more social recognition and respect, but “other forms of new family constellations” are publicly emerging (Nelson, 2006, p. 9), due to the gradual acknowledgment that traditional notions of the nuclear family are limiting, exclusionary ideations.

As Sedgwick (1993) opined, queerness can help us see the luxurious range of possible meanings. Seeing queerly is an open state of curiosity, a state of being and understanding where, thankfully, “everything doesn’t mean the same thing!” (p. 20) Here there is freedom. There is a looseness—a looseness that allows life to move in wonderful twists and oft-surprising turns

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woman’s “right” to an abortion means little if she is a welfare recipient who cannot afford the abortion due to restricted federal financial support for that abortion, such as through the Hyde Amendment—which happened simultaneously (in the 1980s) at a time when the government reduced social welfare spending, thus making it difficult for such a welfare recipient to enact her “right” to give birth to a child or her “right” to get an abortion (p. 136).

47 As Butler (2004) urged repeatedly in Undoing Gender, supportive communities and networks of care are not a mere luxury, rather they must be seen as a necessity for supporting life because being embodied, gendered, and sexual ultimately create conditions of extreme vulnerability that can only be balanced by being able to rely on supportive others.
(rather than unidirectionally). Desire, then, can become the way people engage with the world (rather than fear). Desire can be considered as not something to be slavishly obeyed—instead, desire acts as a pointer for what is important to our emotional and spiritual wellbeing; it helps us make creative, often-daring choices in ways that recognize that breaking supposedly “sacred” traditions has its rewards. Further, desire is not something that should decrease with age, but rather it’s a dynamism that needs to be respected, revitalized, maintained. Desire needs to be valued. For is it not desire that ultimately motivates? Is it not desire that brightens us out of deadening depressions, monotonies, and whole litanies of “shoulds”?

In this twenty-first century, definitions and understandings of family are indeed shifting—or, at the very least, starting to shift in theory. In a legal article on the practice of polyamory in regards to Canadian family law, Calder (2009) argued that Canadian society would “be a better society if we allowed our understanding of what family looks like to evolve and change, allowing it to be more attentive to function than to form” (p. 88). This sentiment, I believe, rings true for not just the country of Canada, but can no doubt extend globally. But, how do we get there? How do we move in directions of prizing function over form? Although polyamory has already, indeed, been analyzed in terms of queer issues and theory (e.g., Shannon & Willis, 2010), more work needs to be done. What is sometimes lacking from some academic arguments on polyamory—for instance, Calder’s critique of the ongoing hostility many citizens feel in reaction to any image of family in the media that does not center on the monogamous dyad—is the infusion of a queer theory that is particularly suited to peeling back layers of problematic normativity.

In the work of queer theory scholars such as Sedgwick (1993), Lehr (1999), Riggs (2006, 2010), and Anderlini-D’Onofrio (2009), family is newly understood as something we cannot
know in advance. Understood as something we cannot, paradoxically, understand. Family is unique and specific in each instance of its imagining. Just as the term queer refuses a prescriptive definition, so too does a queer understanding (productive un-understanding?) of family resist a prescription. Indeed, “it is difficult (and perhaps ultimately useless) to attempt to provide a prescription for what a queer family looks like” (Riggs, 2006, p. 3). I’d actually take Riggs’ sentiment one step further and say that not only is it difficult and useless to predict—but, such predictions often have harmful, oppressive effects. When we normalize the family, we normalize what we think is best for love. We think we know how love should move.

Family is not a composition to rigidly regulate; we cannot be sure we know what style will be best for others. In her brilliant *Tendencies*, Sedgwick (1993) questioned the neat and tidy assumptions that our American culture holds about “the” family. Unrealistically, all of these dimensions are supposed to “line up perfectly with each other” in order to create a family:

- a surname
- a sexual dyad
- a legal unit based on state-regulated marriage
- a circuit of blood relationships
- a system of companionship and succor
- a building
- a proscenium between “private” and “public”
- an economic unit of earning and taxation
- the prime site of economic consumption
- the prime site of cultural consumption
- a mechanism to produce, care for, and acculturate children
a mechanism for accumulating material goods over several generations

a daily routine

a unit in a community of worship

a site of patriotic formation (p. 6)

Lists such as these can be built by relationship literacy learners, as they queer concepts such as “family,” “love,” “relationship,” and “sex.” Lists like these belie the usefulness of such stable, predictable, in-advance-knowings. Why must the image, the structure, the composition of specific emotions and relationship groupings and forms be so damned certain? What good does this do? In whose interest (the state? corporate economies? religious institutions?) does a rigid and monolithic notion of family or love serve? Deconstructive lists such as these are invaluable for the burgeoning cultural critiques within polyamory studies at large and would no doubt serve as rich heuristics for questions about agency and social justice within rhetoric and composition. Mononormativity is deeply engrained, even within our field’s scholarship. In Chapter Four, for instance, I will show how historical figures such as Aspasia have been portrayed in mononormative ways, and offer suggestions for pairing insights from queer theory and poly studies with feminist explorations of historical rhetoric.

In the mononormative paradigm in which most people currently operate, the possibilities of engaging in nonmonogamous/nondyadic sexual partnerships, forming residential living groups composed of friends, creating intense support networks of nonromantic lovers, or parenting as a group of more than two adults can appear to be outlandish, impossible dreams. They can be dismissed as silly pipedreams of naïve hippies. The hegemonic narrative that there is a right, normal, and/or proper way of forming a family is propagated by everyday discourse within most institutions such as schools, churches, courts, and hospitals. As Lehr (1999) decries, “social
“discourse” creates conditions whereby citizens view alternative familial “arrangements with suspicion, often understanding them as a sign of immaturity” (p. 168). As incredible and downright strange as it may seem to many postmodern academics and other social revolutionaries, the fact is that other options for creating a family beyond the Leave It To Beaver Mode are, more often than not, seen as illegitimate by the dominant discourses. The assumed goals in the lifecycle of the human are still very much actions such as: get legally married and try to avoid divorce; procreate; raise children in the “best” family environment composed of two adults of “both genders”; buy a home; value one’s spouse more than one’s friends; maintain romantic love only within the dyad.

Fortunately, the growing poly movement that scholars are documenting and analyzing is an agentic force that is taking action and shaping lives in ways that help redefine family in queer ways. Despite strong, sometimes nearly-crushing opposition, polys break the social norm of compulsive dyadic monogamy and bravely choose other ways to love, other ways to create families that might not seem like families to others but are, indeed, groupings that offer innumerable joy, care, and support. In her article analyzing the poly-themed film French Twist, Anderlini-D’Onofrio (2009) explained how her proposed radically queer “politics of love” (p. 359) can assist in transitioning this planet from a scarcity, fear-based standard—where love is constrained and restrained to just two adults—to one where love has the potential to radiate outward, creating a more “porous” yet “inclusive” definition of family (p. 358). In this model, family is no longer a fortress to be protected from scary outside forces. (In other words, family is not something to be “saved” from doom, as some from the political far Right tend to characterize it.) Family is, instead, a sacred, always-evolving force of abundance—something that doesn’t need saving but rather something that could use an empowering redefinition. Through “serenity,”
“self-possession,” and communication, compersion can be harnessed in the important emotional/spiritual work of becoming aware that “one’s health and well-being are directly proportional to one’s ability to give and receive love” (p. 358) in ways that might contradict the hegemonic narrative of mononormativity.

Some anxious but no doubt understandable questions some might ask, in response to these new re-definings of family, might be: What are the risks and rewards involved in broadening the concept of family to, essentially, allow it to mean what each individual and each group says it means? Where do scholars draw the line about what family means? What must we researchers take to be the ultimate baseline definition of family—and who gets to choose; who gets the final say? How to know when a specific family formation is a viable, ethical, and/or moral one? Following the insights of Anderlini-D’Onofrio (2009), Sheff (2006), and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010), as well as other scholars who’ve analyzed twenty-first century poly families, I intimate that the answer to these questions is deceptively simple. Instead of harkening back to the “good old days” of a 1950s-esque nuclear family (one female mom, one male dad, 2.5 kids, a dog, and a white picket fence)—which, as many queer and poly scholars have pointed out, never really existed anyway—I argue that viable forms of family include the ones where love is not a quantity or essence to be known or to be measurable in advance, as queer theory demonstrates. Rather, love and family are fluid, nonstable, impermanent, ambiguous energies of thought and form. And, yes, they are composed of that potent substance of desire, that concept so vital to understanding queer ways of thinking. Desire underpins and infuses our best days with joy, with mystery, with that nearly-indescribable feeling of forward or upward motion. Ultimately, families can be viewed as ethical when love and desire are present; and, when that love and desire are “practiced responsibly and consensually” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2009, p. 359). Of
course, terms such as responsible and consensual can be slippery, but perhaps the slipperiness aspect can fade in problematic importance if we understand the terms in terms of what queer theory instructs regarding how, in a more egalitarian world that recognizes the value in the creative, the performative, the agentic, and the experimental, terms and ideas need not “mean the same thing!” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 20). Terms such as responsible and consensual can be defined rhetorically, in that they are analyzed on the basis of each dynamic moment in social history. What is responsible and consensual are not fixed forever, but open to change.

Further, in coming to terms with ethical guidelines regarding what family can be or should be, it might be helpful to think about what previous sexuality theorists such as Gayle Rubin (1984) argued regarding where to draw the line between what is moral and what is amoral sexual or relational behavior. Instead of automatically privileging dominant groups’ practices and vilifying minority practices, those interested in evaluating behavior must instead consider new criteria in what Rubin called a “democratic morality.” Here we see a flexible rubric that takes into account not blind tradition, but rather dynamic rhetorical situations:

A democratic morality should judge sexual acts [and relationships] by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence of absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide . . . . It is difficult to develop a pluralistic sexual ethics without a concept of benign sexual variation. Variation is a fundamental property of all life, from the simplest biological organisms to the most complex human social formations. Yet sexuality is supposed to conform to single standard. One of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way. (p. 283)
In Rubin’s proposal, we see a new way of evaluating intimacy. We see a new way of asking whether a family or whether a relationship or whether a sexual practice/behavior is functioning in the best interest of the individual as well as the society at large. Instead of a universal “one way” to form bonds, instead of the problematic pathology/deviance model, multiple options and multiple paths—all valid—are more available and visible, which will provide support, pleasure, respect, and some measure of individual freedom.

Instead of dyadic monogamy being the “silent assumption” of sexual identity and the basis for forming families, connections, relationships, and loves, relationality can be created in queer ways, ways where “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s . . . sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8). Further, in heeding queer theorists’ call to move beyond mere identity politics, as discussed earlier in this chapter, polyamorists can build coalitions with other activist groups interested in creating expanded definitions of what not only family means, but also supposedly “obvious” terms/concepts/practices such as “relationships” and “communities” (Noël, 2006). Queer theory plus polyamory help us to productively explode what we think we know about being social.

By bringing poly and queer together, we can see more clearly the value of allowing. (The value of not fearing options.)

By bringing poly and queer together, we can, more keenly, see that oppression happens when we disallow others the ability to claim, define, compose, and “name their own sexual desire” (Sedgwick, 1990/2008, p. 26).

With the radical embracing of polyamory and queerness come innumerable insights, insights we cannot fully know in advance. This is the work of the future.
Postscript

A caveat is necessary. Scholars have drawn attention to the continually-growing, umbrella-like nature of the term queer, pointing out how new people are claiming it and new categories are being invited under it, such as asexuals, the intersexed, sadomasochists/kinksters, and the various practitioners of nonmonogamy (Barker et al., 2009). However, it is my view that the terms “queer” and “poly” should not necessarily be seen as synonymous and that polyamory (as a practice, theory, term, etc.) should not necessarily be subsumed under the banner of queer. To conflate queer and poly is inaccurate and misleading. In a recent graduate thesis in women’s studies, Sara Wheeler (2011) suggested that while polyamory is a formidable progressive movement similar to that of the queer movement, poly identity/practices should be viewed as distinct from that of queer identity/practices, “because having multiple partners” does not mean that one has “rejected heteronormativity as well” (70). I agree. Thus, while it has been my intent in this chapter to show how new discussions of polyamory may be fruitfully discussed within the context of existing scholarship on queer theory, I want to make clear that although these two—polyamory and queer—do have significant overlap in terms of goals, members, methods, and practices, these two worlds are not always perfectly aligned (though they sometimes and often are) and may even, in some rare moments, be galaxies apart. Therefore, it is with a bit of caution that I suggest queer theory as being a rightful home for further research on polyamory. Even though thinking through poly with the lens of queer will be a vibrant starting place, it will be important to do this work in ways that critique and draw attention to the ways that being queer and being poly may, in fact, contradict or complexify one another. Poly and queer are not the same. For example, it might be helpful to produce ethnographic scholarship in various regions of the United States (or, better yet, producing transnational scholarship) comparing and contrasting
how some poly communities embrace both male and female homosexual practices, while others only endorse female homosexual practices. Or, scholars might explore how the more normative “rights-based” LGB movement purposely eschews any connection with poly activists, for fear that conservatives might use that connection as an excuse to dismiss their claims. Or, additional research similar to that of Klesse (2007) can further shed light on the curious phenomenon of male homosexual practices and communities that intentionally refuse the label “poly” (which is often seen by gay men as a more lesbian persuasion) in favor of terms such as “open” or “nonmonogamous.” Additionally, it is my hope that scholars in rhetoric and composition will remain attentive to the ways in which poly discourses may enrich existing conversations in other areas beyond queer/LGBT studies, such as, perhaps, feminist rhetoric, critical and liberatory pedagogies, or new media studies. In the next chapter, I will more concretely discuss how polyamory studies may be fruitfully imported into our field, offering a variety of options for building upon extant areas and discourses.

Post-Postscript

In the first chapter, I critiqued Rambukkana’s “clear vector” definition of queer. I disagreed with not just the definition itself (he argued that queer means “not straight” [2004, p. 151]), but with his entire definitional schema. I stated forcefully that there could be no bottom-line definition of queer because queer itself queers having anything like a “clear vector.” After further reflection, however, I admit that, in some ways, what I have been attempting to do in this chapter is exactly what Rambukkana did. I wanted to show how queer has a core—and how that core constitutes an openness. I wanted to say that queer is at the root of what polyamory is. In

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48 New media studies seems a potentially fruitful field, due to the recent proliferation of online communities for the support of polyamorists and other alternative sexualities and relationship styles.
my own way, I wanted a radical “clear vector”: a baseline of how we can talk about queer and about poly.

Instead of returning to that first chapter and revising that critique, I leave it intact. The feminist in me doesn’t want to erase or tidy-up the ways in which my mind has moved in the course of this project. Instead, I offer my own moment(s) of ambiguity as a concrete, fleshy example of how words, language, and discourse, sometimes, in the course of an intellectual project, can become something of a mess.

But, a good mess.
IV: IMPORTING POLY INSIGHTS INTO OUR THEORETICAL DOMAIN

“In order to communicate across difference, people must always be looking to learn what more they do not know about the Other; they must avoid presuming they can know the Other as a totalized and whole consciousness.” —Stephanie L. Kerschbaum

Questions & Cautions

Here I make concrete what before has only been foreshadowed. Here I provide an outline of how the importation of polyamory studies (hereafter referred to as PS, for the sake of brevity) into theories of rhetoric and composition is a compelling path for those interested in advancing social justice aims through the art and act of writing and speaking.

I agree with Karen Kopelson’s (2008) two reminders: Theory has been, is, and will be an element that stimulates our field’s evolution and continued relevance, just as our development of pedagogy has been; and rhetoric and composition has historically drawn strength from importing theories, insights, frameworks, and epistemologies from disciplines outside of English studies—and that this is a good thing. As this project balances pedagogy (discussed in the final chapter) and theory inspired by scholarship outside our discipline (in this chapter), I heed Kopelson’s prompts.

If rhetoric and composition imports insights from the transdisciplinary field of PS into queer discourses circulating in our field, we will augment existing awareness of how rhetorical agency and gender are constituted. In surveying two current and highly influential works in queer studies within rhetoric and composition, I point to how an engagement with relationship literacy gained through knowledge acquired from PS (please see Chapter Two for an overview of
the significant themes emerging from this body of work) helps us extend existing conversations. Additionally, I provide a case study of the historical figure of Aspasia, to demonstrate how such extended conversations might play out within feminist rhetorical studies. Through asking new questions about how Aspasia has been portrayed in existing historical scholarship, we can more carefully attend to the nuances of rhetorical choices, such as the use of the term “mistress” or the tendency to downplay her sexual power, asking how these choices affect how scholars are—or are not—achieving feminist goals.

My aim in this chapter is to, primarily, offer templates for new lines of writing research, new types of questions about identity that can be asked. I want to show how the rich work that’s already being done can take on additional complexity when considered through the lens of relationship literacy. In doing so, a clearer field of vision opens up—and the problem of mononormativity is revealed, which is a marginalizing energy every bit as powerful as heteronormativity.

Before I move into the heart of this chapter, though, I offer a caveat. This project, and especially this chapter, is not overinvested in identifying, defining, and/or redefining specific categories of identity. As writing studies scholar Stephanie L. Kerschbaum (2012) has shown, difference between people is “not a stable thing or property” that can ever really be identified and “fixed in place” (p. 619). Instead, difference is something that is always moving, always in motion. We cannot ever fully pin down others. Moreover, we cannot even fully pin down ourselves! If we try to answer the questions: Who am I? Who are you?, we will always receive a partial answer, at best. Yes, we can (and maybe “should”?) attempt to learn about various

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49 Here I mark the word “should” with scare quotes to indicate my uneasiness in implying that one can know what is best for another person or group. Even with the most careful of research, utilization of the word should usually seems to subtly imply that there is a line of action or reasoning that is best. Therefore, it seems that using the word should is a word in a lexicon of violence, of coercion.
concrete differences, concrete identities between people in order to improve our teaching methods and in order to improve our theoretical understandings of the way that writing, communication, and its implicit social interaction works. However, even the most comprehensive of knowledge about various identities—and even by taking into account an advanced intersectional perspective (Wallace, 2009)—will not be able to let us “know” others fully. Identities are rather mysterious, ephemeral energies. But this does not mean we cannot know something about them. We can. However, while it is absolutely imperative to take identities into account—to learn more about them and remember them in our formation of both practice and theory—identities are not everything. Categories are not everything. We cannot stop there.

Thus, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, my aim is not to promote an over-attention to the category of “polyamory” as a particular mode of embodiment and subjectivity in this world (although such an outcome is no doubt an inevitable, important, and invigorating consequence!). Instead of inspiring the mission in my readers to learn more about the realities of living as a poly person and assuming that such knowledge will be able to translate smoothly into being better equipped to, as an example, produce scholarship about rhetorical theory, we can, instead, begin to use the knowledge of the polyamory movement and knowledge of PS in service of analyzing “the shifting terrain of difference” (Kershbaum, 2012, p. 619), broadly writ. We can ask bigger, better questions about what difference means, about what oppression and silence means, and how these discourses move. We can attend to the myriad intellectual and theoretical quandaries we face both on the page and in our professional lives as scholar-teachers. Thus, while my readers’ being more comfortable about and sensitized to working with poly-identified (or poly-
questioning or nonmonogamous or queer, etc.) students or colleagues will be a happy byproduct of engaging with this project, and while it might seem revolutionary to simply celebrate or defend the identity of poly as an identity that really exists in the world, I suggest that such discussions might take a backseat to grander revelations: In attending to PS within our field, new kinds of queerer questions emerge—questions that lead us down new paths regarding ideology that we simply haven’t been able to go down before. These questions attend to an insidious hierarchy that has not yet been recognized by our field—a hierarchy that systematically marginalizes those who step outside the bounds of the monogamous dyadic “normal.” Through queer critique, we can better see how monogamy, just like heterosexuality, is deeply embedded in the values and discourses dominant in American culture, as well as in many other cultures worldwide. In sum, while it is important to study, recognize, support, and sympathize with identity categories as they exist “out in the world” (since that world is the very same which populates our colleges and universities), it is also just as important, if not more important, to use our knowledge of identities/categories in the greater service of asking what those identities/categories can tell us about underlying cultural assumptions—assumptions which motivate the keeping of those identities/categories silent, stifled, or reviled. The case study of Aspasia toward the end of this chapter illustrates how asking new questions about mononormativity and the linked discourses of sex-negativity might open up new ways of conducting rhetorical analyses—new ways that make an attempt to fill in so many blind spots regarding how healthy, strong, daring, unique, loving relationships might be composed. First, however, before demonstrating how such a questioning process might begin, it is necessary to further flesh out the concept of relationship literacy, a concept that is, in many ways, the antidote to the marginalizing energies of heteronormativity and mononormativity.
More about Relationship Literacy: “Learners begin to wonder…”

As discussed in Chapter One, relationship literacy refers to the reflexive, critical fluency with which people can understand, analyze, discuss, and reflect upon their own as well as others’ relationship styles, choices, practices, values, and ethics. Relationship literacy denotes an ease. People with relationship literacy understand more clearly how relationships, particularly romantic or intimate relationships, are variously constrained or supported by culture. Mononormativity—the energetic property (enacted at the individual as well as the larger cultural level) that all people aim to be or should be monogamous is one of the negative results of ignorance about the possibilities for healthy relating in a sexual, loving, and/or intimate manner. As the term suggests, mononormativity is a norm. This norm, like any norm, is created and upheld by two kinds of maintenance: both unintentional participatory reinforcement as well as intentional tending (Jason Cory Brunson, personal communication, July 3, 2013). An example of unintentional participatory reinforcement might be: a friend of a couple giving the unsolicited advice that they should start thinking about having a baby soon because both members of the couple are getting older—while not realizing that that couple have decided to wait to have children because they want to first expand their relationship with a third adult because they feel the triad form is more conducive to raising children. Intentional tending would be, for example, if that same friend cut off ties (out of a sense of being morally indignant) with that couple after the couple comes out of the closet to that friend, revealing that they are polyamorous.\footnote{If that friend cuts off ties due to the simultaneous reason that he/she thinks it is “wrong” for the heterosexual couple to gain a partner who is of the same gender as one of the members of that couple, then this would be an example of intentionally tending heteronormativity, as well.}

Fortunately, norms are only as strong as their maintenance. When maintenance ceases, then the norm dissolves. Relationship literacy is important to critical rhetorical agency in that it supports a culture of options and care, where a diversity of approaches to intimacy and relationships are
increasingly recognized, considered, and supported, rather than immediately rejected on the basis of tradition, religious doctrine, or the oppressive, sex-negative psychological model of deviance/pathology. Ways of relating are allowed to be flexible and in service of the individual people involved, with their unique needs, desires, and quirks. No one model will work for all.

As literacy is, at heart, a method of cultural navigation, relationship literacy is a method for asking precise, complex questions about relationships and how those operate (or might operate) in our culture and various cultures. Relationship literacy helps us ask: What are our connections with each other? How do we forge bonds? What options are culturally condoned? What options for connection are taboo, illegal, or dismissed as unethical? As Alexander (2008) wrote in *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy*, “Far from being a purely ‘personal’ or ‘natural’ phenomenon, what we know about sex/uality comes to us through a variety of discourses surrounding us and in which we frequently participate” (p. 61). Extending this notion to relationships, what we know about how to form and maintain bonds with others is not personal or natural or unremarkable, but rather heavily conditioned by cultural discourses, institutions, and values that are often unseen and unremarked upon. Romantic relationships—and the normative mode of dyadic monogamy—are by no means natural states of being. As queer theorists such as Warner and Butler have pointed out, our monogamous-centric ideology of sexuality is one that does not just spontaneously erupt, but it takes careful maintenance and regulation. If monogamy were the natural state, no such promoting or policing would be required, because all people would simply choose this way of life and no deviation or no temptation to deviate would occur.

Relationship literacy—a practice, skill, and pedagogical focus—is a way of seeing that takes into account the agency inherent in human need and desire. Love will find a way. While it
may be difficult, there are those who put on the line their job, financial security, social status, relationships with their families of origin, and even sometimes risk tangles with the law, in order to forge alternative loving systems of care. It is important to remember that relationship literacy can be enacted by individuals and expressed through personal practice, but it is also and always a larger social force, a larger cohesive energy or momentum. Relationship literacy, at this time in history, too, is not easily accessible—as it can only ever be taught through coming into contact with truly radical teachers and guides in the general public or educational systems. Relationship literacy is not a natural, inborn, primary, or dominant way of understanding intimate/romantic relationality in many cultures across the globe. In the United States, for instance, the primary way of understanding and enacting relationships is through norms that require sexual intimacy to happen only in heterosexual, dyadic, monogamous, reproductive (or, at least, having the possibility of that in the future), and nonkinky relationships.

Also critical is the notion that relationship literacy helps us moves us beyond mere content (knowledge, facts, methods and methodologies) to be acquired by students, teachers, learners—a movement, a way to work that has been going strong in rhetoric and composition since nearly a half century ago. A literacy of relationships means a further opening up to truly seeing (as opposed to just looking at) the world—a way of seeing that breeds compassion—even if one’s daily choices include aiming for monogamous relationships as a primary way of enacting romantic or intimate relationship. In other words, the learner of relationship literacy need not be “changed” to polyamory or some other queer or non-monogamous identity as a result of becoming fluent in relationship literacy. The goal of this project is not missionary. Instead, coming to a more nuanced understanding of what is possible for the human communicator to achieve (or not achieve) aids discursive understanding of what rhetoric and composition is all
Paradigms of persuasion, communication, and listening take on new meanings, as relationship literacy helps to peel back the layers of silence around alternative options for living in a world where true communication, across difference, is indispensable.

Polyamory is not the only orientation—and here I use the word “orientation” in the way that Sara Ahmed uses it, as a way to describe a person’s “very relation to the world” (2006, p. 68)—that can be revealed through an attention to relationship literacy, however. As a way of seeing, a range of queer practices, queer communities, and queer relationships can either be revealed or become further salient, as learners become more savvy in decoding the myriad cultural messages received from the sex-negative dominant culture—a culture that reviles ways of loving that threaten the status quo of late capitalism: a status quo that emphasizes competition for resources (people and love). Simply put, loving more than one, or loving a gender or body type or race or ethnicity (etc.) that is taboo puts in jeopardy the blinders that the current mass culture tries to enforce. When one begins to step out of the box of striving and valuing the “normal” and begins to queer love and to queer relationships, one becomes more flexible in the stretching of other sorts of wings. Just as a beginning yoga practitioner starts out with stiff joints and can feel comfortable only in doing simple poses, with practice, over time, the practitioner becomes more flexible and can push herself to try more intense poses—poses that, by their very practiced nature—not everyone can accomplish. Learning a literacy of relationships transforms a previous fear of public/dominant social censure. Learners begin to wonder: What else about relationships and bodies and subjectivities don’t I know? What else have I been told not to do, and why? What else have I been told is wrong, evil, corrupt, unnatural? In sum, the possibilities for a productive social rebellion expand. And, what is key to this movement is that such a

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51 This is not to imply that learning yoga poses or learning relationship literacy is impossible for some. No. Everyone can learn. The issue is that not everyone is ready or able at the same time to engage in such a path.
rebellion is one that promotes peace over (often subtle) violence. Questions are asked instead of the bullets of arguments, instead of the bullets of “should.” Language is seen as the ripe place to enact this new kind of vision, this new kind of seeing, this new kind of wondering. And, along with Laura Micciche (2010), I see the action and emotion of wonder as being crucial for rhetoric. Wondering becomes so important to what is, ultimately, a feminist project of peace, a feminist project of dismantling hierarchies of normal—for what is upheld by holding up “normal” is oppression and violence, no matter how subtle. Relationship literacy helps one intentionally and mindfully cross relationship/relational borders, in both thought and deed. And, once one relational border has been crossed, other borders become more easily seen and crossing does not illicit quite as deep fears. For some, even, further questionings and crossings become a calling.

New Questions about Rhetorical Agency

Having a more critical knowledge of sexuality and relationships does not guarantee that such knowledge will translate into agentic communications in the public sphere. In their article “Queer Rhetorical Agency: Questioning Narratives of Heteronormativity,” David L. Wallace and Jonathan Alexander (2009) demonstrate how the insights of queer theory and gay/lesbian studies do not always lead to complete understandings of critical rhetorical agency forwarded by New Literacy scholars. In a broad sense, they argue that our field needs to “consider more critically the workings of constructs of sexuality in both our sense of literacy development and our sense of the possibilities for developing rhetorical agency” (p. 794). In elucidating this viewpoint, they caution that the brave, transgressive open identities of LGBT people do not necessarily translate into agency, and neither, necessarily, does the work of LGBT-identified scholars and teachers (or their advocates) in our field striving toward a more inclusive, nonhomophobic learning environment. Communicative actions such as simply coming out of the closet and promoting
inclusivity and diversity are not enough, in other words. They write, “agency is only effective . . .
to the extent that it challenges heterosexual narratives, ideologies, and investments” (p. 803).
Along these lines, being open about one’s polyamorous identity or being supportive of
alternative ways of organizing intimate relationships via an engagement with relationship
literacy does not necessarily translate into automatic rhetorical agency. What is needed is more.
What is needed is the exposition of and critique of mononormativity.

In Wallace and Alexander’s (2009) “queer take on agency,” they provide a useful set of
questions to explore\textsuperscript{52}. Some of these include:

- What is heteronormativity; how might heteronormativity underlie homophobia?
- How is Western culture still deeply saturated and infused by heteronormativity, despite the progress made by queer and LGBT activists and theorists?
- How can we describe the “identity negotiations” inherent in any dialogue about or within American government, education, and culture as a result of “heterosexual privilege” (p. 806)?
- How has sexuality become “sorting system” in the unfolding of history—and how might “dividing us into straight and gay, normative and non-normative” have an effect on not just those who have been marginalized, but broadly across all citizens? (p. 806)
- What are the valued “certain kinds of love and affection” in American culture, and what are the kinds that are disdained? (p. 806) In what educational or classroom contexts might these values take on particular salience?

\textsuperscript{52} Note: While it is true that Wallace and Alexander do not explicitly frame these questions as questions (i.e., they do not use question marks to end their sentences), these questions are apparent as questions/areas that need a great deal further research and discussion. Even though I have paraphrased their discussion in the format of questions, I do not believe such rewording does damage to their central aim, which is to inspire more scholarship about queer theory within rhetoric and composition.
• How do/might composition teachers unwittingly “participate in social and cultural practices that maintain heteronormativity”? (pp. 793–794)

• How might queer theory queer teachers’ and students’ conception of rhetorical agency?

• How might the concept of agency be strengthened or productively complicated by taking into account queer lives and ways of knowing?

• What “entails” a uniquely “queer path to rhetorical agency”? (p. 796)

These questions are incredibly useful, in helping to deconstruct the layers of influence that create a heteronormative dominant culture. We begin, through these queries, to tease out just how heteronormativity and homophobia relate and reify each other. We begin to see how even well intentioned leaders of society, such as teachers for instance, can “unwittingly” contribute to the silencing of other possibilities for sexual relating and other modes of loving. We begin to understand how queer voices can enrich our understanding of how to dismantle dominant, hierarchical ways of knowing. We begin to understand better how emotions are implicated in all these phenomena, such as: courage, confusion, love, fear, hatred.

By coming to terms with the actualities of mononormativity as a real energy that limits humans’ capacities to determine which path(s) will lead to the most fulfillment and which path(s) will lead to “coming to know others” (Kershbaum, 2012, p. 640), we can begin to construct an expanded set of questions that take into account what we already know, on account of queer theory, about relationships. In using Wallace and Alexander’s questions as a starting framework, then, we can adjust the direction and intention of the queer conversation, while still being oriented (again, I’m using Ahmed’s conception of the word: a way to describe a person’s “very relation to the world” [2006, p. 68]) in ways that Wallace and Alexander are. We can ask:
• What is mononormativity, and how might that undergird polyphobia or other phobias (such as, for example, biphobia) relating to relationship forms and philosophies that do not take dyadic sexual fidelity as their aim? Furthermore, how might the psychologically based insights within PS help rhetoric and composition scholars to understand emotions such as jealousy in contributing to polyphobia or other fears of relationship orientations that are based on principles of abundance rather than principles of scarcity?
• How is Western culture deeply saturated by heteronormativity, and how might this tendency be linked to mononormativity?
• How can we describe the negotiations about identity inherent in any dialogue about or within American government, education, and culture as a result of monogamous or dyadic privilege?
• How has sexuality become a kind of sorting/categorizing machine in the unfolding of history—and how might “dividing us” into “normative and non-normative” have an effect on not just those who have been marginalized due to mononormativity, but broadly across all citizens?
• How might relationship literacy expose how a perceived lack of choices about relationships constrains “certain kinds of love and affection” in American culture? And, in what educational or classroom contexts might these values take on particular relevance?
• How do/might composition teachers unwittingly participate in social and cultural practices that sustain mononormativity?
• How might PS, and its attendant discussions of mononormativity, queer teachers’ and students’ conception of rhetorical agency?

• How might the concept of agency be strengthened or productively complicated by taking into account polyamorous lives and ways of knowing?

• What occasions a uniquely polyamorous or extra-dyadic path to understanding, grappling with, or harnessing rhetorical agency?

Although monogamy or polyamory are not explicitly mentioned in Wallace and Alexander’s article, I believe their overall mission is in line with this project, as they hope to inspire the creation of “a more equitable and capacious approach to honoring how people diversely create intimacy, relationships, and family” (p. 806). Theirs is, ultimately, a call to “effective agency” within not just educational settings but also in the world at large. Theirs is a call to get involved and do more than simply intellectually know about marginalization or to admit unintentional complicity with marginalization. At the conclusion of their piece, they boldly critique what they see as the dominant way of doing LGBTQ-supportive work in our field—which is, unfortunately, a “shallow multiculturalism.” Instead, to be effective “guides” to others, we:

Need to be better informed about the operation of gender, race, class, religion/spirituality, age, physical and mental/emotional ability, and sexual identity in our culture. And perhaps to be truly progressive, we must move beyond simply acknowledging our culpability in heteronormativity, sexism, racism, ableism, classism and the like in order to make unseating these systems of oppression central to our mission. Further, we must see that accepting responsibility for our individual and collective participation in the discourses of oppression is foundational to developing pedagogies that enable our students to do the same. (pp. 815–816)
As we admit to our culpabilities, we enter the domain of the humble, which is, I would posit, the domain of the learner. Harkening back to comments I made in the third chapter, I repeat the notion that admitting to not knowing is the beginning of knowing. And admitting one does not (fully) know is a humbling, extremely vulnerable act. Yet, this is how learning takes place. Relationship literacy will understand and celebrate this.

New Questions about (Trans)Gender Feminist Rhetorics

In the chapter “Queering Feminist Rhetorical Canonization” within the groundbreaking Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods & Methodologies, K. J. Rawson (2010) returns to a central issue within feminist rhetoric: the ethics of canon formation and maintenance. What should be included within a feminist canon of rhetoric? Should there even be canon(s)? Through investigation of “methodological patterns in the feminist rhetorical canon that shape our field” (p. 39), he exposes a number of pressing questions indispensable for anyone serious about taking into account shifting postmodern understandings of how the queer “analytic” (p. 41) redirects our understanding of what it means to communicate. In offering the lens of transgender critique as a way to expose the normativizing energies within feminist rhetoric, Rawson makes available the following questions:

- What are the “methodological norms” by which feminist rhetoric is “determined” and named? (pp. 39–40) (In other words, what are the underlying epistemologies that constitute when a person is deemed to be a rhetor or a text rhetoric?)
- How have “normative notions of gender” been relied upon to “categorize what counts as feminist rhetoric”? (p. 40)
- How might “[q]ueer theory be a useful analytic for feminist rhetoric?” (p. 41)

53 Just as with the previous piece by Wallace and Alexander (2009), I have chosen to paraphrase these calls for future research in the form of questions.
• How might transgender critique—a sub facet of queer theory—be useful in shedding light on gender normativity within the field of rhetoric?

• How are those who are “not biologically born or identified” (p. 45) as a woman potentially being excluded from rhetorical canon(s)?

Through theories of transgender, Rawson helps us see the problems inherent in a simple reclaiming of forgotten rhetorical figures and texts. No longer should we take for granted what it means to be woman, female, feminist. He helps illuminate the ways in which we squelch the further evolution of the rhetorical tradition by excluding those authors and texts that might have something important to say about how power works in human societies. Though Rawson’s suggestion is for us to take a closer look at how power dynamics play out within static, conservative notions of gender, his insights serve as a touchstone, a taking-off point for how other exclusionary dynamics of power might play out in terms of the methods and methodology of canon formation and reclamation work. If those in feminist rhetoric within the larger field of rhetoric and composition begin to engage with the burgeoning field of PS, radical questions can emerge from queer work such as Rawson’s. These new questions are not meant to discredit, distract, supersede, or overshadow existing queer scholarship, but rather shed light on the need for an abundance of research and scholarship that continues to dig into questions about how the territory of “feminist rhetoric” is composed, and what areas/thinkers/texts we might be unintentionally leaving unconsidered and unvalued.

• What are the methodological norms by which feminist rhetoric is constituted? How might there be blind spots caused by the (mostly invisible) force of mononormativity, impeding our sense of who might count as a rhetor and what might count as rhetoric?
What discussions are being had at the margins of society regarding relationships that might be usefully integrated into analyses within feminist rhetoric?

- How have normative notions of intimacy, relationships, and sexuality been relied upon to categorize what counts as “important” to the lives of feminist rhetors? How might relationship literacy open up the field of what “counts”? (For a concrete example of how to respond to a question such as this, please see the next section on Aspasia.)

- How might queer theory be combined with knowledge of the cultural polyamory movement as a useful analytic for feminist rhetoric? Since the birth of polyamory in the early 1990s, how might the numerous self-help books, websites, conferences, panels, speeches, and other language-events be analyzed and recognized as being in the service of feminist rhetoric? What are the goals of feminist rhetoric and how might those goals be in line with (or complicate) the goals of the transnational poly movement?

- How might transgender critique be useful in shedding light on gender normativity within the field of rhetoric? And, how is gender normativity related to mononormativity? Might mononormativity be the product of the notion of the naturalness of two “complementary” genders or two “complementary” sexes who fall in love? How might the dominant romantic paradigm of The One True Love (as elucidated by poly theorists such as Meg Barker) be related to the cultural maintenance of gender normativity?

- How are those who are not identified as monogamous potentially being excluded from rhetorical canon(s)? In what ways might the dominant cultural logic state that
anything other than monogamy is a symptom of a person being immature, untrustworthy, selfish, abnormal, or pathological—thus, not worthy of the title “rhetor”? How might relationship literacy make legible relationships that fall outside the purview of traditional sexual or emotional dyadic monogamy?

In his aforementioned article, Rawson promotes his vision of the word queer: In its most productive form, it is “not an identity but a strategy, a politic, an outlook on the world. Once it becomes merely a sexual identity, it loses its utility as an analytic” (p. 46). This vision of queer is strikingly similar to Sara Ahmed’s understanding of orientation. These are two ways of seeing the world that celebrate difference not as just some abstract and politically correct concept but, instead, as a very real living-and-breathing grounding in one’s daily life. Queer and orientation are terms used in service of more than the simple tick of a box; instead, queer and orientation question the very notion of the box itself.

These analytic strategies employed by queer theorists such as cultural studies scholar Ahmed and feminist rhetorician Rawson call to mind the prefatory remarks at the beginning of this chapter. My vision of the queer–poly blend goes beyond just promoting, celebrating, or exposing additional identities or additional categories. Though such exposing and celebrating is an exciting, valuable moment in history, eventually we may find that we are exhausted at adding one more letter in long acronyms, such as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual). When such an exhaustion takes place (or, hopefully before), we may begin to find the root cause for the need to create such extensive labeling systems in the first place. Why is it important to expose modes of living and loving that run counter to dominant systems of thought? If we can begin to dig into that question, then we, as academics, will be closer to what feminist rhetoric is after. We will begin to “become increasingly aware of the identities we
privilege to the exclusion of others” (Rawson, 2010, p. 46)—and, in that rising cognitive awareness, we will come to understand how language is either in service of violence/oppression/privilege/exclusion or in the service of peace/freedom/equality/diversity. Though this may, at first, raise the cautionary red flags in the minds of my readers who mistrust binary systems (and I include myself as one who holds such a mistrust), I offer the insight that, in some contexts, viewing the world through a binary lens might, sometimes, have productive ends. There are times for viewing things in a more fluid or holistic way, yes. Absolutely. And, then there are other times when a binary system allows for a few moments of more clear-cut, goal-oriented thinking. In a sense, a binary framework can allow us to ask the sometimes-important question of: Am I on this side, or am I on that side? It allows us to, for a moment at least, figure out which direction we want to move in. It gives us the much-needed (though, as it must be, temporary) energy to get our bearings and then move forward. Sometimes, a binary can help us cut through the myriad directions and hone in on a (temporarily) single path.

As Rawson concluded his chapter, he asked what would happen to feminist rhetorical recovery as well as developing rhetorical theory if his insights about critiquing essentialist notions of “feminist” and “woman” were taken seriously.

How does one rhetorically advocate for gender expression from differing historical, racial, social, class, and sexuality contexts? In what ways does gender advocacy work redefine or reposition our field’s work on feminisms and rhetorics? Where do we find the rhetorical work of gender advocacy and how do these contexts matter? These questions will help us as feminist rhetoricians reimagine rhetorical recovery across a variety of discourses that include sex and gender but that are not bound to a single and presumably stable gender or sexual identity. (p. 47)
In highlighting the importance of reimagining feminist rhetoric projects as those “that are not bound” to a “stable gender or sexual identity,” Rawson’s work helps us see how, in our project of importing insights from PS, an expanded set of questions and directions are possible. Insights from PS will help us further expose, as Rawson has done, how essentialist, normativizing tendencies limit our work in feminist rhetorics.

As a concrete example, let’s consider how reclamation work and theorization of the historical figure of Aspasia might be furthered and amplified. Let us harken back to the previous questions made possible by an importation of PS: How have normative notions of intimacy and relationships been relied upon to categorize what counts as “important” to the lives of feminist rhetors? How might relationship literacy open up the field of what “counts”? If feminist scholars review past scholarship on the rhetorical legacy of Aspasia (please see section 4.5 of this chapter), they can begin to critique what “counted” in past scholarship and ask what might count now, in light of a more complex understanding of rhetorical agency made possible by an expanded view of what might be possible in intimate relationships. But, first, it’s important to paint a fuller picture of why an attention to relationship literacy and PS is so important for a field such as feminist rhetoric.

To Witness (rather than denounce)

Following the lead of Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster (2010), I believe excellent rhetorical inquiry can only occur when “our operational strategies [are] engendered by an ethos of humility, respect, and care” (p. 649). As thinking through relationship literacy and PS can help feminist historians uncover and resist marginalizing cultural sexual–relational mores, this can invite the work of re-seeing past scholarship about historical figures many of us hold dear. By uncovering ideology regarding supposed sexual deviance and normalcy, we can more
gracefully, more calmly be with our research subject. In other words, feminist rhetoricians can better see, rather than frantically looking at or glossing over what doesn’t appear to be important. Vision is sharper. In other words, through insights gained from PS and relationship literacy, researchers can attend to aspects of historical narratives that they ordinarily might find unremarkable—or even uncomfortable—without rushing to categorize or critique based upon well-worn structures of relational normalization that discipline and reify those types of responses. In adopting a PS-informed lens, there can be a reason to slow down, to linger in curiosity regarding how human beings use their bodies, minds, and relationships to inhabit the world. There is less rush to pin down. And there is, ultimately, more joy in the work itself, as researchers widen their gaze in appreciating the sheer multiplicity of intimacy and expression.

The strength gained by considering insights gained by PS is derived primarily (paradoxically) from an absence. This is the absence of anxiety. Scholars (not just in feminist historical rhetoric, but across the rest of our broader discipline of rhetoric and composition) who, via PS as well as queer theory, come to understand that sexuality and human relationships can be viewed as variations rather than as deviations to some norm—and are thus relieved from the emotional burden of needing to imagine threatening futures. For example, polyamory studies scholar Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli’s (2010) exploration in Border Families, Border Families in Schools of “multisexual families”—those families whose parents or children are bisexual or polyamorous—can be seen as a bold example of how this nonjudgmental ethic may work. Though Pallotta-Chiarolli is not herself bisexual or polyamorous (she identifies as straight and states she is in a monogamous marriage), she suspends judgment about what is, for her, an unfamiliar way of being. In this text, though she does not necessarily claim that these sexual identities are a “right” or even a “good” way to live, her analysis is woven throughout with
respect, empathy, wonder, and curiosity. As she exposes the discrimination that bi and poly families face in educational systems both in the United States and Australia, her critique is rigorous in that she does not take anything for granted about how sexuality or relationality or intimacy “should” operate. Her vision is a feminist, inclusive, even radical view of care that 

refuses to get anxious about whether or not her research (about identities, lifestyles, and ideals that are not yet culturally accepted) will lead to moral or ethical chaos.

If we take our cue from Pallotta-Chiarolli, scholars can study ways of being without having to “pick a side,” without the burden of having to “defend” their own way of life that differs from the research participants. Instead, it’s about revealing choices, options. An example of how Pallotta-Chiarolli frames her work, at the opening of Border Families, gives us an inspiring example of the ways we might ethically and rhetorically engage with sexuality and relationships:

I wish to state clearly that this book is not intended to undermine, displace, or negate the enormous work of gay and lesbian research, activism, and education campaigns to end homophobia and homonegativity in schools, nor to undermine, displace, or negate the significance of recognizing, affirming, and celebrating same-sex marriages and families in political, legal, educational, health, religious, and sociocultural systems and structures… This book is also not intended to undermine, displace, or negate heterosexual monogamous families. Heterosexuality and monogamy should continue to be affirmed and celebrated, but should not be privileged or constructed as the only form of sexuality or relationship/family worthy of validation and attention within heteropatriarchal monogamist political, legal, educational, health, religious, and sociocultural systems and structures (p. 10; emphasis added).
In her collegial yet direct manner, Pallota-Chiarolli demonstrates how one can explore or even perhaps celebrate the ethics, choices, and possibilities of actions and words enacted and spoken by present or historical figures even if those actions and words diverge from how that researcher herself lives on a day-to-day basis. Pallotta-Chiarolli is straight and monogamous. Yet, by truly valuing diversity and seeing sexuality in a radically sex-positive way—two tenants described by practitioners and theorists of polyamory—the researcher can research polyamorous and bisexual families without having to feel like she must act or think just as the research subjects do. She can be who she is and they can be who they are. And it’s wonderful! Monogamy and heterosexuality, as she states, are not wrong: What is wrong, however, is the silencing of alternatives. In other words, PS-infused research allows for an intensification of identification, in the Burkean sense of the term. (Two examples of this would be: a researcher who explores or celebrates a butch identity despite that fact that she herself presents daily as traditionally “feminine” in her choice to wear skirts on a daily basis or a researcher who explores the possibilities of pansexuality despite the fact that he himself is asexual.) Using PS as a framework for analyzing social justice issues, there is no need to assert one’s egoic position as superior: for there is no fear that not speaking against will contribute to a kind of slippery-slope-future where sexuality (and other human behavior) will run amuck. Thus, the attendant stress of that projection is obviated and replaced by something more like a witnessing. If the research participants appear to be fully consenting to the situations, practices, and identities they are living, then there is no need to pick a side, no need to denounce. In the field of feminist historical rhetoric specifically, if the rhetor acts or speaks in ways that seem foreign or too-radical for that researcher to adopt in her own life, this does not impede that researcher from being with that figure, from witnessing that figure. Judgment is delayed and possibly entirely forestalled by questions. Disagreement is not
automatically employed in order to “protect” the future of humanity—for sexuality is seen, at its core, as a potentially positive, not automatically negative, force. Thus, the researcher can slow down to see and re-see the rhetorical practices of the figure(s) under analysis, seeing more clearly what a particular society’s fears about sexuality and relationships have hidden, distorted, or reviled.

Re-seeing Aspasia54

In the 1980’s, 1990’s, and early 2000’s, there was a flurry of recovery work on the historical figure of Aspasia, a remarkable woman of 5th century B.C.E. Athens—a woman whom many believe taught rhetoric to Socrates and acted as logographer to Pericles, a woman whom Cheryl Glenn (1997) has called “Our Mother of Rhetoric” (p. 1).55 Since then, unfortunately, there has been a relative dearth of scholarship about her.

Revisiting the story of Aspasia by re-seeing what’s been said about her within the pages of past scholarship, I think, is crucial to the ongoing project of feminism, especially in light of the popular polyamory movement and its attendant academic PS. If we re-see what’s been written about her through a critical lens of PS, asking how scholars have referred to Aspasia and how they have focused on and interpreted particular details from her life, we ask how words have been used to describe her. What are the terms that scholars have received from previous scholars; what are the key words and phrases that run throughout the biographies? What are the ways scholars have referred to Aspasia in passing, while they are focusing on other historical figures of her era (such as Socrates, Plato, etc.)? How do these words perhaps unintentionally reflect certain dominant, mononormative cultural values? Are these words acceptable, or do we

54 This section is a revised version of my paper, “Old Meets New: Aspasia and Sex,” presented at the 2011 annual Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) conference.
55 A full history of Aspasia is outside this chapter’s scope; please consult Glenn’s influential Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity Through the Renaissance (1997).
wish to begin the work of revision? How, as active feminists, might we begin to interrogate some of these usages? How might we re-think or re-make some of these terms?56

We could start such a project in obvious places. For instance, we could look at the text that is, arguably, the most widely used anthology within the field of rhetoric: Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg’s second edition of *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (2001). Bizzell and Herzberg’s inclusion of Aspasia alongside key classical players such as Isocrates, Gorgias, and Aristotle gave weight to her as a person of note, as a rhetor of weight—yet, at the same time, Aspasia is, in the Introduction, initially introduced to us as the “mistress of Pericles” (p. 27).

Of course, the editors were using a word—mistress—that had been used in dozens of secondary sources that had come down through the ages. Indeed, the word has been used in novels and poems written about Aspasia for hundreds of years. The word has been used in scholarship across fields. It has indeed been stated in numerous credible sources that Pericles and Aspasia did have a sexual relationship before Pericles was divorced from his wife. So, what’s the problem?

An analysis from the vantage point of PS may reveal the term as problematic. While the term mistress has more than a hundred current and past usages (some of these usages are positive, in fact, connoting responsibility and strength), most of these listed usages hold a derogatory connotation. If we look at the online *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the seventh definition listed for “mistress” is “A woman other than his wife with whom a man has a long-lasting sexual relationship”; this is probably, in current American culture, the most popular sense

56 In order to undertake the project of re-thinking received terms, it would be prudent not to simply focus on scholarship in feminist rhetoric—particularly during that explosive era of the 1980’s, 1990’s, and early 2000’s—but also consider the allied fields of philology, classical studies, philosophy, women’s studies, communications, and literary studies, as these fields have enriched our understanding of what it means to speak as a woman.
of the word. However, if we then click on the Oxford Historical Thesaurus found within the site, these semantically-related words pop up: “harlot,” “strumpet,” “underput,” “wench,” “convenient,” “slave,” “whore,” “bed-sister,” “pet,” “doll,” and “minion.” Thus, the term mistress, while denoting a certain kind of relationship, evokes images of that particular relationship as illicit. As bad. As sinful. As being of the domain of scarlet letters and of hiding guiltily in closets and shadows. The term mistress brings to mind stereotypes of The Other Woman—a home wrecker who always seems to be deranged, hopeless, clueless, animalistic, greedy, over-sexed, pathetic.

Feminist historians might, then, ask the following questions: How does this seemingly innocent word—“mistress”—act as a passive continuation of certain sexual sociocultural values and ideologies regarding monogamy? How might the connotations of this word, mistress, act as a distortion of who Aspasia might have been? In asking these challenging questions, we realize how the use of the word mistress as a key node in a biographical description is a rhetorical act that tacitly supports the script of mononormativity, a predictable script that condones the marriage dyad as the only socially-acceptable relationship option.

As PS scholars Jin Haritaworn, Chin-ju Lin, and Christian Klesse (2006) remind us, the growing polyamory movement that is being proliferated through both popular and academic media help us radically re-see what before was perhaps not even see-able. We can see that Bizzell and Herzberg’s recapitulation of the word “mistress” from the sources they had consulted was (probably) not a personal response per se, but rather the result of deeply ingrained, structurally produced and reproduced codes of normalcy and normalization. Through PS and specifically through the mode of seeing via relationship literacy, feminist historians can remember that sexuality itself (construed broadly) no longer needs to be negative from the
outset—rather, it can be asked: What are the possibilities for opening “sex-positive terrains for erotic, sexual and relational understandings and practices” (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 518)?

To be clear, the inclusion of the word “mistress” in The Rhetorical Tradition is not an isolated instance, but rather represents an ongoing, interdisciplinary issue regarding the connotative light in which Aspasia is usually summarized and portrayed. For instance, a 2006 PMLA article by Melissa Ianetta, Associate Professor of English at the University of Delaware—one of the rare folks in English Studies who continues to produce Aspasian scholarship—begins, in the very first paragraph, with the statement that Aspasia was the “paramour” of Pericles—a term that, according to the OED, means a person in a “clandestine or illicit affair.” In other collections and readers, too, Aspasia is straightaway introduced—usually before mention of any of her achievements—as someone who was the proverbial other woman of Pericles; for instance, the Aspasia section in the popular college rhetoric reader Women’s Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation, edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, begins with the familiar description: “mistress of Pericles.”

If we are attentive to the ways in which we might utilize PS as a powerful feminist framework, we may re-see, with fresh eyes, how Aspasia has been portrayed as a mistress, as someone who “cheats” the rules of monogamy. We may ask what kind of impact that continued portrayal may have. We may begin, too, to notice all the assumptions about love, sex, marriage, religion, and family that coalesce around “simple” notions like heterosexual dyadic fidelity. As sexuality theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner state, in their chapter “Sex in Public”: “Every day, even the talk-show hosts are newly astonished to find that people who are committed to hetero intimacy are nevertheless unhappy. After all is said and done, the prospects and promises of heterosexual [monogamous] culture still represent the optimism for optimism, a
hope to which people apparently have already pledged their consent” (p. 196). This continued
“astonishment” seems an exigency to begin to talk in more critical ways about sex and
relationships. Why is mass culture continually astonished when the divorce rate continues to
rise? Why does romantic love automatically translate into the image of monogamy? How might
theorists in rhetoric and composition begin to not only critique the “astonishment” of mass
culture, but also to look within the pages of our own scholarship for traces of that same
astonishment, for traces of that same assumption that marriage and love equals sexual
monogamy?

In future work on Aspasia, utilizing the framework of relationship literacy would help
researchers ask: Who, in both ancient Athens as well as current-day America, might be
astonished that Pericles wanted more than one lover simultaneously? Why is this astonishing?
What norms do the emotion of astonishment support? How might astonishment be related to the
silencing of alternatives to dyadic monogamy? Is the continued emotion of astonishment that
some might feel perhaps connected to scholarship and other discursive acts that include word
choices such as “mistress”? How does astonishment drive notions of partnership and romance in
today’s era and how might that relate to previous eras? How might scholars understand the
current phenomenological injunction that the only way to be “happy” is to have a normal—not
queer, not radical—sexuality (Ahmed, 2010) in light of the rhetorical history of Aspasia?

By drawing on the work of PS scholars such as Elisabeth Sheff (2006), we might re-see
Pericles, as well. See him multiply; see him in a new light. We might, perhaps, see a man who
loved Aspasia while she was (probably) loved by many other men too, in light of today’s
polyamorous “man” who redefines what it means to be masculine and resists hegemonic
performances of masculinity (pp. 632–638). We might see his lack of control over his lover,
Aspasia, as a purposeful, rhetorical act. We might even look for clues in Pericles’ writing, to see if he might have felt the emotion of compersion, or if the converse was true. We might even queer future biographical summations of Pericles with the note that, for example, *he was the lover of Aspasia* (rather than the typical reverse formation stating that she was his lover). Or, perhaps, we could make it a point to discuss Aspasia’s rhetorical accomplishments before providing terms and categories that explain her sexual connections. Through relationship literacy, there are countless options for a revitalized practice of thinking and writing human relationships and sexuality.

With a heightened awareness of how rigid relational norms are (in our day) and were (in Aspasia’s day) maintained, simply noticing the word “mistress” in *The Rhetorical Tradition* can be the first step of a fruitful investigation into the rhetoric of mononormativity. One may turn, next, to Ianetta’s (2011) discussion of Lacan’s theory about how signifiers are never stable. Drawing on Lacan, she writes, “Since language is never arbitrary, there is never an insoluble relationship between a word and its referent…we can never assume that an unbreakable chain connects a word to a concept” (p. 26). With a new understanding infused by PS, feminist rhetoricians can linger over Ianetta’s reminder that no rock-solid chain connects Bizzell and Herzberg’s usage of the word “mistress” *and the actual possible reception of it* by other scholars who are interested in uncovering the deeply intertwined ideas about sex/sexuality/relationships within discourse. Mistress is not neutral. It does not just “inform.” With the use of mistress, numerous possibilities begin to unfold, and what one reader will receive will not be what the next reader receives. *Just as Cheryl Glenn carefully re-fashioned our image of Aspasia as a mother, as a caretaker and teacher of rhetoric, so too must we be careful to re-fashion the image*
of Aspasia by using each word, each term mindfully. There are no neutral descriptions; there can never be.

“Simple” summations and descriptions of historical figures can have the powerful effect of either adding to the momentum of increased relationship literacy, or, these writings can have the opposite effect—that of unintentional participatory reinforcement. Haritaworn et al. (2006) discuss how new narratives are emerging within critical sexuality studies (of which PS is a major part) that do “not remain stuck in deconstruction but dare to actively construct…new narratives of emotional and sexual abundance and collective care,” which provide alternatives to traditional notions of capitalistic, patriarchal ideologies “of personal ownership and scarcity” (p. 519) and breathe new life into long-held “truths” about romance, marriage, family, honesty, language, and connection. Theories of polyamorous relating in particular are necessary because they bolster queer theory’s insights about how valid, valuable, healthy sexual relationships can and do occur outside of traditional structures—and, further, about how these alternative relationships must not be viewed as shameful or unethical (p. 515).

Granted, it would not be realistic to call for an update of all terminology to anticipate all the subjectivities of current scholars. However, it would be an attainable goal to call for: 1) the creation of scholarship about historical female rhetors/rhetoricians that analyzes the usages of seemingly harmless words such as “mistress” in existing scholarship, and 2) the creation of new kinds of scholarship that, as a grounding practice, makes more-careful distinctions about using traditional, received terms, while still conveying information about the values and attitudes of the historical age under discussion. In other words, we can choose terms in ways that more finely reflect the emotional mood, affective response, and intellectual stance we want to take regarding woman rhetoricians such as Aspasia. We can select better words, better terms—terms that will
tell *a closer version* of the story that we want to tell. For example, instead of simply stating something like “Aspasia was the mistress of Pericles” we can revise the passage to explain that Aspasia and Pericles “were not married” (there is no value judgment in a phrase such as this), and “did engage in sexual connection” (again, there is no value judgment here, just an observation based on historical texts). Perhaps, if it makes sense for the scholarship we are working on, we could then summarize (in as much length as made sense for the specific theme under analysis) the moral and ethical assumptions of how married men and married women should engage in sexuality, and how different expectations were in place for each gender role.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990/2010) explained that the possibility for a radical political rethinking of gender/sexuality lies in the fact that norms of gender/sexuality are reproduced through a culture’s repetition through discursive acts—yet, paradoxically, this is where we can understand the open space, the possibility for change. She stated, “the possibilities of gender transformation” are located in “the possibility of a failure to repeat” (p. 192). In other words, if we *fail to repeat* terms that carry negative connotations, terms that spring from outmoded systems of thought regarding human sexuality, then we will thereby *transform* that system, ushering in, as PS scholars understand, a plethora of healing sex-positive possibilities.

Therefore, if we take the extant scholarship on Aspasia as our cue, it seems appropriate to ask, in future lines of rhetorical feminist research, questions such as: What other terms, such as “mistress” might be ubiquitous throughout other feminist recovery scholarship? *What words might be so present that they have become invisible?* And, what terms will we use within future scholarship? What terms will we utilize when we unearth new female or feminist rhetoricians? As critical scholars immersed in the domain of language, we are fully aware of the repercussions of the maintenance of words, the continued usages that we feel are appropriate (or not) to
advance our goals. Surely there are other words we can use in Aspasian scholarship. We might take our cue from Cheryl Glenn (1997), for instance, who, in the opening paragraph of *Rhetoric Retold* refers to Aspasia as “lifelong companion of Pericles and influential colleague of famous men” (p. 1). Beautiful. The term “lifelong companion” sets up an affable portrait—a relationship appears in the reader’s mind of one that is balanced, seasoned, healthy, sensual, secure, enjoyable, lasting. In this term we get the hint that Aspasia’s and Pericle’s connection was sustainable because it was, ultimately, based on a deep friendship—which is what any romantisexual relationship must be if it is to last over the stretch of time. Then, the term “influential colleague” broadens our lens outward from the pair bond aspect of Aspasia’s history and reminds us that, equally important, was her contribution to the intellectual milieu of ancient Athens. Glenn’s dynamic, rich portrayal here is beautiful because it helps to lift Aspasia out of the realm of the one-dimensional “mistress” and makes her more of curiosity, more of a person that really lived that we can really learn about. Readers might know what a mistress is (or think they know), but maybe they are not so sure about what it means to be a “lifelong companion” to someone and what it means to be an “influential colleague.” Those words are less drenched in negative connotations. Or, we might follow the lead of Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (2001) in *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetorics*—where, on the first page of Aspasia’s biography there is the lovely and simple comment: “Pericles and Aspasia were lovers.” There are many many possibilities. We could even look to Plutarch, who wrote: “[He] loved her with wonderful affection; every day, both as he went out and as he came in from the marketplace, he saluted and kissed her” (quoted in Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001, p. 66). Indeed, it is crucial to note that Pericles treated Aspasia as more than just a sexual plaything, but a real partner. Bizzell and Herzberg (2001) wrote of this in *The Rhetorical Tradition*, in fact. They wrote about how, in
a time when the eroticism and romance between men was praised as a “far better source of emotional sustenance than marriage” (p. 27), it seems clear that, for reasons that we perhaps still do not fully comprehend, Aspasia was a person who was truly loved by Pericles—she was hardly “the other woman” that the word “mistress” implies. She was his lover, his friend, his family, his partner, his confidant, his ally, his muse. She was his and he was hers. Theirs appears to have been a remarkable, deeply-enriching relationship.

Moving beyond the critique of specific words/terms utilized across the biographies is a broader issue of how sex and sexuality has been construed within Aspasia scholarship. With insights gained from PS and relationship literacy, we might begin to unravel the deeply entrenched sex-negativity of mass culture—a negativity from which scholars are not exempt.

The binary of genitals versus brain is one that is, unfortunately, all too common within the telling of history. Let us linger, then, for a moment, over this problematic portrayal: Aspasia the Prostitute versus Aspasia the Rhetorician. So often, within the pages of academic journals, scholars paint her as if she can’t be both. Scholars seem confused, asking: If Aspasia was a true intellectual, how do we account for the fact that she offered her body for money? If Aspasia was an immoral prostitute, than how can she have had a powerfully trained mind and a will to put it to use in the polis? If Aspasia was a whore, then how could she have been our Mother of Rhetoric? In sum, if Aspasia had so much sex, how could she have been so smart? These binary questions are problematic because they imply that to be sexual outside of “proper” dyadic monogamy is to belie one as a mature, intellectual, important rhetor.

If we maintain the dichotomy of Aspasia as only rhetor or Aspasia as only prostitute, then we are unnecessarily limiting what feminist historical research can do. I agree with classical historian Madeleine Henry (1995) when she urged, “it is important to reestablish ‘Aspasia’
discourse as a missing link in both the history of female subjectivity and the discourse on erotic pedagogy, a discourse largely attributed only to Socrates” (p. 55). However, it is only when we let go of our impulse to sexually purify the story that we understand just how Aspasia’s combined use of eroticism, sexuality, sensuality, intelligence, and ethics contributed to her ethos as a rhetor.

Yet, many scholars just can’t seem to get past the idea that Aspasia had a lot of sex. Consider Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong’s (1995) portrait in their chapter “Aspasia: Rhetoric, Gender, and Colonial Ideology” in *Reclaiming Rhetorica*. Here, Aspasia is handed to us all cleaned up, in a G-rated fashion. Here, there is a massive denial of sexual desire; the scholars downplay the actions of her sexed body entirely in favor of her brilliance as a brain, as a rhetorician, as an intellectual. First, Jarratt and Ong noted that Aspasia did not even meet Pericles until “six or seven years after [emphasis added] his divorce” (p. 12). This clashes with most other renditions of Aspasia, which point out that Aspasia and Pericles began their bond well before Pericles left his wife. In addition, Jarratt and Ong maintained that Aspasia wasn’t a prostitute at all! Both claims—that Aspasia did not engage in monogamous relations with a married man and Aspasia wasn’t a prostitute at all—combine to form a sort of seamless narrative, one in which Aspasia is cast as the good girl, the one whose sex history is above reproach; Jarratt and Ong wanted us to know that Aspasia was noticed by men not for her breasts or lips but for just her mind. Only her ideas. Through sensitization through PS, this portrayal can be critiqued as a particularly sex-negative version of the story of Aspasia. From there, we may re-see, revise. Further, we might ask questions about the various types of prostitution available in ancient Athens, comparing and contrasting the possibilities for agency to our time. How might our current understanding of prostitution affect our understandings of prostitution in ancient
cultures, especially in Athens, a culture were prostitution was legal? How might we queer the notion of a “prostitute”, both today and then? How might Aspasia have gained wisdom through the exploration of various sexual partners? How might a G-rated version of the narrative such as Jarratt and Ong’s potentially distort the ways in which we might view Aspasia as challenging the patriarchal systems of her day? How might we open up the possibilities for who Aspasia might have been without pigeonholing her or misrepresenting her? Through thinking about polyamory as a philosophy for living and loving in diverse, nonnormative ways, feminist historians can lead the way in opening up new ways of thinking for what it means to be a sexual intellectual, as we reconsider the possibility that Aspasia was not just “either” a prostitute or a rhetor, but that she may have been both plus a multiplicity of simultaneous roles: mother, philosopher, logographer, lover, teacher, student, orator, reader, backstage politician, matchmaker. In sum, we must resist making her story—or any story—simple. Even though polyamory is not an identity we should foist upon Aspasia, as such a category did not exist in 5th century B.C.E. Athens, we still can make use of what polyamory can teach us in terms of how her multiplicity of roles and how her multiplicity of lovers created a woman brilliant and brave enough to teach rhetoric to men. In claiming the reflexive power that comes with importing a more nuanced understanding of sexuality and relationships, feminists can do the important work of resisting the impulse to either clean Aspasia up (take away her positionality as a sexed body) or to take away her legacy (as a rhetor, thinker, person of influence). We can produce new scholarship that integrates more of whole, rich, nuanced picture of what women in our rhetorical tradition contributed.

Ultimately, inhabiting future research in the ways outlined will be, no doubt, a road of uncertainty. These ways point to roads that can be described—but not fully understood unless traveled. And they are, admittedly, journeys of question-asking; journeys of listening more than
pronouncing. Journeys that must content themselves in the not (fully) knowing. Our power, as feminists and as those interested in promoting social justice aims, will derive not from our own grand insights but, rather, from pausing alongside the road to listen to others. What has been said about historical figures such as Aspasia? What are the terms often used? What have these figures said about themselves, written about themselves? What have others written or said about them? What information has been glossed over, covered up, erased, distorted? Can we gently redirect the conversation without accusing, without hostility? What is the difference when we see relationships as a rhetoric of options, as a game of language and fluidity and the chance for revision?

Moving Forward

As we have seen, the importation of PS into theories of rhetoric and composition provide a place for asking new kinds of questions. We can ask questions about rhetorical agency, transgender rhetorics, and feminist recovery work. My review of current scholarship by Wallace and Alexander (2009) and Rawson (2010), as well as my critique of Aspasian scholarship, is not meant to be seen as an all-inclusive look at what has been done or what can be done in terms of merging PS into queer theories of rhetoric and composition. This chapter, rather, is meant to be an opening glimpse into what’s possible. The work is just beginning, here. Next, in the final chapter, I turn to a thick description of how pedagogy within our field might be influenced by an understanding of relationship literacy and polyamory. Offering narratives and course materials from *Queer Writing: Communities, Identities, Texts*, I offer a vision of what is possible in terms of classroom practice.
V: TEACHING “QUEER WRITING,” A QUEER-POLY STUDIES CLASS

This course has opened my eyes to the possibilities in new relationships. I learned that polyamory is a sensible option for those who feel one person is not enough to love. I am more open to the idea of change. I have a feeling that once polyamory, homosexuality, etc. go through the threshold in society, it will be accepted just like anything else—in time. (student feedback)

Theory into Practice

As discussed in Chapter One, this entire project—which no doubt includes “Queer Writing”—was made not only possible but made thinkable to me because of the work of one person in particular: Jonathan Alexander. I am intellectually and emotionally indebted to his relentless provocation that rhetoric and composition think seriously about how to guide students in becoming more fluent in narrating their own sexual stories as well analyzing what those stories mean in relation to larger cultures. Alexander’s vision has provided an invaluable touchstone for me.

The work of David L. Wallace has also been quite important to my impetus to create a course based upon my sense that students are not only able to engage in complex topics such as mononormativity and relationship literacy, but they are hungry to do so. They are hungry to do so because they understand, at perhaps an intuitive level, that their lives, and the stories that they tell about their lives matter—or, that they might matter, if given the right context or platform or moment. The course “Queer Writing” takes as an assumption Wallace’s (2011) notion of alternative rhetoric as a place from which to analyze how personal identity and our personal
narratives are always “intimately bound up in the practice and pedagogy of rhetoric” and that “fundamental components of culture, language, and rhetoric are complicit in systemic inequities in our society in ways that have real and daily consequences for those they marginalize” (pp. 4–5). Alternative rhetoric is the rhetoric used by those who are marginalized in ways that break free from, or partially break free from, that marginalization. In challenging hegemonic discourses of power, language users can recognize, more and more, how their individual subjectivity has led them to make certain choices with language and with their lives, as opposed to other choices, and they can recognize, more and more, how those choices have a very real rippling effect outward to others in their communities and larger life-worlds. Understanding that rhetoric is a powerful product of one’s own subjectivity allows one the insight that language can be employed more deliberately, more intentionally, in service of various moral and ethical quests.

“Queer Writing” is, ultimately, a course in rhetoric, as there is a strong social–political bent to the material I ask students to read and respond to. In designing the course, I knew that even if students did not leave the course revved up by explicit goals to make the world a more equitable place, if they could—at the very least—leave the course understanding how to engage in more empathetic conversation as well as actively cultivate an open mind state, then the activities that my students would soon engage themselves with (whether it be within the community, their jobs, their hobbies, or their vocations) would be undertaken with the energies that are absolutely crucial for inventing a more equitable world: the energies of honesty, empathy, compassion, open-mindedness, and love. In other words, social justice work would be getting done, without the rhetor necessary labeling it “social justice.” So, the basis of a course that undertakes the sensitive task of revealing and/or debunking societal norms is a course that

\[57\text{Let us not forget that rhetoric, in itself, is a slippery term. My definition of rhetoric is this: The power inherent in language use, with that power being never neutral but always slanted toward having loving purposes or fearful purposes.}\]
asks students to account for their own assumptions about what they believe to be “normal” regarding sexuality and relationships, guiding them to consider what the consequences of these assumptions might be. While a course such as this is certainly asking students to be vulnerable to the often-painful insight that they have been complicit in discourses of hierarchy and oppression, it is also asking students to take stock of the enormous power they can harness in the words they write and speak daily. Language is revealed as that which can be used in the service of, as Wallace helps us understand, alternative rhetoric. Language is rhetoric; language is agency. And, as students begin to understand how they may become more fluent in a literacy of relationships and sexuality, they begin to see an alternative model of language emerge: a way to communicate that, in the very practice of it, brings about a very different kind of world. No doubt, this is a very ambitious classroom. In this queered space, students and teachers explore how the world is now and how they might like the world to be—but they don’t stop there! They ask, “How have I used my language to help create a certain kind of world? How will I use my language in the future to help make a certain kind of world? How am I implicated in this language game, and what powers do I posses in collaborating with others to remake what is unjust?”

The Basics of the Course

The pedagogic aim for the course I’m about to explain is for students to be able to situate themselves—their subjective history, their subjective lens, their subjective morals—within the larger context of the present culture. The goal is to nudge them toward answering the social, ethical question: How do my identity, relationships, and sexuality converge and clash with normative expectations of various communities and cultures?

The course, “Queer Writing: Communities, Identities, Texts,” was an Intermediate Writing (ENG 2070) course taught in the spring of 2013 in the English Department at BGSU.
The instructors who typically teach this course are advanced doctoral students in the Rhetoric & Writing Program, and they are—to their delight!—given great leeway in terms of how they want to compose the course. Working under the direction of faculty mentors in the department, instructors of Intermediate Writing typically create the course in ways that dovetail with their dissertation research interests. The undergraduate students who tend to take this course are taking it as an elective within an English degree program (usually creative writing), or, they are taking it as a requirement for another major.58 These students, usually juniors or seniors, have already successfully completed the required undergraduate composition sequence; and, they arrive at the course with the knowledge and experience that comes from having taken courses in their desired major.

The students quoted (anonymously) gave me their written consent to use their writing that they completed for the course.59 The excerpts have been obtained from major projects, in-class written reflections, assignment evaluations, and course evaluations. I made sure to emphasize to students multiple times, both verbally and in writing, that they were under no obligation to release their written work to me for the purposes of this research, and that no negative consequences would follow from declining to consent to participate. In response to student questions about why I desired to use their writing, I pointed them to the words printed on the consent form: “If you choose to sign, your work will be used by Heather (in both her written dissertation, also possibly in professional conference presentations) in order to explain to teachers, scholars, and other interested readers why pedagogical and theoretical approaches in English should include attention to queer theory, relationship literacy, polyamory, and other topics that Heather explores in her dissertation work.” As discussed in Chapter One, as this

58 A number of architecture students informed me that taking the course was a requirement for their program.
59 Out of eighteen students, fifteen consented to having their writing utilized in this dissertation. If you’d like to view the consent forms, please email me at trahan.heather@gmail.com, and I will be happy to provide you with copies.
project is a theoretical study rather than an empirical one, my use of student writing is meant to
serve as anecdotal food-for-thought rather than as concrete fact; the writing is meant to share
student voices in order to paint a general impression of how such a course on sexuality, identity,
and relationships might proceed rather than “argue” how such a course will or should proceed.

_Cultivating Conversation and an Open Mind State_

Not surprisingly, this course is based upon dialogue and the asking of questions, rather
than absorbing the wisdom of a “master” or the answering of questions. Conversation (true
conversation, where both teacher and students have a reciprocal educational relationship) is key
to the success of a course of this type. In studying poly and queer ways of knowing, students are
often going to often have visceral reactions to the material, often without fully understanding
why. Their emotions are valid reactions. A majority of Americans, as well as across the globe,
has been conditioned to believe that love and sexuality/sensuality are scarce, finite resources—
one that must be jealously guarded. Additionally, it is “common sense” that there should only
be one kind of romantisexual relationship (the monogamous and heterosexual type). Thus, as
students grapple with alternative practices of sexuality and alternative expressions of relational
identity, an open mind is necessary in order to be able to consider the information that flat-out
defies the social conditioning students have previously received. Here I must emphasize this
point: although typically denigrated as a cliché, an open mind is the only kind of mind that will
receive and consider new information. If information is new, if information is previously
unheard of (or partially unheard of), then the human—unless she/he has an open mind—will
cling to the old ways out of fear. The new is indeed scary. In order to cultivate a space where
students can enjoy the freedoms and intellectual excitement that comes with practicing an open
mind state, students must be able to voice their concerns, fears, hesitances, and questions, along
with the values and morals that they have brought to the course. In a—some would say controversial—course such as “Queer Writing,” it is absolutely mandatory that the teacher be prepared to truly listen to such concerned voicings—and not with the goal of debunking the students’ beliefs, but, rather, with the intention to learn from the unique subjectivities of students and to express empathy and interest, while also guiding the conversation toward an honest exploration of normative assumptions regarding sex/uality, gender, identity, and relationships. In sum, both teacher and students must be willing, with an open mind, to face their own ignorance. They must grapple, together, with uncovering a multitude of ideologies: and then they must ask, “What now?”

As Judith Halberstam (2011) wrote in *The Queer Art of Failure*, it is the aim and the practice of conversation rather than mastery that offers a true educational experience. In “Queer Writing” learners were not encouraged to master content material or even rhetorical strategies—instead, through empathetic conversation, learners came together to write and speak in exploratory ways that defied mainstream competitive, argumentative standards. In a course about polyamory and queerness, this is essential. Empathetic conversation emphasizes not judgment, but rather a peaceful mode of seeing that is nonviolent, a mode of seeing that is truly curious about other ways of being and knowing. The art and act of conversation, rather than that of mastery, is a “very concrete way of being in relation to another form of being and knowing without seeking to measure that life modality by the standards that are external to it” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 12). In other words, if a teacher sets the stage properly, polyamorous and queer people appear not as figures to be denounced, rejected, or mocked—instead, polyamory and queerness, both as theories and as embodied practices/identities, appear to students as curious alternatives worthy of study, even though these alternatives stand outside mainstream
understandings of how sexuality and relationality “should” work. Queerness and polyamory take on a delightful ambiguousness, an ambiguousness that is channeled as a value in order for students to ask questions—tough questions!—about their own role(s) within the world, as they make choices, use language, and relate to others.

Caveats

There are three important caveats to note, before moving on to describe, in more depth, the course I taught. First: A teacher facilitating a poly/queer themed writing course needs to be able to dialogue frankly with students about sexuality, and, if it makes sense to do so, as conversations organically arise, that teacher needs to be able to speak honestly about her/his own life journeys. This does not mean that a teacher must be an expert in talking about sexuality. Rather, a teacher must be willing to take the leap of faith that talking about deeply intimate topics such as sexuality, love, and relationships requires. And, as Valerie Lehr (1999) pointed out, any course that aims to raise the political consciousness of students must be lead by teachers who are comfortable (not ashamed of or squeamish about) conversing with students “as real people who are themselves desiring sexual subjects,” facing “choices and conflicts as sexual beings” (p. 160). Paradoxically, it is through the vulnerability of the teacher, in being open about herself/himself as a sexual being, that both teacher and student become empowered. As social psychologist Brené Brown (2012) has compellingly expressed, vulnerability is often mistakenly seen as weakness; whereas, in fact, the act of making oneself open and vulnerable to others is the birthplace of agency and creativity. Brown’s understanding of the power of vulnerability has aligned with my experience, as well as the experience of many other wonderful teachers with whom I have collaborated. When a teacher models vulnerability (which cannot happen without an open mind state), the typical outcome is a classroom full of students who are eager to share
their own stories, their own triumphs, failures, confusions, questions, and insights. In sum, there can be no mask-wearing in courses such as “Queer Writing.” Honesty has a home here.

My second caveat involves the larger institutional culture. A teacher would be wise to carefully evaluate the current climate on her/his campus to determine whether or not such a provocative course about alternative sexualities and relationships makes sense. In the article “I Thought Composition Was About Commas and Quotes, Not Queers: Diversity and Campus Change at a Rural Two-Year College,” Danielle Mitchell (2008) described the “chilly” difficulties and sometimes outright hostilities she faced while teaching a composition class that asked students to deconstruct gender and sexuality as culturally-made constructs. As she pointed out, any writing course that deals with social construction along with the task of writing—and, especially one about something as sensitive as sexuality—is a course that is going to be riskier in its execution than a course with a theme that is less intensely personal. As discussed across previous chapters, sex-negativity runs rampant throughout our American culture because sex is often associated with shame. Asking students to confront shame is a heavy asking indeed! Therefore, teachers must take the time necessary to reflect about whether or not they have the emotional energy they need in order to respond with compassion and empathy to difficult moments. Speaking personally, I was cautioned by a few faculty members on my dissertation committee that teaching “Queer Writing” as I had envisioned it would probably be met by student resistance, and even, perhaps, parental and/or community backlash. While I did not encounter any parental or community difficulties, my mentors were correct about the student resistance part. There was palpable tension in the classroom during the first two weeks of the course. However, as I will discuss later in this chapter, I had prepared frameworks for cultivating conversation and an open mind state—and these frameworks allowed students to move in and
out of resistance (especially during those first few weeks) with a measure of grace and courage that was inspiring to witness.

The third and final caveat deals with a teacher’s initial approach to discussing polyamory. Teachers must try to approach a queer-poly studies class with an understanding that polyamory, though marginalized and demonized by mainstream society, is not always practiced in an ethical way by all proponents. In other words, teachers would be wise to resist thinking of poly as an automatically “good” thing. Nay, poly is a complex thing! As a poly person myself, the temptation to idealize polyamory has been strong, but I believe my pedagogic approach has been a balanced one; I have striven to show polyamory as an option for relating, among other queer and nonqueer options, discussing with students how some of these options are more privileged than others and what the consequences of such a privileging might be. Along similar lines, teachers would be wise to not portray dyadic monogamy as a “bad” thing, as it is not always oppressively practiced. Careful distinctions need to be made—between compulsory monogamy and a term I call *honest monogamy*, a situation where the two people in the relationship have openly discussed with each other the alternatives to traditional dyadic monogamy and found those alternatives lacking. In sum, both polyamory and monogamy are complex ways of being, and it is necessary to resist the lure to discuss either in ways that uncritically praise or uncritically denounce such identities and practices.

**Questions, Explorations, Engagement**

As outlined in the syllabus (see Appendix), “Queer Writing” helps students think more deeply about what it means to be queer: to think queerly, to write queerly, to behave queerly, to create queerly, to relate queerly, to perform queerly, to move queerly, to ask queerly, to answer queerly, to disrupt queerly, and to use queer theory in order to analyze and converse about queer
texts, experiences, activisms, literatures, media, identities, and cultures. As discussed on the syllabus, an overview of the course goals stated:

We will work on developing mastery of the rhetorical processes of planning, executing and revising prose. Emphasis will be on strengthening analytical writing; emphasis will also be placed on the use and expression of creativity. A central part of this course will be working with your peers in collaboratively composing rubrics specific to each major writing project, and you will gain experience in assessing your own writing as well as the writing of your peers. As this course aims to expand your ability to critically use, analyze, assess, and interrogate language, it will be quite a valuable experience, preparing you for future writing you will encounter in a wide variety of professions.

Additionally, I provided students with a list of questions, which served as a rough map of our semester-long collaborative explorations:

- What does “queer” mean?
- What does it mean to be sexual?
- What does “sexual orientation” mean?
- What is a relationship?
- What is love?
- What are the assumptions our U.S. culture has about family relationships, work relationships, romantic relationships, sexual relationships, and other relationships?
- What does the term relationship orientation mean?
- What is relationship literacy?
- What does queerness and queer cultures have to do with heteronormativity and mononormativity?
• What appears to be the ideal relationship orientation(s) and sexual orientation(s) in our country/culture?
• What are the practices and values of marriage and parenting in our country today?
• What are some transnational practices and values regarding norms of sexuality?
• What is the status of the nuclear family?
• What other groups might qualify or self-identify as “queer”?

In sum, our explorations in “Queer Writing” was, first and foremost, to work together as a tight-knit community of nineteen thinkers, working together to look deeply into how society understands relationships, sex, family, and romance.

One of the key philosophies of “Queer Writing” is: there no such thing as “right” or “wrong” answers—instead, there are only respectful and reflective attempts to define terms, offer hypotheses, and voice more questions. No one’s word is the final word on the matter (including mine). In the syllabus and during class discussions, I continually emphasized that, even though this topic area was immensely interesting to me, I did not have ready-made answers to any of the questions we were broaching, and, thus, I welcomed the learning that students were surely going to spark within me. In this way, I modeled the open mind state that I desired to inspire within my students.

In order to facilitate the level of intense engagement I knew was essential to digging into these issues, I included a number of radically nontraditional class meetings called Open Seminars, meetings where students reflected together about a text without my intervention, prodding, or guidance. This is how it worked. Students came to class all having read a text in common, and then, using written questions that they had prepared in advance (relating to

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whatever it was about that text that intrigued, confused, and or excited them), students sat in a circle and discussed the text freely, while I stayed intentionally silent and acted only as an observer. In an Open Seminar, the mood and flow is similar to that of a book club. In this way, students were able to release any fears that they might have harbored about getting the “right” answer or saying the “right” thing. Through the Open Seminars, students were able to enjoy and grapple and struggle and wonder and explore complex cultural ideas that were presented in complex cultural texts in ways that defused the tensions that many of them felt between the home values they brought with them to the course and the queer/poly values to which they were being exposed. Many of them, during the Open Seminars and also outside of these, discussed very frankly the ways in which their upbringings and family cultures radically clashed with the queer values of the course. However, the confusion that students felt and voiced, particularly at the beginning of the term, seemed to me to be a fertile ground for what I see as the only ground for true exploration: confusion. I agree with Robert McRuer’s (2006) perhaps counterintuitive conclusion that composition/writing classes must be spaces where existing feelings of confusion, agitation, messiness, and disorientation in students are not only welcomed, but that the composing classroom must be that which produces these emotions and mental states—because these states are the experiences that are most generative for the thinking necessary to do insightful writing (p. 148).

When I asked students to provide me with anonymous feedback about their experiences with the Open Seminars, a majority of students reported that they looked forward to these “intense” meetings above all others, and, as one student put it, “Most of me wishes that every

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61 I let students know that the only time I would speak during an Open Seminar would be to redirect the dialogue if students were using violent language or in order to correct a fact (for example: If a student said that a book was published in 1992, and I knew the book to be published in 1995, I would briefly jump in to clarify). During the term, I probably spoke up about two or three times during all the Open Seminars, and only for the latter reason.
class would be in this format but I do understand that isn’t always possible.” Students discussed that because these particular gatherings were “student-regulated,” they felt as if they could “speak freely about how they truly feel about different topics.” The words “empowered” and “freedom” were used multiple times in the various student feedback that I solicited. Many of them liked the fact that even when they weren’t speaking, they were grateful for the simple freedom to focus on the practice of listening. Interestingly, it was often when they had the courage to stay silent and empathetically absorb the interpretations of the texts and also the emotional reactions from their classmates (without always feeling the need to argue against) that they felt they learned the most. As one student put it, “These seminars help with learning to listen and learning how to let others speak, which is something I think we need to work on.”

Up for discussion in the Open Seminars were: *A Queer and Pleasant Danger: A Memoir* by Kate Bornstein (2012), *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* by Michael Warner (1999), and *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, & Other Adventures* by Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy (1997/2009). These three were the central texts students used to jumpstart their own thinking about the political, ethical, practical, and philosophical aspects of queerness and polyamory. (I mention these specific texts not in the hopes that they will necessarily be adopted in my readers’ own future courses on this topic area, but rather simply as a way to help conceptualize the general types of texts that might be incorporated into a course dealing with such radical content area.)

I selected Bornstein’s text as a way to ease into the term via the genre of a personal memoir: my aim was for students to read a text, written by an openly queer author; and, through the use of the personal pronoun “I”, students might begin to get a feeling for how it feels to be an “I” that is often denigrated in mainstream culture. In talking with my students at the end of the
term, during the final week of classes, a majority of them expressed that they enjoyed reading
this book the most out of the three, and felt that they liked Bornstein’s humor, playfulness, and
approachability as an author. To be honest, their overall positive reaction to Bornstein surprised
me a bit, for this book does quite graphically discuss sex acts, as well as various BDSM
practices—because of this, at the start of the term, I was a bit anxious as to how students would
receive the book. Yet even some of my more conservative students admitted that while they
themselves “would never do what Borstein did,” they enjoyed the author’s honest accounts of
her life, feeling that Bornstein, though a sexual radical, was at the core an intelligent, caring
human being who had some practical as well as philosophical wisdom to share.

Warner’s text *The Trouble with Normal* was the most academic (utilized the most
challenging language) of the three; thus, it was the most difficult for my students: a handful of
the class seemed to be invigorated by the challenge, while many simply got frustrated and tuned
Warner out. As *The Trouble* is, by Warner’s admission, a polemic, it indeed served that purpose,
by inciting some very passionate discussions during one particular Open Seminar meeting, where
students debated riling questions such as: Does the inclusion of sex toys or the exchange of
money constitute “moral sex”? Is queerness genetic or a choice? Should sexuality be regulated
by the law/government, and, if so, to what extent? What are some solutions for overpopulation of
the planet? If I were to teach the course again, however, I probably would ask students to read
only a chapter from Warner—and, moving more slowly, I would help to facilitate discussion
guided by myself (in addition to the Open Seminar), where I could work more closely with
students, helping them understand some of the more complex passages and arguments.

Lastly, I chose the bestselling, infamous book *The Ethical Slut* as a way to introduce
students to a baseline understanding of what polyamory is all about. (Thousands worldwide cite
The Ethical Slut as their “bible” for living an intentionally ethical poly life.) Students read the text as their beginning step in the final unit on polyamory, and then branched off from there into their own more specific research projects regarding their perceived understanding of the dynamic between polyamory and queerness. During class meetings, we discussed the political practice of reclaiming words from their conservative origins, a strategy that queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (1999) refers to as disidentification. Students began to understand how the term “slut,” while still holding negative connotations and denotations for many, is beginning to unravel into positive meanings and associations, thanks to the work of many radical feminists who practice polyamory. In analyzing the reclaiming of the word slut, therefore, students understood that words are not static, and that “the very discursive nature of language, rhetoric, and culture means that change is possible” (Wallace, 2011, p. 34).

In addition to the written texts, there were other “texts” utilized throughout the term. In particular, three guest speakers (a local polyamorous husband/wife activist duo as well as an openly poly-queer professor of architecture at BGSU) came to speak about the topic of polyamory. Also, we utilized a number of podcasts, popular websites, Youtube videos, and also the poly documentaries When Two Won’t Do and Three of Hearts.

Even though I consider the choice of these texts to have been, ultimately, a successful aspect of “Queer Writing,” I do want to suggest that other texts might serve similar purposes and achieve similar aims. I agree with Robert McRuer’s (2006) insight that scholarship on pedagogy needs to avoid being a “nuts and bolts” way to simply hand down how a course should be taught, because “such streamlining” has the effect of erasing “critical thought” (2006, p. 165). Instead,

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62 A crucial decision that I made, early on in the planning of the course, is that I didn’t want to invite my own poly partners to come in as guest speakers. Doing that wouldn’t have allowed students to be comfortable in questioning polyamory (and queerness) as I had wanted them to feel free to do. Having people other than those closely related to myself was key to providing the space for students to be able to critique, wonder, disagree.
the sharing of choices of texts, practices, activities, and philosophies that went into the making of an academic course, such as in this chapter, is more of a sharing that is meant to inspire other teachers’ own unique critical creation of a course.

Course Blogs

Each student was asked to create their own personal Wordpress (http://wordpress.com) blog, where they would post weekly reflections on the readings, in-class discussions, as well as on the documentaries and short videos we watched. In addition, students posted all drafts and final versions of all their major writing projects (except for the final essay) to the site. The sites were made public during the duration of the course. Each of their blogs was linked to our home Wordpress site, which was also made public during the duration of the course. Utilizing my own social network, primarily via Facebook, I often shared some of the more intriguing student posts with many of my poly/queer activist friends and colleagues. I encouraged students to share their own work widely; however, there were no formal methods in place within the course for doing so, primarily because I wanted such sharing to be an organic, personal choice motivated by an earnest craving to share and connect with others about this subject matter rather than a mandated requirement for the course. Thus, some students proudly circulated their work with broader communities, while others chose not to, for various reasons.

For three out of the five major writing projects, students utilized the genre of the blog post in order to argue, question, explore, reflect, critique, or some combination of these. I chose the blog post as the primary genre I wanted students to practice because, in my personal observations, it appears that a well-crafted blog post is a potent form of communication and critique in today’s world. I would even argue that a blog post—when done well, of course—has

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63 For confidentiality reasons, (because my students consented to have their writing utilized only anonymously for this project), I have disabled our home Wordpress site for the course.
more potential currency to effect real, systemic change than peer-reviewed academic publication. Blogging is a method of writing that students can learn and then use, for their own purposes, after a course is over. Thus, in the service of building my students’ public rhetoric skills, the blog seemed the ideal venue for production and circulation. Especially at the start of the term, I reviewed examples of effective, creative, intellectually-rich, well-circulated blogs, discussing concrete strategies for developing style, organization, graphic design, ethos, as well as improving revision and editing processes.

For the major writing projects, students were asked to draw on scholarly and/or credible popular texts in their research. However, students were not required to cite a certain number of scholarly texts in their research during the term because “Queer Writing” was conceived as, primarily, a way to bolster students’ critical thinking skills in ways that could extend beyond just their academic life but to, as stated in the syllabus, support each student’s learning to “function in the wider world as creative human beings, energized community members, awake citizens, spiritual leaders, critical employees, and/or successful entrepreneurs.” In other words, my goal for the course was not to necessarily train students who could “master” the art of writing or reading academic genres (as that was the goal for the introductory composition course sequence that they had already completed); but, rather, my goal was for students to exit the course more fluent in the literacy of relationships, able to communicate that literacy with others through writing. Additionally, this choice to not over-focus on academic texts (in both reading and composing) was based upon insights gained from rhetorical theorist Robert McRuer, in his position that queer theory is “indissolubly linked” to “collective” events, texts, ideas, activisms, and movements outside the university—and that this must be so in order for queer theory/studies to remain a relevant force (2006, p. 155). Overall, in terms of reading, my goal was for students
to adopt a sense of genuine open-mindedness (something that cannot be faked) through their encounter with the sorts of powerful texts that they were personally drawn to in their research, as well as through engaging with their classmates’ writing. Though scholarly writing was not a focus in the course, I did assign a handful of academic essays to be read as homework assignments, which we discussed as a whole class. On a handful of occasions throughout the term, too, I met individually with students during office hours to assist those who were struggling with how to interpret such challenging work (most students came to see me with questions about Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal* [1999]).

**Major Projects**

For the major projects, I encouraged students not just to think about queer, but to *do* queer: to “queer” the act of writing itself—in other words, they were encouraged to blur the boundaries by playing with form, mixing traditions/modes/genres, and generally aim for creative, unique approaches in their writing. A majority of students excitedly took me up on this offer, often incorporating bits of poetry, memorable quotations from literary works and films, graphics, or photographs within their blog posts. Ultimately, the organization structures students used were entirely up to them, and whether to include components such as thesis statements was their choice as well. As I mentioned in Chapter One, this approach to looking at writing as a more creative, loose, fluid, ambiguous, nonnormative force was inspired by writing teachers DiGrazia and Boucher (2007).

**Personal Reflective Analysis**

The first major project, to be completed during the first four weeks of class, was a “Personal Reflective Analysis.” In this blog post of 1,000–2,000 words, students weaved what

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64 To obtain copies of the assignment sheets for the course, please email me at trahan.heather@gmail.com.
they learned from an academic chapter on queer theory (Tylson, 2006) into their critical and emotional reactions to the personal memoir by Bornstein (2012), and then, using what they’d learned, reflected on two of their own life events. Students were to describe one event from the past and one that was a present or ongoing situation that, in some way, elucidated the general concept of “queer.” Students were encouraged to find commonalities between their own lives and the queer lives they had been reading about. They were encouraged to address one of two questions in their post:

• Do you have a friend or family member or classmate who seems to be or has said she/he is queer, and how might queer theory help you to imagine that relationship differently? How might queer theory help you to have a conversation with this person?

• What part(s) of you might hold a certain queerness?

• What does “queer” mean to you?

• What organizations do you belong to which you might reinterpret now as being “queer”?

• How does sexuality relate—or not relate—to queerness?

• What does love have to do with queerness?

• What does your life philosophy have to do with queerness?

Using the lens of queer theory as a framework, students attempted the important work of looking-for-commonalities, work which helped set the stage for a celebration of their own choices, questions, and moments of deviation from cultural norms. Looking for what people have in common (as opposed to what separates us) is an art of composition that had the desired effect of releasing the tension that many students felt as they entered “Queer Writing.” When they began to think in a unity consciousness as opposed to a difference consciousness, they began to stretch their minds in ways that allowed them to understand queer as not such a threatening
thing, and they began to understand how deep-seated emotional reactions play a part in how society tends to label what is normal versus what is supposedly deviant. As we worked together early in the term, and as students drafted and revised their Personal Reflective Analyses, we collectively composed a definition of queer that we posted to our Wordpress homepage. We wrote that queer “can be a verb—the act of stepping out of society’s norms” and that queer is “used to describe a nontraditional or informal (going against society’s norms) subject or person, of which or whom there is a lack of knowledge or fear.”

Even though this first major writing project marked only the beginning of our work together, I was already amazed by a number of students’ abilities to be honest and emotionally vulnerable, looking at various ways that they could empathize with queer and/or LGBT people. One student’s work stands out, in particular. She blogged about how, as a “confident” female, she was shunned and mocked by her family and friends after she “stepped out of the box” and cut her hair short in a traditionally-lesbian style, even though she was straight. She was able to draw comparisons about how her experience paralleled those who step out of the box and choose a mate of the same sex or gender. Even though she cherished her short hair and “felt like a rock star…beautiful, strong and bad ass,” she admitted in her post that she still felt, at that time, somewhat “imprisoned” by the stereotype that others put upon her as being “too manly.” She wrote of the shame she felt when friends and family made “negative comments” about her appearance. She wrote about how (presumably heterosexual) men no longer flirted with her when she went out in public spaces, after the haircut. However, despite these tensions and negative emotions, she blogged about how she ultimately gained strength and confidence through this situation, and discussed how living this experience made it easier for her to appreciate the strength and confidence it must take in order to live an openly gay/queer life. At
the conclusion of her post, she told a brief narrative about her friend who is a “homosexual and expresses himself in feminine ways”, a friend whom she stated she had more admiration for now, because she understood that her friend had “the strength and confidence to step out of the box that was assigned to him…jumping into one he created for himself.”

Making Connections

The second major project of the term, “Making Connections,” was a 2,000–3,000 word blog post asking students to reflect on the communal assessment processes completed for the first major project, which included creating a student-generated rubric as well as completing peer reviews where students gave more than just feedback/critique but also actual grades to their peers.

A unique aspect of “Queer Writing” was, indeed, its radical approach to assessment as well as the creation and implementation of course policies. Students had a major say in the grades given to each major project, as well as sole responsibility for creating the course policies that would guide how students conduct themselves during class meetings. During the first three weeks of class, students dialogued (and sometimes vigorously debated!) about what course policies they might create that would help them learn and enjoy during class sessions. They proposed and voted on issues such as attendance/absence, tardiness, cell phone use, how to address classmates and instructor, and so on. In those same initial weeks, students decided how much weight would be accorded to peer reviewers as well as to myself, the instructor. Students eventually collectively decided (through a voting process) to grant sixty percent of the “power” to grade to peer reviewers, while the final forty percent was accorded to myself. At various points throughout the term, we revisited this decision, to make sure that students were still happy

65 For each major project, a new rubric was created, with input from the whole class.
with this arrangement. Throughout the term, this weighting system remained, as students found a sense of accomplishment and even enjoyment through providing not just feedback to their colleagues but also in the act of creating numerical grades in ways that corresponded with the written feedback they provided. In other words, this communal peer review process helped students to articulate the sometimes-challenging “whys” and “hows” of assessment. Students grappled with the questions: Why is some writing more effective than others? Why do some pieces of writing get higher grades than others? How can I explain to someone how their writing could be improved? How do I explain what was excellent about a piece of writing? In this careful, sometimes admittedly slow-moving groundwork, students learned how to work together, learned about their own potentials and synergies, and learned about the work it takes to build a community. A community, they learned, is not built overnight nor is it built easily. However, once that community begins to take shape—a community where respect and dialogue is the foundation—sensitive topics are more easily explored, because the members involved have already taken the time to make decisions together. In other words, “hot” topics such as queerness and polyamory can be the focal point of classrooms aimed at social justice explorations if groundwork such as this, in building a community, can be done.

It is also important to note that the sixty percent accorded to any one writing project was never determined by a single peer reviewer, but always distributed among a group of three or four peer reviewers, all of whom used the same rubric, but worked independently (wrote feedback letters and assigned grades independently). In a class such as “Queer Writing,” a space that values diversity in relationships and sexuality, it was important to create a situation where writers would receive feedback on a project from a variety of readers: myself, as well as more than one other student. Sometimes (but not always or even often), reviewers would diverge
markedly on their assessments of various components of the writing (despite using the communally-created rubric that each student understood well, since they each had had a hand in making it), and, together, as a class, we would often discuss hypotheses for why opinions would sometimes vary so greatly. In this way, there was a strong attempt to demythologize the vague concept of “good writing.” Classmates began to understand how, even when given the exact same rubric, readers could interpret that rubric in a myriad of ways, and then provide feedback in ways that focused their attention on what that reader felt was most important. Asao B. Inoue (2010) addressed this sticky-but-interesting issue in an article about the importance of truly valuing diversity—rather than just paying lip service to it—in the writing classroom. As students in “Queer Writing” absorbed the critique of multiple readers, they began to see how writing about diversity is every bit as complicated as interpreting the diverse feedback of multiple readers as well as having to offer feedback to others in ways that are clear, honest, but also take into account the diverse ways that various writers respond to a writing prompt. As Inoue made clear, valuing diversity is not an easy task, but, as I believe many of my students came to realize, it is a worthy aim.

It is important to note, also, that there was a formal dispute process put into place, for situations where writers needed to rebut the critique/scores given to them by peer reviewers. This dispute process was utilized only once during the course, and it involved an office meeting, where the peer reviewer, student writer, and myself sat down to discuss how to proceed in a way that was fair. What we unanimously decided is that the peer reviewer would re-write his critique in a way that was less harshly worded, as well as point to more specific examples of weaknesses in the text in order to justify the score that he gave. In addition, the peer reviewer had the option
to change the score he initially gave. In the end, the reviewer did decide to raise the score by a full letter grade, to the satisfaction of the student writer.

In the second blogging assignment, “Making Connections,” students were expected not only to make connections between how they read, analyzed, critiqued, and assessed their peers’ writing, but also to make connections regarding how the type of no doubt challenging (and out of the norm!) assessment processes they were being asked to engage in might be contributing to queering the course itself. Students were prompted to respond to some of the following prompts:

- In what ways does communal assessment “queer” your notion of reader and/or audience?
- In what ways does communal assessment “queer” your notion of a writer?
- Discuss how your writing has been assessed in previous educational situations. How do these experiences relate to social hierarchies that queer theory aims to expose?
- In what ways does assessment privilege the idea of a “normal” text? How might the ideas of Michael Warner relate to writing assessment?
- What is the difference between “assessing” a piece of writing, and “judging” or “grading” it? Please define and explore these terms.
- In what ways is the writing done in this ENG 2070 classroom queer?

While, overall, I enjoyed reading students’ responses in “Making Connections,” a handful of students’ extreme honesty in comparing their previous experiences with having their writing graded by only the teacher to their current situation in being given the responsibility to help decide grades struck me as incredibly fascinating. It was like being given a behind-the-scenes look at what my own educational experience had taught me: That traditional peer reviews (where students meet during class and give constructive criticism to each other’s in-progress drafts) are often seen by students as a waste of time, simply because students intuit that the teacher’s
opinion is the only one that “counts,” because the teacher has the sole power to determine the grade. In the following excerpt, one student compares, in a very blunt and open way, the communal assessment processes in “Queer Writing” to her experiences giving feedback in previous writing classes.

Every experience I have had with assessing writing, previous to this class, has been unpleasant, to say the least. Generally, I had considered peer review to be a joke … Peer reviews for classes were never taken seriously; no one ever wanted to actually give critiques of someone else’s writing if we weren’t going to be graded for it. I never got any decent feedback, and never really gave it either, mostly because I wasn’t sure how. I have been writing for a long time, and not just simply papers for school—I often write poetry, and I’ve written a novella or two, along with a couple scripts for plays or movies. I consider myself a decent writer, and, like most people, am generally protective of my work and the criticism it receives . . . Once I came into this class, everything changed. When I first heard that my grade would be based mostly off of what my peers thought, I was terrified, and a little angry. How could a fellow student tell me what my grade was going to be? How could they possibly know what is and is not good writing, when they have no more experience than I do? And how am I supposed to grade someone else’s writing? I didn’t know how to grade something, and I didn’t want someone else’s grade to be based on what I thought, just as I didn’t want mine to be based on what someone else thought.

However, [communal assessment] changes everything. The idea of being a “reader” gains a completely different meaning. No longer am I simply a reader, or just skimming through a student’s paper for class, I am now something more. I am assessing
what I am reading, engaging in it, and delivering feedback to the writer. This is very
different than just writing to get a good grade from my teacher. This is writing that will
be interacted and engaged with. It causes the reader to think and reflect on it, even after
they have walked away from it. It causes one to go deeper into the writing, to really look
at what someone has said, rather than just skim the surface. It becomes memorable. The
reader has to really look at what they have read and decide how they feel about it, and
how they want to communicate those feelings back to the writer. Often, we read things
without really interacting with them. We do not get to engage in critique or feedback with
the writer; we are simply an audience, and this is fine for most texts and for our daily
lives. But when we do assessments, we are more than an audience. We are real people,
and it becomes so much more about perspective. We are learning and teaching
simultaneously. We are learning how to see things from a perspective that is not our own,
and we are teaching others how their writing is viewed from someone else’s perspective.
This creates better writers as well as better readers. Assessing or evaluating someone
else’s work is not just for their benefit; it’s for ours as well. We learn as much from
assessing as those who are being assessed. In this way, evaluating writing makes it much
different than just being a reader and tossing some simple grammar fixing comments
their way. We are part of a process of learning and teaching, and engaging with what we
read.

While some students, such as the one excerpted above, provided in-depth analysis of how
communal assessment changes the standards by which students engage with peers’ work, other
students chose to focus on how their added responsibility to give feedback that “mattered” to
others students was a reflection of a course that was, truly, queer. Students wrote about how the
nonnormative oddity of our assessment methods paralleled the nonnormative oddity of relationship styles and practices that they were unfamiliar with. One student wrote about how she thought she understood the meaning of writing and the meaning of gay sexuality but that, now, in the course, she felt like she was “re-learning” and that at “this stage of my understanding I am molding myself to be open minded, open minded to my ‘Truth’ of the word queer being false.” Overall, students’ analytical, critical reasoning stretched as they explored the intersections between queer theory, power in the classroom, hierarchies in society, and also various questions about what it means to write, to read, and to assess.

Collaborative Exploration and Presentation

In the third major project, the “Collaborative Exploration and Presentation,” students broadened their initial understandings of queer by working together in groups of three or four to research and finally teach the whole class about a queer cultures topic of their choosing. Students were required to draw upon at least six credible sources, whether in the popular media or academic scholarship, or a mix of both. A caveat was that sources had to appear intelligently written and researched, written by leading thinkers—such as activists, professors, politicians, community leaders—who appeared to be truly qualified to discuss the topic. According to the assignment sheet, the goal was to spend a few weeks to “discover, explore, analyze, critique, enjoy, ponder, organize, and present information about your chosen topic.” Student groups were given a list of queer cultures to choose from; some of these options were: bisexual queers, pansexual queers, transgender and/or transsexual queers, gender-bending queers, kinky/BDSM queers, queer art, queer hangouts, queer activism, and queer cultures online. In multimodal presentations of about ten minutes, student work ranged from creatively leading the class in
discussions, drawings, and other artful learning activities as well as utilizing the more traditional Powerpoint slides or showing short Youtube clips.

This major project was not only oral–visual, but there was also a writing component, as well. Students groups collaboratively composed a 250–500 word reflection, which they distributed to classmates on the day of their presentation. This was a document that explained the intellectual processes that the group underwent in arriving at the final presentation, as well as discussing one or two sources that were the most enlightening for the group’s understanding of the topic. In this reflection, too, students were asked to evaluate the quality of the sources that they used, working together to define what “credible” means. During communal assessments, peer reviewers provided feedback and scores for all aspects of the presentation as a whole.

Students voted to invite guests to the presentations, so I (and a few other students) publicized the event using our various social media networks. In the end, a doctoral student in Education/Higher Administration who was working on a dissertation about polyamory as well as a former undergraduate in Fine Arts attended. These guests took part in the various Q & A segments, and I noticed the doctoral student taking vigorous notes during a number of the presentations. In a majority of the student evaluations after the project was concluded (after each major project, I asked students to anonymously reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the assignment), students commented on how they enjoyed having outsiders come and interact with the class. Having guests amplified the excitement as well as the seriousness with which students delivered their findings. In other words, having guests included seemed to make the projects “matter” more. Students also praised how the project allowed them to be particularly creative as the list of subject topics they were given to choose from was quite broad—and, in addition, they were free to explore their chosen topic in only the ways they truly desired. (The assignment did
not mandate that students “had” to cover any certain aspect about their topic.) A few students, however, provided the critique that this assignment, despite the writing component, did not seem to make much sense within the context of a writing course. Upon enrolling, students—particularly the creative writing students—wanted to maximize their learning of how to write, and so this project did not seem as conducive to that end. However, this negative sentiment was not the majority, as many students wrote about how the chance to collaborate in small groups as well as teach their larger cohort was bonding for the class community. It helped continue the tone of openness, collaboration, and vulnerability that was set at the start of the term. As one student wrote, “While some people dread group projects, I felt it was beneficial to have one in this course. I enjoyed that we were able to collaborate with each other on our ideas according to the topics. I also enjoyed being able to share information with the entire class outside of our writing assignments.” All in all, this project met my goal of offering students concrete examples of ways of socially being that defy the oppressive structures of heteronormativity. Learning about alternatives—such as bi cultures or kink cultures or trans cultures—provided the students a wider view of the options available. This presentation project provided a good segue, as it provided a broad cornucopia of particular paths of queerness, setting the stage for more deep, sustained analysis of one particular path of nonnormativity: polyamory.

*Exploring Polyamory and Queerness*

After the first ten weeks of the course (in a sixteen week term), students had undergone enough basic groundwork in inquisitively engaging with queer/nonnormative ways of being that they were ready to explore, in depth, the sensitive issue of polyamory. Drawing on the knowledge they had gained from the three previous units—using the notion of queer to shed light upon aspects of their personal lives, thinking about how a queer classroom might function, and
surveying various aspects of diverse queer cultures—students were able to think about how queer and poly might interrelate. In this research project, “Exploring Polyamory and Queerness,” students composed and posted a series of three blog posts, each being 1,000–1,500 words in length, where they found and analyzed sources that built upon their knowledge of poly philosophy and culture from *The Ethical Slut* (Easton & Hardy, 2009), as well as from documentaries and the aforementioned polyamorous guest speakers. As this was the most formal of the five major projects for the course, students were required to use thesis statements, as well as carefully cite sources in MLA or APA format. Yet, at the same time, they were still encouraged to queer their notion of source “texts”: students used popular websites, podcasts, videos, graphic images, interviews, speeches, poetry, and other communicative forms to demonstrate various insights they had about the coalition, or not, of poly and queer.

In the first post, students gathered, organized, and shaped evidence to support the claim that polyamory can be rightly considered a queer culture, practice, or identity. In the next post of the series, writers defended the thesis that polyamory is not a queer culture, practice, or identity. The purpose of asking students to present two different viewpoints was in the service of asking students to think critically about a question that is very much at the heart of both academic and popular debates, as well as my own dissertation work: Should poly be considered queer? There is much evidence on each side. I was genuinely curious to see how students would present both cases. It must be noted, though, that if I were to have the pleasure of teaching this course again, I would allow students more leeway in their creation of two different thesis statements—I would simply guide students to explore two different aspects of how queer and poly might (or might not) relate. Asking students to take up both sides of a binary debate was, I admit, somewhat limiting, and students were quick to point out this limitation on final course evaluations.
However, working within the limitations that they did have, students still created a pleasing array of work that queered traditional notions of what an “argument” can be. For example, one student creatively fashioned the first two interlinked blog posts by drawing on a collection of the recent work of Meg Barker—arguably the foremost expert on polyamory in academe today—as a theoretical backbone, and then used a practical discussion of the documentaries we watched during class as well as the insights from the guest speakers as “real life evidence” of how polyamory actually looks and behaves in day to day life. By balancing the abstract/theoretical with real folks’ everyday existences, the effect was a piece that had both brain and heart (not to mention received a nearly perfect score from peer reviewers!).

In the third post of the series, students were asked to compose a meta-reflection that discussed the process of gathering research for and crafting two sides of a debate. They were asked to answer some of the following questions:

- What did I learn about myself through the process of making this project?
- What did I learn about myself in relationship to a community outside of the university through composing this project?
- What was the most rewarding aspect of composing this three-part project, and why?
- What was the most challenging aspect of composing this three-part project, and why?

Looking back, two things surprised me most about the outcome of this assignment. First, a number of students discovered scholarly sources that I had not yet found, despite over a year of careful searching on my part. In this way, I am forever intellectually indebted to these students. I am grateful. I made sure to publicly congratulate these students, during class meetings, especially as we workshopped their drafts together as a whole class. Secondly, what I ended up enjoying reading most was not the first two posts, but the third in the series. Students seemed to blossom
because of the freedom that this portion of the project lent. Many reflected on how this project changed them, or opened their eyes to vastly different ways of approaching love. Many connected their work on the project as being connected to what we discussed on the first day of the term, Brené Brown’s (2012) insight that courage, not weakness, is inherent within being intentionally vulnerable. Other students discussed how they viewed the concept/emotion of jealousy differently, and how polyamory taught them that how to enact romantic love is not, in actuality, such a closed case: there are indeed many ways to have loving relationships. One student even utilized this post to provide the suggestion that I organize a series of postcourse (voluntary) workshops for students who are interested in learning more about polyamory—a workshop for those who might want to become polyamorous, and/or for those who might be interested in community activism.66

All in all, I was pleased with how students approached the assignment. I learned a great deal simply from how they variously defined the term “queer” (always open for interpretation!) in their posts, as well as how they analyzed present and past poly cultures in relation to other forms of nonnormative and nontraditional living. Some students, such as the one quoted in the epigraph at the start of this chapter, even made predictions about the future. Many insisted that queer theory and queer culture opened up, through language, a path where more was permitted—and this, they felt, was a good thing, a step in the right direction. Many discussed how embracing queerness actively creates a kind of world with room for more love, more compassion. Many wrote of the rigidness, harshness, and cruelty of mainstream society, of norms. Many wrote of their own frustration with trying to “fit in,” and, inevitably and often, failing to do so. Most

66 I did organize such a workshop, though I did modify my student’s idea a bit and open it up to not only class members but also those in the nearby community. It took place a few months after the course concluded. While no “Queer Writing” students were able to attend, the workshop did draw six people who varied from already “out” poly people interested in activism to those who self-defined themselves as “poly-curious.”
students saw polyamory as not something they themselves seemed ready to adopt or explore for their own lives (although a handful did); rather, they viewed polyamory as an interesting gateway for their own thinking about how there are many ways to be queer, there are many ways to live courageously and against the grain. Across projects, students offered sentiments similar to David Halperin’s (1995) understanding of how queerness has radical potential to change societies, how queerness can “open a social space for the construction of different identities, for the elaboration of various types of relationships, for the development of new cultural forms” (pp. 66–67). Students seemed to understand that being queer and being poly both dealt with the future, with the new. In that way, it was dangerous. In that way, it was not understood. But in those ways, it was significant.

*Relationship Literacy Analysis*

Just as the semester began with a project focused on the personal, so too did our journey together end with just such a focus. In the final project of the course, the “Relationship Literacy Analysis,” students wrote a three to five page essay where they used the concept of relationship literacy to analyze how, in the past and present, they understood relationships as well as how they formed and maintained relationships. On the assignment sheet, I defined terms, and provided starting questions.

Literacy is a term that describes how people can actively, creatively, and fluently utilize language in order to make life more live-able, more productive, and more joyful. There is not one literacy, but many literacies—there are many ways to use language for different productive purposes. In your essay, please analyze your relationships through the lens of the term “relationship literacy”: In what ways have you creatively used or invented language to describe your relationships to and with others? In what ways have you used
language to be able to enter or “fit into” a certain community? (For example, some of our poly guest speakers use different terms to describe their relationships, such as “metamour” or “primary relationship”…are there words or terms that you use to describe your unique relationships? Who invented these terms? When and how do you use these terms?) In what ways have you made active decisions—rather than passively defaulting to norms—about how your relationships are, look, behave?

In asking for the genre of the essay, which was emailed to me privately as a Word document and not required to be posted to the blog (although students could post and circulate their essays if they chose), I was, in essence, asking for students to be more open and more vulnerable than ever before. By not having the potential for a wide audience to be present, such as with the other projects, my intent was to create as much of a space of safety as possible: It was just going to be me, Heather, the single and interested reader—a person whom I’d hoped my students, at that point in the term, interpreted as loving and nonjudgmental. As I made clear to our “Queer Writing” community, the intent of creating this final writing project was for writers to demonstrate and synthesize the overall learning that they achieved throughout the term.

Additionally, it was also a final chance for students to dig deep within themselves, asking about the relationships they prioritize(d) and compose(d), and how those relationships—whether it be romantic or otherwise—fit into larger cultures or communities, whether mainstream or not. I offered intimate, perhaps challenging questions for students to answer such, “How important is sexual expression in your life? Do you hide certain relationships from others? How do policies and traditions of local or national governments, religious institutions, or schools influence special relationships in your life?” What I wanted was blatant honesty. What I wanted was a level of soul searching that perhaps might feel “risky” only in terms of what the self (the writer) might
discover about the self (and, thus, perhaps have to transform or evolve in some way)—but not risky in an external way, for the only reader would be myself. Indeed, this last assignment was not assessed in the typical peer review fashion and it was graded on a Pass/Fail basis. If a student failed to meet the expectations for the assignment, she/he would be responsible to work with me on revisions, until the point the assignment met the minimum standards. Here is an excerpt from the assignment sheet, where I discussed assessment criteria and expectations:

This assignment will not be graded in the typical way (it certainly will be read and enjoyed, however!), as it is meant to bring together all you have learned in the term—unhampered by potential worry about a grade. In other words, this essay is a low-pressure way to truly explore and truly celebrate all you have learned this term: by gazing at yourself and applying what you have learned about writing, relationships, queerness, communities, and identities to your own life story. The audience for this piece of writing will be yourself (the writer), and your teacher (Heather); it will not be posted to your blog. The feedback you receive will not come in the form of a rubric assessment, but rather as a personal letter from Heather, focused not so much on the nuts and bolts of the writing itself (grammar, organization, style, etc.) but more on the ideas and insights you presented. In other words, Heather will only be looking for and responding to the content and quality of your ideas. In her feedback letter, she will respond honestly, compassionately, and curiously. She is looking to see what you learned this term.

Because I made a commitment to students to keep their privacy intact for this final project, I am not at liberty to share quotes or even summaries or paraphrases. However, I can state that all students passed the essay on the first try, and, three students even received extra credit for
creating analyses that, I felt, went above and beyond what I had required, in terms of length, emotional vulnerability, creativity, format, and/or depth of analysis.

Implications and Future Research—What’s Next?

Students who understand relationship literacies—ways of understanding the cultures of connected people and the many choices therein—will continue their education, both in and out of the classroom, with a sense of power. I am not talking about power in the way the academy has so often critiqued. Instead, I’m talking about power in the sense of power as a vital force for tearing down hierarchies, inspiring connection, allowing creativity, and solving the problems of our world today. Power to lead. Power to learn. Power to change. Power to, through being open to others, embrace and listen and learn. As the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Tich Nhat Hanh (2007) wrote, in *The Art of Power*:

> When you look deeply, you see the pain and suffering in the world, and recognize your deep desire to relieve it. You also recognize that bringing joy to others is the greatest joy you can have, the greatest achievement. In choosing to cultivate true power, you do not have to give up your desire for the good life. Your life can be more satisfying, and you will be happy and relaxed, relieving suffering and bringing happiness to everyone. (p. 5)

In this way, we can start to think about power as not something to run from, but rather as a resource for good. And, just like polyamory teaches, resources like love and power are not scarce—they are abundant. It is up to each of us how and when we want to tap into these existing external resources, while simultaneously contributing our own internal flows of love and power—and, thus, multiplying these powers beyond even what the imagination could predict.

It is unfortunately true that, currently, there is a tremendous amount of suffering happening at a global level. Human beings happily stumble upon beautiful and inspiring
romantic, spiritual, emotional, mental, practical, and other connections, yet they often choose not to pursue and explore them, because there are limited models for the “right” way to do relationships. People are afraid of the social consequences of disobeying tradition. This is suffering. Speaking for myself, there were many years that I denied my love for others, and this brought about a sense of longing, a sense of sadness, a sense of regret, a sense of bitterness. I began to chant questions in my brain: What could have been? What am I missing? Who is to blame? Why do I feel so isolated? Why must I hide this love for her? Why must I hide this love for him? Why must I hide this love for them? Why is the love I feel “wrong”? This project as a whole seeks to offer polyamory as a beginning to the answering of these questions—but certainly not an ending.

Considering polyamory in the ways I have described in this project—as an outgrowth of queer theory and as a way to frame a queer sexualities course—I admit that I desire for my readers to depart not necessarily “converted” to polyamory, but as more open to a mental-emotional state where the concept of many loves is valued. In this state of mind, there is not only tolerance for others’ relational and sexual choices, but there is also compersion. My readers, after weighing the pros and cons of polyamory, may still choose dyadic monogamy. Awesome! If it works for them, then that’s great. My hope is this: that readers will come away from this project and meet the different choices and different lifestyles of colleagues, neighbors, friends, family members and fellow earthlings with the greeting of a smile, of warmth, of true joy. Compersion means no judgment, no fear, and no resistance (given that the relationships are consensual, of course). This is the nature of compersion: I am happy because you are happy, even if those specific choices are not mine.
In our profession of rhetoric and composition, the notion of compersion can be useful, both on theoretical and pedagogical levels. The notion of taking joy in someone else’s joy is a compassionate, powerful, revolutionary act. In theory, we might expand upon compersion as a lens through which we might understand queer ways of knowing and being. How might queerness have something to teach us about a kind of live-and-let-live philosophy? How might we see queerness as being an energy of unconditional love? Indeed, there is not one “right” way to be queer—there are many ways, and the goal is not judgment, but rather a seeking and a striving to understand, to connect, and also to help our fellow human beings, as well as all the other inhabitants of this interconnected planet. Through compersion, we seek to understand, assist, and celebrate what is most good and most joyful for others. Queer theory within rhetoric and composition will be a fruitful place for shedding light on ongoing professional issues; for example, how to peaceably and productively work and collaborate with colleagues? If we think in terms of compersion, notions of competition can radically change, and what we are left with are questions about how to share our voices in ways that benefit all. If we think of compersion, problems such as depressing working conditions for adjunct faculty can be seen in a new light. We might ask new questions that deal with compassion and collective action; we might seek out solutions (faster) so that we no longer must feel (or ignore) the pain of our colleagues; we might strive to create conditions where their working situations create joy, create love—energies we all can feel, and can be utilized for the continued evolution of our profession.

In our pedagogy, teachers may harness the concepts of compersion and polyamory in order to ask students to compose works which aims to connect, rather than divide. Asking learners (as I did with my students in the “Personal Reflective Analysis”) to find commonalities is not a trite or empty task. Nay, the act of finding what we share, what we hold in common, is
revolutionary in a national educational system that continues to stamp hierarchical grades on students, dividing and categorizing them. In not just universities but also in schools across levels, the powers of polyamory and compersion cannot be underestimated as forces which—once learned about—blow apart notions of how people are “supposed” to act in this world. Not only this, but questions about what is possible and what is impossible arise. When learners understand that, yes, some poly people can transcend their jealousy and take delight in the delight of a partner interacting with another person, this often is a moment of supreme cognitive dissonance. I have witnessed this moment in many of my students, as well as in my daily life. People sigh, shake their heads from side to side, raise their eyebrows, purse their lips. Jealousy overcome? Really?? Jealousy might not have to control my actions? For many, this is one of the most powerful learning moments a person can have...for when jealousy is unveiled as not the supreme force many think it is, then so much more is possible. In rhetoric and composition courses, questions and concepts that interrogate static, outmoded ways of loving can be weaved into any course that aims to guide students toward understanding rhetoric as an ultimately compassionate (thus, revolutionary!) act. Rhetoric is the intentional unloosening of fear, of jealousy, of hate, of hierarchy, of competition. Rhetoric—this new rhetoric—ushers in a new Earth.

Connections and Voices

When I look back in time, what stands out for me, curiously, is actually not the content of what our “Queer Writing” community discussed verbally or on the page. What stands out for me is the level of connection I had with this particular group of students. Granted, this level of connection could be heavily influenced by the fact that, for the very first time in my academic teaching career, I had been given carte blanche to teach wholly according to my intellectual passions and activist pursuits. Yet, however, I don’t think that curricular freedom alone can
explain what I felt. I think the connection I—and many of the students—felt was due to the careful groundwork that we, brick by brick, put into place in the first weeks of the term. Collaboratively deciding on course policies, collaboratively creating an assessment plan as well as rubrics for each project, in addition to what some might cynically call “sappy” conversations about emotions/feelings/states such as love, compassion, and vulnerability set the stage for the level of engagement I felt in my students, especially toward mid-semester and the end of the term.

Moments stand out in my mind. After guest speakers Lyn and Julian, a husband/wife poly couple, left the classroom after an intensely animated discussion, one of my students walked with me to my office, telling me that her “mind was blown” because she had finally “put herself in my shoes” and felt what I must have felt. She said she empathized with me; she said she realized that by my consistently having my poly identity be offered up for discussion and critique, such as during the guest speaker session that day, I must have been feeling extremely vulnerable, extremely emotionally naked. She said, compassionately and with a bit of awe: “What a strange position you have put yourself in, Heather.” I thanked her. She was right. It was strange. Or, on the last day of class, one of my most conservative students approaching me and asking to borrow one of the documentaries we had watched about polyamory. She said, “I don’t want to be poly, but I think what that triad built was so beautiful to watch. They really love each other. I can’t be against love!” Or, during an Open Seminar, one of my more timid female students saying that she was feeling like the rug had just been pulled out from under her; for her whole life, she felt she’d had “control” over her relationships. But now, hearing the discussions about cultural oppression and hierarchy, she realized that she had been told that things were impossible that weren’t really so impossible. Putting her face in her hand, she sighed, “Why did they lie to us?”
Or, around mid-semester, when one of my more boisterous male students stayed after class to confide that he had a repulsion against polyamory because, in high school, the “love of his life” had cheated on him. He just couldn’t get past it, he said. We stayed in that classroom, talking, for about an hour. At one point, this very typically-masculine man broke down, tears in his eyes. I told him that I too had been cheated on in the past. We talked a long while about what we had in common, and what we had both experienced.

A fitting way to end this chapter, and this entire dissertation is not with my own voice or the voices even of the queer and poly scholars and teachers who have mentored me, but with the voices of my students, drawn from their end-of-the-semester evaluations. In these voices is the best case I can make for going on a limb and teaching the risky but rewarding domain of queer theory and polyamory. Truly, these voices are the souls that have most shaped me, who have given me the moments and the courage to do what I do—which is continue to write, think, learn, express, and advocate for a more expansive understanding of the power of love in this world. I humbly thank these students.

This course has changed my perspective on the idea that not everyone views things in the same ways that I do, obviously! I am speaking more so in terms of relational status, I never thought that something like polyamory existed and that it had this many followers and above all it has been new to me. I do enjoy learning new things, and this class in its entirety has been very fresh and exciting. From the beginning when we spoke about honesty and vulnerability to bondage and now Polyamory and can surely admit that I have been on a roller coaster ride on new adventures! My perspective on my own tolerance and acceptance has changed slightly; before this class I was not very open
minded to opposing views and standpoints, but now I find myself more open to seeing the other side of the grass.

Sometimes, before you actually know people who identify a certain way, some things can seem like they’re only on TV or in articles, and not actually real. However, once you meet people, you realize that this is a real identity or practice, and your perspective changes, because it becomes so much more relevant to you. Through this course, I met multiple people who had experiences that I felt distanced from, but now feel much closer to. I feel like this happens often in my life, and it definitely happened to me in this course.

Since I hardly knew anything about queerness and queer theory, this class has completely expanded my knowledge on the subject. Even though my view towards queers didn’t really change, I can now give reasons to justify my claims and feel more comfortable when talking about it in a group when it’s brought up instead of, “Gay? Straight? whatever I’m cool with it.”

While I feel that I was understanding and open to alternative ways of living or loving before, I feel that this course has given me more information with which to make sense of and form my own feelings about. My feelings now are different than those feelings I may have felt before because I am more educated, refining the lens that I see the world through.
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APPENDIX A

Syllabus
“Queer Writing:” Communities, Identities, Texts
English 2070: Intermediate Writing
Spring 2013
East Hall #115; Meeting Time: Tuesdays & Thursdays 11:30am-12:45pm
Section # 1001; Class #13096

| Instructor: | Mrs. Heather Anne Trahan |
| Email: | htrahan@bgsu.edu; please allow 24 hours for email responses |
| Office: | 339B East Hall |
| Cell Phone: | 586.354.1919 (feel free to reach me via text, also; please allow 24 hours for me to respond to your text) |
| Office Hours: | Thursdays 2-4pm  (and also by special appointment) |
| Mailbox: | 210 East Hall (my mailbox is above my name) |
| Writing Center: | Learning Commons in Jerome Library (This is an excellent destination for all writers! I used to work there, so please let me know if you have questions about this resource.) |
| Writing Center Phone: | 419.372.2823 |
| Writing Center Website: | http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/learningcommons/ |
| BGSU Technology Support Center | 110 Hayes Hall; 419.372.0999 |

“Queer is a term that offers to us…a way of knowing, rather than something to be known.”
---Karen Kopelson

Course Goals:
ENG 2070 Intermediate Writing (3 credits)(Prerequisite: GSW 1120):

Overview:
We will work on developing mastery of the rhetorical processes of planning, executing and revising prose. Emphasis will be on strengthening analytical writing; emphasis will also be placed on the use and expression of creativity. A central part of this course will be working with your peers in collaboratively composing rubrics specific to each major writing project, and you will gain experience in assessing your own writing as well as the writing of your peers. As this course aims to expand your ability to critically use, analyze, assess, and interrogate language, it will be quite a valuable experience, preparing you for future writing you will encounter in a wide variety of professions.

Intellectual Engagement & Openness:
This course will require intense intellectual engagement. You will be asked to read, analyze, and respond to a mix of academic and popular writing regarding our culture’s views, opinions, and debates about sex/sexuality. In addition, you will be asked to reflect
on and also critique your own values and assumptions regarding sex/sexuality, ultimately presenting those reflections and critiques in writing to an audience of your peers, focusing on the genre of the blog post, which is a popular mode of communication in today’s world. We will review examples of effective, intellectually-rich blog posts, and discuss strategies for developing style, organization, graphic design, ethos, revision, editing, and proofreading.

In many ways, this is a class about thinking as much as it is about writing. In fact, I’d argue that doing “good writing” relies heavily on the writer being open to new ideas—often ideas that are initially foreign, strange, or even threatening. Furthermore, doing good writing is not just about communicating with others (reading others’ writing and offering our own writing to others), but it is also about using the dynamic activity of writing itself as a method of learning and discovery—and, learning and discovery is all about engaging with new ideas.

Questions and Explorations:

This course will help you think more deeply about what it means to be queer: to think queerly, to write queerly, to behave queerly, to create queerly, to relate queerly, and to use queer theory in order to analyze queer texts, experiences, activism, literature, creative writing, media, identities, cultures, language, events, terminology, and so on.

This class will be a collaborative space where we can collaboratively investigate questions such as:

- What does “queer” mean?
- What does it mean to be sexual?
- What does the term “sexual orientation” mean?
- What is a relationship?
- What is love?
- What are the assumptions our U.S. culture has about family relationships, work relationships, romantic relationships, sexual relationships, and other relationships?
- What does the term “relationship orientation” mean?
- What does queerness and queer cultures have to do with heteronormativity and mononormativity?
- What appears to be the ideal relationship orientation(s) and sexual orientation(s) in our county/culture?
- What are the practices and values of marriage and parenting in our country today?
- What are transnational practices and values regarding norms of sexuality?
- What is the status of the nuclear family?
- What other groups might qualify or self-identify as “queer”?

This class will seek to, together, discuss the above questions. There will be no right or wrong answers, only respectful and reflective attempts to carefully define terms as well as voice agreement, confusion, questions, and divergence. I do not have ready-made answers for any of the above questions and, thus, I welcome the learning that you all will surely spark within me.
Note about Agreement:
The point of the course is not for you to agree with any of the material, views, opinions, and ideas that are organized and offered by Heather Trahan or other writers or other thinkers we encounter throughout the term, but rather to explore them as possibilities. In other words, you are under no obligation to be persuaded. However, in order to successfully complete this course, you will need to adopt a stance of genuine openness (something that cannot be faked), which will be reflected in the writing assignments you complete, both minor and major, as well as in the verbal dialogue you engage in with your classmates.

Beyond the Academic:
A final important point is that this course is shaped with the knowledge that very few (if any) of you will go on to graduate school; furthermore, most of you will not choose a lifelong academic career. I agree with writing teacher Peter Elbow, when, in his article “Reflections on Academic Discourse,” he states: “life is long and college is short” (136). In other words, I understand that my goal here is not to train highly specialized academic scholars—rather, my job in 2070 is to help each of you function in the wider world as creative human beings, energized community members, awake citizens, spiritual leaders, critical employees, and/or successful entrepreneurs. Therefore, we will not be focusing on only reading and analyzing academic texts. This course is much more broad, and, much more useful than that. English 2070 will help you become a more critical, empathetic thinker. Learning here will help you find, form, and transform community/communities—indeed, the central aim of this classroom is assisting you in becoming ethical, active citizens both inside and outside of university walls.

The “Inside Scoop”: Some of Your Teacher’s Teaching Philosophies
Your teachers in other classes will have different philosophies about how to act in the classroom or what classrooms are for or what should happen in a classroom. All teachers are different in what they expect and believe. Of course! Teachers are unique in their training and ethics. But since it can be confusing (and perhaps frustrating for you) to try to “figure out” what kind of a teacher I am, I thought it might be helpful for me to be up-front about some of my personal beliefs regarding knowledge, silence, and speech practices within the classroom space.

Sometimes I might say “I don’t know” or “I don’t know, let me get back to you” or “I don’t know, let me think about that.” Sometimes, you might say “I don’t know.” Sometimes, when I ask you a question, you will only be able to respond to part of the matter. Or, maybe it will take you weeks to come to an answer. (Or maybe you won’t understand until years later, long after this course has passed.) These are actually symptoms of a healthy learning environment.

Wisdom means acknowledging that we cannot know all things at all times.

Sometimes, also, I won’t immediately know the answer to one of your questions. Or, sometimes, you won’t have a quick response to what I ask you. Therefore, embrace the silence. Silence is awesome; it is a space for gathering ideas and collectively considering the complexity of a situation. Because issues and questions in writing classes are never simply right vs. wrong/true vs. false, let’s not fear silence in the classroom, but rather recognize it as
beneficial for learning. Silence does not mean you or we are incompetent or failing (unless, of course, silence is a result of not completing the assigned work—but that’s a whole other matter!). Often, silence simply means we are being honest enough not to speak yet.

I’d rather hear a genuine response after a long silence, rather than ten people who don’t know pretending to know.

At the same time, however, please be brave. If you have a tendency to be shy, please try to break that routine—and speak out. We want to hear your ideas. Also important in this class is the act of asking. Asking a question is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of wisdom. Remember to regard your classmates as community—instead of competition (That old capitalist model won’t work here!) No question is dumb and no question is a waste of time. Even if I don’t know the answer to your question, one of your classmates might. Also, it’s a good thing to remember that every time a student asks a question, it’s a likely bet that ten other students are breathing a sigh of relief—because they had that very same question burning in their brains, but were too shy to ask! In conclusion, each time you ask a question, there is a benefit to more than just yourself.

Above all else, what I, as your teacher, care most about (I care about this even more than writing!) is respect. My classroom will be a safe, respectful place. I will not tolerate any sort of hate language—to be specific, I will not tolerate any violent and/or hateful language that is sexist, racist, classist, ageist, or demeaning toward LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) people. If you use hate language aloud or on the page, you will probably be asked to leave the class. (I usually give second chances, though; it depends on the severity of the particular situation.) If anyone has questions about this, or would simply like to talk more about this subject, please remember my office door is always open to you.

Major Writing Projects:

You will be completing five major projects for this course:

**Major Project #1: Personal Reflective Analysis:** In this carefully-crafted blog post of 1,000–2,000 words, you will engage with the queer theory readings your have completed, reflecting on an event from your past which, in some way, elucidates the concept of “queer.”

**Major Project #2: Making Connections:** In this carefully-crafted blog post of 2,000–3,000 words, you will reflect on the assessment you recently completed of your peers’ Major Project #1, making connections between how you read, analyzed, critiqued, and assessed their writing. Additionally, you will offer some suggestions for how this type of communal assessment might “queer” a writing course.

**Major Project #3: Collaborative Exploration and Presentation:** Working in small groups, you will collaboratively research and present to the whole class information about a queer culture of your choosing. For this 10-15 minute presentation, your group must utilize at least 15 credible sources in your research. In addition to the oral-visual presentation, each group will
collaboratively compose a 500-word reflection, explaining the intellectual processes the group underwent in arriving at the final presentation.

**Major Project #4: Exploring Polyamory and Queerness:** In this project, you will use what you’ve learned so far about queer theory and queer cultures as a lens in order to consider a way of being that is slowly increasing in popularity across our country and many parts of the world: polyamory. You will compose three related blog posts, each of approximately 1,000-1,500 words in length. In your first post, gather evidence that supports the claim that polyamory should be considered a “queer” culture and/or identity. In the second blog post in this series, gather evidence and then defend the thesis that polyamory should not be considered a “queer” culture and/or identity. Finally, compose and publish a meta-post that reflects upon the process of gathering research and crafting both sides of a debate.

**Major Project #5: Relationship Literacy Analysis:** In this final project, you will compose a 5-7 page essay where you analyze your relationships through the lens of the term “literacy.” You will consider questions such as: In what ways have you creatively used or invented language to describe your relationships to and with others? In what ways have you used language to be able to enter or “fit into” a certain community? In what ways have you made active decisions—rather than passively defaulting to norms—about how your relationships are, look, behave?

**Texts to Purchase:**

*Please note: I own a variety of books about sexuality, queer theory/issues, and polyamory. If you are interested in borrowing any of these sources, please meet with me during office hours (or set up a special appointment), and we will talk.*

**Online Reference Guide:**
- For all questions and concerns about grammar and how to properly use APA format, please refer to Purdue’s online writing lab site: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/

**Other Materials You Will Need:**
Also, please bear in mind that active participation in this course will mean printing various articles and bringing them to class, so please be prepared for that future cost. (On occasion, I will provide copies for you.) In addition, please:

- Purchase a spiral notebook (this will be your “journal”). Bring this to every class for in-class writing. This writing will be a required part of the course but it will not be formally graded.
- Be sure you have a reliable means of saving your work, such as a flash drive or a dropbox.com account; please do not save your work to the computer lab computers.
When you get emails from me or your classmates, they will come via our class Canvas site. (We will only use Canvas in order to utilize its email and announcement functions. For all other online communications and materials, see our WordPress homepage.)

There will be two blogs that you will use and refer to continually throughout the course: Your personal Wordpress blog that you will create and update, and also our course WordPress homepage, located at http://queerwriting.wordpress.com.

Make it a habit to often refer to our course WordPress homepage. Here you will access the syllabus, announcements (announcements will always be posted to Canvas, as well), handouts, class notes, assignment instructions, links, our class blogroll, and other important documents and information.

Make it a habit to check announcements before each class meeting. If I ever need to cancel class due to illness, a snow day, or some other emergency, you will be notified via email and also through our course Canvas announcements. Please make sure that you have your class Canvas account set up so that emails, announcements, and all Canvas updates get sent directly to your falcon email account.

Communally-Decided Classroom Policies

#1) Must be respectful of others during class discussions. Also be respectful of how you are relaying information (example: raising hands or shouting out). Be attentive to the room (example: face the room). Heather circulated around room in ways that draw attention to the center of the room. (“Respectful” means: keeping an open mind; being willing to be empathetic; treating others how you want to be treated.)

#2) Students can miss 4 classes (no differentiation between excused or unexcused). If student misses a fifth class, Heather will notify student to meet for a conference where we will discuss reasons for being absent and where to go from there. If student is within 6% of the next grade at the end of the term and the student has missed 4 or less classes, then that student’s grade gets bumped up to the next grade. (Note: this starts from Day One of term.) Departing early and arriving late will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

#3) Cell phone usage, social media, and computer usage (unless directed by Heather) should be kept to a minimum; there should be absolutely no texting, social networking, or computer usage that is not related to the course while someone is speaking.

Writing Happens in a Writing Class!

This course will be writing-intensive. We will be doing writing during every class meeting. We will be doing a mix of old-fashioned handwriting (in your journal), and also typing on computers. It’s simple: to learn to be a good writer, you write. You write, write, then you write some more. And more. Then, you read. Then, you talk. Then you write some more, talk some more, read some more.

Reading is important to the writing process because you can absorb the ways, methods, styles, and ideas of other writers—all of which are essential to becoming a better writer. I definitely believe that great writers actively model their own writing on the styles/strategies of other writers that they admire.
Office Visits
I’d like to get to know each of you. During Week 3 of the term, we will set aside time for “getting to know you” office visits. As the term progresses, please know that you can schedule a meeting with me anytime. I’m here to help, and I truly love my job. So please contact me—and we’ll talk! Office visits may include encouragement, tips, tutorials, extra feedback, or perhaps just a sympathetic ear. Also, we will not always “go over” everything from the assigned readings during class (due to time limitations)…so if you have any questions about the readings, my office hour is a perfect time to drop by and ask. My office is located in #339B East Hall. My office hours are Thursdays from 2-4pm, and also by special appointment.

AME
In your academic careers, you have become familiar with the term “homework.” Stop and say that word to yourself: “homework.” Does it give you a knot in your stomach? A feeling of dread? An emotion of stress, annoyance, or something else? (It certainly gives me those reactions!) I think that, in our learning journeys, it can be useful to purposely discard terms that may have gathered negative affective (emotional) connotations and replace them with new terms. (Some examples of these sorts of negative, dread-inducing terms might be: test or grade. Yuck!) I’d be happy to share more about this particular teaching philosophy with you, if you’d like. But, suffice it to say, I think it may help us enjoy our out-of-class learning a bit more if we start thinking of that work as “after-meeting exploration,” or “AME” for short. Of course, habits are hard to break—so if you hear me say the word “homework,” I welcome a gentle reminder from you about how we are replacing that negative term for a new (hopefully more positive) one.

Communal Rubrics:
For each major assignment, the whole class will work together to generate a rubric, which will help guide students as they compose their writing assignments. In other words, the rubric will help us to know what to shoot for, and help us to know if we’ve hit, or come close to, the mark.

Course Assessment:
You will receive your final course grade based on the following point breakdown (this was decided upon by the class):

1,000 points possible for term

Project 1: 100 points possible
60 points determined by peer reviewers
40 points determined by Mrs. Trahan

Project 2: 200 points possible
120 points determined by peer reviewers
80 points determined by Mrs. Trahan

Project 3: 250 points possible
175 determined by peer reviewers
75 determined by Mrs. Trahan
Project 4: 350 points possible
180 determined by peer reviewers
170 determined by Mrs. Trahan

Project 5: each student will receive 50 points for completing the assignment (if project does not meet basic project standards, student must work with Mrs. Trahan to revise before end of the term). This project will not be assessed by peer reviewers; Mrs. Trahan will give comments on the work.

Journal: 50 points possible (journals will be collected, randomly, twice during the term. 25 points will be awarded at each collection if student completed all assigned journal entries at proper length and put forth obvious effort/creativity/brainpower). Note: since this is a minor, not major project, no revisions will be allowed.

***If you have perfect attendance: if you are within 8% of the next grade, then student gets bumped up to next grade.

Drafts & Revisions:
You will have plenty of feedback from your peers on drafts during the term. Remember, too, that the writing center (located in the learning commons in the library) is a great place to get feedback on drafts. For every major writing assignment/project, it will be your option to turn in an in-progress draft to me for commentary and feedback. I welcome this. However, I do not require it, as I only wish to provide extra feedback for students who are truly eager to use my feedback to improve their drafts. Please let me know if you have any questions about this policy.

Occasionally, there will be a situation where a student does not follow the assignment guidelines. (An example of this would be: The assignment asks for an analysis of an article, yet the student writes only a summary of the article.) In this rare event, I will ask the student to complete a revision of the project, working with the student to determine an appropriate deadline for that revision.

Late Work:
All assignments must be completed and submitted by the scheduled deadline. If you are unable to meet the scheduled deadline, you are responsible for negotiating a new deadline with me in advance of the date assigned. To request a revised deadline for an assignment, you need to email me in advance of the original assignment deadline asking permission for an extension, clearly stating the reason that you need the extension, and proposing a new deadline. In other words, please keep me informed.

Non-Sexist Language:
In keeping with the latest guidelines in most professions, I ask that we work to avoid sexist language both in our oral and written communications: male pronouns should refer specifically to males; female pronouns should refer specifically to females. When in doubt, I would suggest alternating between “she” and “he” in written work.
**Learning Differences:**
I will make every practical effort to ensure that no student is denied access to any educational opportunity at this institution because of a disability. Therefore, any student who is differently-abled and can benefit from any adjustments to my method of instruction or anything else under my power should speak with me; I will do everything I can to accommodate those learning needs. I also recognize that some students come to this class with various levels of preparation due to differences in socio-economic backgrounds. If you feel that you are struggling to keep up, please know that my office door is open to you and I will do everything I can to help you. You only need to ask.

Also, students with learning disabilities who would like to receive various accommodations must present to me their official documentation from the Office of Disability Services (413 South Hall) during the first two weeks of class so that necessary arrangements may be made.

**Academic Honesty:**
Please refer to BGSU’s current Student Handbook (available online) for information regarding BGSU’s academic honesty and plagiarism policies.

**Course Grades:**
According to university policy, the possible course grades are A, B, C, D, and F. Please note: It is possible to receive a **WF (Withdraw Fail)** in this course. If you should stop attending this class for any reason without going through the University's official procedure for dropping the class, you will receive a **WF**; the grade will appear on your grade report, and an **F** will be calculated into your grade point average.

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**Schedule of Activities & Assignments**

**Unit 1: Queer Theory & You**

**Week 1:**

*Day One/January 8:*
Introductions; Sending a message in Canvas; Handout 1.1; Definition Discussion: “What is Queer”? (in-progress definition posted to course blog); Syllabus Highlights; Plan for Weeks 1 & 2; Questions

**After-Meeting Exploration (AME):**
- Note: **All AME work is always due by the next class meeting, unless otherwise specified.**
- Please read the entire syllabus and take note of any questions or concerns you have—there will be more time during the next class meeting for questions.
Please brainstorm a list of potential policies (in other words, “rules” or “guidelines for conduct”) for this course. Please recall previous courses that you feel were optimal learning environments—what were the policies that were in place during those courses? Think of your favorite teachers: What did they implement that worked well? Some categories to consider: attendance, coming to class on time, language use in classroom, attitude toward classmates and/or teacher, technology use during class meetings, and daily participation. (Please feel free to add to this list.)

Read “In Society” poem (Handout 1.2)

Please do a bit of Internet research on Allen Ginsberg and this specific poem; then, in your “journal” (your spiral notebook), hand-write a few paragraphs in response to these questions:

1) What did American society, in general, think of homosexuality in the time this poem was written (the late 1940s)?
2) In the opening lines of the poem, Ginsberg uses the term “queer” twice. What is his meaning of the word queer? Is his meaning different from the way many people use that term today? How?
3) What is your reaction to this poem? What sorts of thoughts or emotions did this poem elicit for you?


In the “The Power of Vulnerability” video, Brown says “in order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen.” In your journal, please hand-write a few paragraphs in response to these questions:

1) What do you think she means when she says we need to “allow ourselves to be seen”? Do you agree? Why or why not?
2) When was the last time you were vulnerable? What happened?

Day Two/January 10:
Questions about Syllabus; Vulnerability/Honesty/Community Small Group “Vulnerable” Introductions; Small Group Course Policy Building Discussion; Whole-class Course Policy Drafting, Distribution of Chapter 1 of Critical Theory Today, “Everything you wanted to know about critical theory but were afraid to ask”

AME:

1) Please read Chapter 1 of Critical Theory Today (I will distribute hardcopy handouts; this will also be posted to our Wordpress site under “Readings”). Please note: This essay focuses on literary theory; however, literary theories can be used to analyze texts and media beyond just great literary works. Thus, in this course, we will be using “Queer Theory” to study not just literature but also popular writing from the general public on the web, as well as other media (TV, film, art, photography, etc.).

2) Please read “Engaged Reading Practices” Handout 2.1 (available via Wordpress, in “Handouts” page)

3) In your journal, please brainstorm 7 criteria for what you believe to be a “good piece of writing.” (Examples: follows assignment guidelines, creative language, free of spelling errors, etc.) Also, consider, how many of these 7 criteria would have to be met for a paper to be considered an “A” paper or “B” paper or a “C” paper or a not-passing paper?
Finally, decide if some criteria are more important than others (if some should we weighted differently)? Next week, we will collaboratively create our general method, as well as first specific project rubric, for how writing will be assessed in this course.

**Week 2**

**Day Three/January 15**
“Stable” Small Group Nicknames; Small Group Discussion Regarding Writing Assessment; Sign-up for Getting-to-Know-You Conferences next week

**AME:**
- Read and annotate pages 317-322 of Chapter 10 in *Critical Theory Today*, “Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism”
- Read Prologue and Part 1 of Kate Bornstein’s memoir

**Day Four/January 17**
Whole-Class Construction of Communal Writing Assessment Procedures; Revise Syllabus Accordingly (at midterm, we will revisit and possibly revise these policies/procedures—so as the weeks pass please take note of what’s working and what’s not); Conclude Conference Sign-up; distribution of hard copies of Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Sex at Dawn*

**AME:**
- Read and annotate pages 322-329 of Chapter 10 in *Critical Theory Today*, “Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism”
- Read Part 2 of Bornstein’s memoir

**Week 3**
In lieu of regular class meetings, please attend your scheduled “getting to know you” conference with Heather Trahan. All conferences held in East Hall office, #339B

**AME:**
- For our next class meeting on January 29, please read and annotate pages 329-353 in *Critical Theory Today*, “Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism”; please read Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships* (hard copies provided)
- In your journal, please hand-write at least two pages in response to the following questions:
  1) In this course, we will use the terms “Queer Theory” and “Queer Criticism” interchangeably. (In other words, synonymously.) Which of these terms do you prefer, and why?
  2) What does Queer Theory have to do with vulnerability?
  3) Why do you think might be the benefit of applying Queer Theory to texts, language, experiences, situations, or media beyond just that of literature?
  4) What the heck is “literature,” anyway?
Week 4

Day Seven/January 29
Blog Set-Ups; Explanation of Major Project #1: Personal Reflective Analysis; Communal Composition of Rubric for Major Project #1

AME

- Draft of Reflective Narrative due for in-class workshopping a week from today, Feb. 5
- Optional: If you would like to send Heather a draft in order to get feedback/advice, please email draft to Heather as a Word document attachment by our next class meeting
- Please set-up your blog and send your URL to Heather Trahan
- Do some web surfing and find sites that discuss definitions of queer theory and descriptions of being queer. Compile a one-page summary (one page if typed in Microsoft Word, double-spaced) of your findings as well as your personal reactions to or further questions about this brief research, and post this to your personal WordPress blog. Within your post, please include live links to at least 5 different credible websites.
- Read Part 3 and Epilogue of Bornstein’s memoir
- Read “How To Do An Open Seminar” handout (posted to our course Wordpress site, under “handouts”)
- Create 1-2 questions for use in the Open Seminar regarding the Bornstein memoir

Day Eight/January 31
Today we will meet in University Hall, room #314 (at our normal meeting time)
Open Seminar on Bornstein’s memoir

AME

- Work on draft of Reflective Narrative; post draft to your blog for in-class peer review Tuesday
- Using our communal assessment Rubric, isolate 1-2 areas of the rubric that you would like feedback on, and craft 3-4 questions that you would like your workshopping group to answer. Post these questions to your blog.
- Read handout “8 Guidelines for Workshopping” (posted under “handouts” on our course Wordpress site)

Week 5

Day Nine/February 5
In-class Workshopping utilizing student-generated questions; finish Rubric creation.

AME

- Take into account workshopping feedback; Reflective Analysis due next class—post final version to your personal blog (don’t forget Works Cited, if applicable). Make sure to
include a clear label your project, such as “Final Version” in the subject line; it would also be helpful to delete your draft version, so that there’s no confusion.

Day Ten/February 7
Communal Assessment. Access projects via our queerwriting.wordpress.com blogroll. (You received a document via email earlier this week that lists who will assess who.) If you are absent today, you will complete your assessments from home—and these will be due by no later than our next class meeting.

AME

- Please finish up your assessments—these are officially due by our next class meeting. However, it would be super helpful if you could finish these asap.
- **To submit assessments:** Send Heather an email (htrahan@bgsu.edu); please include within that single email the multiple fill-out rubrics (either two or three, depending on how many are in your group). Don’t forget to email copies of rubrics to all student writers you assessed, as well. For full instructions on how to complete this assessment process, please see the Major Project #1 Rubric (posted to our queerwriting.wordpress.com site, under “Rubrics” page).
- Optional: Send a separate email to Heather discussing any concerns, questions, or feedback you have regarding this first experience of assessing your peers’ writing. Heather will reply to all assessment emails by no later than Thursday of next week.
- If you are asked to revise your project, please schedule an office visit with Heather in order to discuss a reasonable deadline & expectations.

Unit 2: Queering Writing Assessment

Week 6
Day Eleven/February 12
Freewriting, Assessment Discussion, Introduction of Major Project #2; Definition Discussion: “What is Queer”? (revised definition posted to course blog); Communal Composition of Rubric for Major Project #2. Guest visit today: Dr. Kristine Blair.

AME

- If you did not receive assessments from those in your assessment group, please let Heather know. They should have been all submitted by today.
- Begin drafting Major Project #2
- Read Chapter 1 of Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal*; craft 1-2 questions about this chapter for the Open Seminar Thursday

Day Twelve/February 14
Today we will meet in University Hall, room #314 (at our normal meeting time)
Open Seminar on Warner

Continue working on Major Project #2; please post a rough draft of your project to your blog for our workshopping meeting next week Tuesday

Reflect on our communal assessment rubric, and craft 2-3 questions, specific to your paper—that you would like your stable group member’s to help you with. Post these questions to your blog.

Week 7

Day Thirteen/Feb. 19
Assignment and Workshopping Discussion; Stable groups workshopping (Finish communal composition of Rubric for Major Project #2, if necessary)

Please post your final version of Major Project #2 to your blog by our next class meeting.

Day Fourteen/Feb. 21
Communal Assessment Day. If you are absent today, you will need to complete your assessments from home; please see the list (posted to our course website, on the “home” page) of which classmates you will assess—these groups have been selected randomly.

Please read Chapter 2 of Warner’s The Trouble with Normal. Compose a 1-2 page journal entry about your reactions and thoughts regarding Chapter 2.

Conclude your communal assessments of Major Project #2 by our next class period. Please see rubric for full instructions on communal assessment procedure.

Please allow 2 weeks to receive an assessment of Major Project #2 from Heather. If you are asked to revise your project, please schedule an office visit so we can discuss a reasonable deadline & expectations.

Unit 3: Queer Cultures

Week 8

Day 15/Feb. 26
Introduction of Major Project #3; Assessment Discussion & Communal Composition of Rubric for Major Project #3; Definition Discussion: “What is Queer”? (revised definition posted to course blog)
AME:
  o Individually sketch some notes/brainstorm some ideas for your group presentation—to share with your group on Thursday

Day 16/Feb. 28
Continuation of Assessment Discussion—finalize presentation rubric and assessment plans and post to course blog; Research Tips Discussion; Working on Group Presentations (for those absent: please contact your group via email or some other method to find out what was missed and how you can contribute)

AME:
  o Work/Meet with your group to further plan presentation—if your group members are leaving town for spring break, it is imperative that you find sufficient time to work on this project, before the break begins.

Week 9: Spring Break Week: Sometime during break, please meet with your group to work on your presentations—if this is not possible, you must meet with your group before spring break commences. Groups will present starting Tuesday, March 12.

Week 10

Day 17/March 12
Presentations (3-4 groups); Each presentation followed by 5 minutes of Q & A. Last part of class: collaborative group-group assessments—please email final assessments to me (Heather) by no later than 10pm today. Groups who presented today will receive feedback from myself, as well as groups no later than one week from today.

AME: none

Day 18/March 14
Presentations (3-4 groups); Each presentation followed by 5 minutes of Q & A. Last part of class: collaborative group-group assessments—please email final assessments to Heather by no later than 10pm today. Groups who presented today will receive feedback from myself, as well as groups no later than one week from today.

Unit 4:
Using What We’ve Learned So Far: Analyzing Polyamory

Week 11

Day 19/March 19
Introduce Major Project #4; Communal Composition of Rubric for Major Project #4

AME:
o Read Chapter 1 of *The Ethical Slut*

Day 20/March 21
Synthesis Review; Q & A about Major Project #4

AME:
  o Read Chapter 2 of *The Ethical Slut*
  o Read White’s short article “A Humanist Looks at Polyamory”—available at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_6_64/ai_n9532076/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_6_64/ai_n9532076/)
  o Begin your project research on polyamory

Week 12

Day 21/March 26
Viewing of “When Two Won’t Do” documentary; Open Discussion

AME:
  o Read Chapter 3 of *The Ethical Slut*; continue your individual research
  o Post a short reflection piece to your personal blog, discussing your interpretations, questions, reactions, and insights about the documentary we watched in class today

Day 22/March 28
Guest Speakers: Lyn and Julian; distribution of Chapters 21-22 of *Sex at Dawn*
(note: on a previous version of our syllabus, it stated we were meeting in University Hall. This is no longer the case! We will meet today in our normal East Hall room. Thanks!)

AME:
  o Read Chapters 4 & 5 of *The Ethical Slut*
  o Continue individual research
  o Create 1-2 questions for Open Seminar on Tuesday
  o Continue your research

Week 13

Day 23/April 2
Today we will meet in University Hall, room #314 (at our normal meeting time)
Open Seminar on *The Ethical Slut*

AME:
  o View short YouTube video: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIM2g7bRGFc&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIM2g7bRGFc&feature=related)
  (Cunning Minx is a leading poly activist. Her website, Polyamory Weekly, can be found here: [http://polyweekly.com/tag/cunning-minx/](http://polyweekly.com/tag/cunning-minx/))
Day 24/April 4
Viewing of “Three of Hearts” documentary; Open Discussion

AME:
- Continue working on your final project
- I need 1-2 volunteers to have Blog Post #1 of their final project workshopped by the whole class (volunteer can remain anonymous or not). If you would like to volunteer, please email Heather your draft of your post (as a Word attachment) by next Tuesday. If you volunteer, you may also (optionally) submit a handful of questions that you would like the whole class to answer/discuss/give you feedback on.
- Listen to brief podcast (#296) from Cunning Minx, “Open Relationship or Poly?” at http://polyweekly.com/tag/open-relationship/

Week 14

Day 25/April 9
Today we will meet in University Hall, room #314 (at our normal meeting time)
Guest speaker: Irene; Introduction of Major Project #5 (please note: this project will have a different audience and will be assessed in a new way; please see assignment guidelines for more information)

AME:
- Continue working on your polyamory research
- I need 1-2 volunteers to have Blog Post #2 of Project #4 by the whole class (volunteer can remain anonymous or not). If you would like to volunteer, please email Heather your draft of your post (as a Word attachment) by this Thursday. If you volunteer, you may also (this part is optional) submit a handful of questions that you would like the whole class to answer/discuss/give you feedback on.

Day 26/April 11
Whole-class Workshop/Blog Post #1; Finalize Project 4 Rubric today

AME:
- Continue your research.

Week 15

Day 27/April 16
Whole-class Workshop/Blog Post #2

AME:
o Post draft of your Blog Post #3 to your blog, for (stable group) workshopping this week Thursday. Bring 2-3 questions that you would like your group to help you with.

Day 28/April 18
Stable group workshopping/Blog Post #3

AME:
  o Your final versions of Major Project #4 are due posted to your blog by no later than our next class period.

Week 16

Day 29/April 23
Your Major Project #4 is due today, posted to your blog.
Communal Assessment during class today; all peer assessments due by our next class meeting.
Introduction to and in-class writing of “reflecting on the future” writing assignment.
*** Major Project #5 due by next (final) class meeting on Thursday—submit via Microsoft Word attachment to htrahan@bgsu.edu.

To Write During Class Today:
  o In your first major project, you were asked to reflect upon the past and the present. In this last writing assignment, we will now shift our gaze to the future. In an approximately 500-word blog post, please reflect upon how you imagine your future as a result of reading about and talking about and writing about queer theory this semester. There is no pressure to be dramatic or to stretch the truth. If you imagine that little change or no change will occur, that’s fine—but please analyze why you think that that might be the case. Of course, the future is never sure—life moves and bends, and we can never know quite what will happen—and so my asking you to “predict” and look ahead to the future might seen an odd exercise. However, instead of thinking of this as setting down in concrete what you want to or what will you think will happen, I’d like this to be a playful exercise, where you consider various possibilities, potentialities. In other words, it’s not a requirement that you fully “believe” or “desire” for this to happen in the future. It’s a thought experiment, a game of mind and language. Please work on this during class today and post this final reflection to your blog by this Thursday, our final day of class.