

# EMERGING VOICES: Unpredictable Encounters: Religious Discourse, Sexuality, and the Free Exercise of Rhetoric

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*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord.*

—Psalm 19:14

**H**ere's a fragment from a conversation I overheard (or, rather, that I actively eavesdropped on) about the required first-year writing course at the university where I teach: "You don't have to take freshman writing? That's good. My teacher . . . she made me write about transvestites. . . . She made us watch this sick fuckin' stuff." This comment, obviously issued as an indictment, could implicate any one of dozens of instructors in the writing program at my university, a private research institution in New York. Teachers often use documentaries such as *The Aggressives*, which highlights New York City's black lesbian drag ball scene, and our custom first-year course anthology includes several texts that address sexuality and gender performance. My colleagues are not alone. Many writing scholars advocate for sexuality as a site for inquiry in the composition classroom (J. Alexander; Malinowitz). If the aggrieved student had been in courses I've taught (anything from first-year writing to a senior-level seminar for writing and rhetoric majors), I would provide much material that might provoke such a response.

Within composition scholarship, it is common to encounter this kind of opposition to LGBT issues, or to sexuality more generally as a topic, expressed in concert with specific religious beliefs (De la Tierra; Downs; Smart).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, I imagine teachers might hesitate to deal explicitly with sexuality or religion in classes, in part because of their assumption (or experience) that if these topics come up, the discus-

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sion will elicit dismissive or hateful responses.<sup>2</sup> Yet, even if those responses don't materialize, sexuality, as Jonathan Alexander concedes in *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy*, "is often a very tricky subject to deal with in the classroom" (17). With religion, the same is also true.<sup>3</sup> The interpenetrating discourses of religion and sexuality saturate ideological formations, inform individual and community lives, and shape persuasive possibilities. Given their ubiquity, import, and "trickiness," the intersection of sexual and religious discourses seems to me an immensely appropriate site for rhetorical inquiry and ethical negotiation with students. My work in this regard is centrally informed by Joseph Harris's call to aid students in the task of repositioning themselves within fields of discursive activity: "The task facing our students, as Min-zhan Lu has argued, is not to leave one community in order to enter another, but to *reposition* themselves in relation to several continuous and conflicting discourses" (19). Students and I engage discourses that compel and repel us, figuring out together how to deploy ethical writing and research practices in the midst of encounters that unsettle, shock, and confuse us.

Unfortunately, depictions of LGBT and faith communities as intersecting only when in conflict (as mutually shocking and repelling) appear all too predictably in civic arenas and in popular media. The anti-gay Christian activist is a much more readily accessible image in our culture than the queer Christian. This problem is rhetorical as well as representational, limiting what many students see as possible because they haven't seen a wide range of models outside an oppositional framework.<sup>4</sup> It is a painful problem for me to witness both as a rhetorician and a heterosexual Christian ally in LGBT struggles. I seek a starting point other than one of stark contrasts between conservative religious and progressive secular LGBT and ally communities that may view each other with mutual disdain. I join with Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, who disrupt this binary by arguing that sexual practice should be read through the lens of the free exercise of religion clause in the US Constitution. Given how religion—versions of Christianity in particular—has shaped the regime of sexual regulation in this country, Jakobsen and Pellegrini repurpose religious freedom for sexual liberation. They make this move because religious warrants are so often the grounds used to advance speech that demonizes—or tries to criminalize—a range of sexual expressions and gender identities. By calling for "the free exercise of sex," they demand "a radical version of religious freedom, one that makes room for robust pluralism both in terms of people's commitments and their practices" (111). Following their demand, I argue here for the "free exercise of rhetoric."

I develop this pedagogical stance as an approach to religious rhetoric, especially in relation to sexuality. Adopting the free exercise of rhetoric, I work with students' personal commitments and enhance their rhetorical practice through a process that can involve encountering multiple uncommon or unexpected arguments, acknowledging the value of misreading, and embracing uncertainty. These practices promote a

position from which some students, as former student Ryan Graham puts it, “begin writing about [their] confusion”—confusion that emerges from their encounters with multiple interests and arguments that sometimes conflict with students’ beliefs and assumptions.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I demonstrate one assumption the field makes about the value of religion in the classroom: some students bring religion with them as an identity with attendant rhetorical resources. In particular, a *topos* of religion as personal is privileged. Thus, I posit the need for a pedagogical option that takes religion seriously as a topic and identity, but that does not necessarily start from or privilege students’ personal experience with religion. Through the free exercise of rhetoric, I understand religion as both a personal commitment and a discursive field with which believers and nonbelievers alike can (and, at times, must) engage. From composition studies, I invoke Harris to privilege the dissonance and pleasure that come from renegotiation across, as well as within, discourses, and Janis Haswell and Richard Haswell to address the value of unpredictability in student writing and experience. I also draw on work in queer theory to articulate the dynamics of identity and time that are at play when teachers value unpredictability as an opening move for research and writing. I then describe a second-year writing course that used this approach. That course centered on religious rhetoric, and the opening unit explored religion and sexuality with a focus on LGBT issues. Writing from two students in that course, one secular and one Catholic, reveals how they experienced “misreading” and “writing about confusion” as catalyzing moments for their sustained research-based, argumentative essays. One student also illustrates that the usefulness of this approach is not tied solely to the religion-LGBT intersection, but that the creative and critical energies mobilized by our exploration of that intersection can travel to other inquiries.<sup>6</sup> In closing, I offer some cross-institutional suggestions for teachers who might wish to practice this free rhetoric.

#### COMPOSITION STUDIES, RELIGION, AND THE PRIVILEGE OF THE PERSONAL

Within composition scholarship that advances a broadly defined multicultural agenda, there has been, until recently, a lacuna regarding religion. In his 2005 informal survey of multicultural readers, Bronwyn Williams notes an absence of those that speak to religion: “Even as multiculturalism has become a well-accepted part of Rhetoric and Composition, [. . .] it has often avoided any direct engagement with matters of faith” (105). This lack of readings that arise from explicitly religious standpoints could stem from multiple sources: not knowing how to select, frame, or teach such pieces. Or, perhaps, that category of experience simply still fails to register for many instructors as a legitimate or recognizable area for student inquiry.

Two decades ago, in “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” Maxine Hairston observed, “It’s worth noting here that religion plays an important role in the lives of many of our students—and many of us, I’m sure—but it’s a dimension almost never mentioned by those who talk about cultural diversity and difference” (191). Critical of the antagonisms that explicitly political curricula might provoke from students and inexperienced teachers, she probably did not have in mind the pedagogical stance I promote when she bemoaned the fact that religion is often neglected in discussions of diversity. I make common cause with Hairston when she claims that “a teacher who believes in diversity must pay attention to and respect students with deep religious convictions, not force them [. . .] into silence” (191). Hairston is an enduring (but also, to my mind, a complicated) figure in discussions about religion in writing classrooms.<sup>7</sup> She legitimately challenges those teachers who neglect religion while they confront issues of multiculturalism and power. Yet my unease with Hairston, and indeed with much composition scholarship that advocates religion as a topic or as an argumentative warrant, stems from the assumption of the personal as a *necessary starting point* of *initial* student authority.

In the years since Hairston’s indictment, many writing specialists have explored ways to make composition classes hospitable places for religion. Scholars often frame this work as a means of welcoming a wider array of students’ personal experiences into the classroom, and of helping students understand how religion might provide resources for critical analysis and reflection (Perkins; Stenberg). Writing classrooms might be spaces that recognize their “full lives”—the full range of their lived experiences (Montesano and Roen 95). In his 2011 article, “Re-envisioning Religious Discourses as Rhetorical Resources in Composition Teaching,” Michael-John DePalma echoes Hairston: “Religious belief is a powerful force in the lives of many students and in the world at large. Thus we cannot simply ignore it or ask students to do so” (228). He offers, indeed, a very *pragmatic* and productive suggestion that teachers understand “religious discourses as rhetorical resources” (226). While he mentions that Thomas, a Christian student in a course he taught, produced an analysis essay with primary research, a persuasive essay, and a personal essay that all focused on Christianity, DePalma provides detailed analysis of the personal essay. Apparently, in the other essays,

Thomas maintained the kind of critical distance from his subject that is highly valued in academic contexts. His personal essay, however, broke from this stance. Unlike his analysis and persuasive essays, Thomas’s personal essay wholeheartedly affirms his religious beliefs—a move that enables much of the meaningful work that Thomas’s essay, “In Search of Identity,” is doing. (229)

DePalma’s attention to that “meaningful work” illustrates what religious discourse can accomplish. At the same time, I wonder what work those apocryphal texts of the

disciple Thomas performed and what a research-based essay fully informed by his religious beliefs—what Jacqueline Royster might call Thomas’s “passionate attachment” to Christianity—might achieve (*Traces* 280).

In arguments to include religion as a topic of study, proposed writing assignments often construct an auto-ethnographic and personal commonplace. Kristine Hansen convincingly argues “that politics—including the religious convictions that might inform a person’s politics—can legitimately be the focus of a composition course” (33) and passionately urges “teachers to explore how religious and political discourses intersect” (32). I share Hansen’s sentiments. She goes on to recommend assignments such as producing auto-ethnographies informed by public representations of students’ own religious traditions, writing about their faith practices from the perspective of a nonbeliever, exploring a feature of their faith that they think is marginalized by mainstream culture, and finding instances of seemingly authentic and inauthentic uses of religion in political speeches (36–37). Certainly, it can be incredibly useful for students to draw on their experience for both content and a heuristic lens for analysis. However, starting with those moves and establishing students as immediately authorized through their prior knowledge and experience potentially forecloses the student Graham’s “writing about [his] confusion,” while such an opening might also legitimize the “sick fuckin’ stuff” initial reaction. This I worry about.

Hesitant instructors’ initial resistance to students who want to pursue religiously inflected topics could also be productively reframed. Lizabeth Rand’s “Enacting Faith” encourages writing scholars and teachers to resist the invocation of “metaphors so precious to many devout people” as a means of dismissing evangelical faith as well as just about anything deemed unsophisticated (357). In other words, she invites composition teachers not to immediately link terms such as *missionary*, *evangelical*, and *born again* with chauvinistic anti-intellectualism. As an antidote for this attitude, Rand presents evangelical Christian discourse as potentially subversive, critically resistant, and aligned with postmodernism. And yet, despite this effort to bring religion into compositionists’ conversations in more engaged and productive ways, Rand’s assignments help position auto-ethnography as the default, starting from the notion of students’ at least partial ownership of religion—a domain over which they hold control (363–64). Of course, this assignment might work well if one goal is to help instructors learn about a discourse community that students value.

Even as Rand presents a compelling objection to the exclusion of evangelical epistemologies in composition studies, writing teachers who allow or bring politico-religious inquiries into their classrooms must also account for the potential of faith discourses to exclude. Juanita Smart responds to Rand from both a Christian identity informed by her evangelical rearing and a lesbian sexual orientation. Smart insists in “Frankenstein or Jesus Christ?” that teachers not lose track of the resistance and

discursive ingenuity of “gay and lesbian students who have traditionally been disenfranchised from faith communities” (17). I concur that teachers must be mindful of these students who rarely see their experiences within a curriculum. We should strive to keep open, rather than foreclose, “the highly contested constructs of spirituality and sexuality resisting cultural codification, maintaining the unpredictable and rich valence of possibilities” (Smart 19). It is, in part, for these reasons that I urge the use of course materials that represent many intersections of desire and faith. In my own courses, students have examined such intersections as queer Christian student activism in the United States, gay and lesbian Jewish activism within Orthodox communities in transnational contexts, and transgender subcultural formation in Islamic Iran.

Insights from literacy studies help to further emphasize the need for writing teachers to deploy more varied and complicated representations of sexuality and religion. Deborah Brandt recognizes spiritual communities and faith-based institutions, as well as the power of religious belief, as important sponsors of literacy (110–23). Although queer students-of-faith may understand the divine as authorizing their rhetorical activity from a religious standpoint, they are unlikely to have nearly so powerful a literacy sponsor for reading and writing from both their spiritual and sexual identities simultaneously. And even if these students are able to write from these two polyvalent dimensions of their experience at once, they do so despite the lack of well-circulated models that demonstrate sexual and spiritual literacies working together. When I wrote a letter to the editor of my campus newspaper that urged progressive students-of-faith not to abandon their traditions when they support homophobic positions, but to transform them and be LGBT allies, one gay student and one lesbian student expressed deep gratitude for the piece. One student told me that it had affirmed his life as both a gay man and a Reform Jew. My goal, however, isn’t gratitude. It’s a world where such arguments are unnecessary.

Examining personal experiences with faith may well invite a politically and intellectually critical stance into curricular conversations. Despite my hesitations around the emergence of religion as a primarily personal resource that students bring into the classroom, scholars who investigate religion and writing certainly do not figure this personal *topos* as devoid of political power. For example, Donald McCrary uses womanist theology as course content, and he asks his predominantly African American students to compose a narrative that blends personal experience, institutional context, and social critique (528–29). This positioning of the personal as a political resource also stands in the liberation theology tradition that helped birth the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire so popular with compositionists. In “Composing (as) Power,” Beth Daniell shows how academics commonly disassociate Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed from the liberation theology of South and Latin America even as they note its Marxist influences. Priscilla Perkins describes how she uses critical pedagogy’s insight that harnessing students’ awareness about, and artifacts from,

their own environment could fuel critical reflection. The Bible, which her students would draw on regardless of whether assignments explicitly referenced that text, could be taken as an “esteemed given”—a text that can further, not impede, analysis (591–92). Despite her own hesitancy around inviting students to write about their faith, Shari Stenberg recognizes the usefulness of religion to students grappling with new knowledge about injustice. She notes that critical pedagogies compel students to confront unjust realities—realities in which they (and their teachers) are often complicit. In Stenberg’s assessment, to not offer students opportunities for reflection on such revelations with their whole selves, including their spiritual selves, constitutes a dangerous neglect (288). Thus, we return to the issue of contending with students’ full lives. As Stenberg implies, acknowledging the fullness of students’ lives can take on new urgency as they respond to new complications.

What stances for teaching and writing response can both encourage these productive complications and invite students to have *faith* that their struggle makes possible new understandings and rhetorical proficiency? How do we respond to the challenge from Keith Miller and Jennifer Santos that teachers facilitate student writing about the powerful discursive and political functions of religion in ways that encourage “students to appreciate many varied perspectives” and “to enrich and complicate their views,” while also not inviting “predictable, polemical debates and resistance to analysis” (64)? I offer what I call the free exercise of rhetoric as one such stance.

### THE FREE EXERCISE OF RHETORIC

Though it may sound akin to “free speech,” in the context of religion and sexuality (like so many other subjects), the phrase “free exercise of rhetoric” challenges popular visions of folks raving like Fred Phelps or expressing opinions in an orderly manner on Sunday morning talk shows—all being heard, but not listening.<sup>8</sup> The free exercise of rhetoric means recognizing that religion is rhetorical, discursive, and political as well as personal: religious beliefs and arguments are produced and exist in contexts (not outside of them), and they have consequences involving other people-of-faith and secular folks—all of whom have complicated relationships with religious communities and traditions. Perhaps my focus on rhetoric over expression highlights for students not only their right to speak, but also their and my responsibility to listen. When I listen closely to rhetors’ reasons for speaking or writing, I hear that their discourse is frequently motivated by an investment in the issue under discussion. As Sharon Crowley contends, “The mobilization of passions [. . .] is a task for rhetoric” (22). One of my tasks in teaching writing is to stir an economy of affects that brings into focus for students and myself where we reach the limits of our ability to identify with others or ideas. Is queer life perceived as livable? Is religious discourse

to be disdained? As José Muñoz notes, there is a productive ambiguity about where desire and identification begin and end (14). As students follow, or get caught by, a desire—to challenge “ex-gay” ministries or investigate church history—through research and writing, they undertake self-making activities that also, I hope, expand the realm of argumentative and life options.

In this project, I find encouragement from Harris’s “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing.” I try to prompt a “useful dissonance as students are confronted with ways of talking about the world with which they are not yet wholly familiar” and promote “an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own” (17). Specifically, I understand students’ (and my own!) dissonance, the staggering that comes from being shaken up by the unpredictability of the classroom and the scene of writing, as a fertile site for the pleasures that come from renegotiating our relationships with communities, discourses, and individuals. In the midst of competing discourses, I want, like Harris, to support a

writer’s unwillingness to reduce his or her options to a simple either/or choice. [. . .] [Student writers] seem aware, that is, of being implicated in not one but a number of discourses, a number of communities, whose beliefs and practices conflict as well as align. And it is the tension between those discourses—none repudiated or chosen wholly—that gives their texts such interest. (18)

In this way, my practice helps develop students’ ability to respond to—as well as to make—arguments inflected by religious faith. My aim is to create space for students to voice their personal attachments and to examine the broader discourses in which they participate. In short, my approach is to not dismiss religion and to not give those who use it a pass when their beliefs dismiss or demean others. Religion is discursive. As such, let’s give it the serious engagement it deserves as a site of possibility and complicated, contradictory formations. It follows, then, that introducing a range of potentially unexpected religious perspectives and formations would be a feature of the approach I describe, and that students and I work to reposition ourselves in light of these varied arguments.

As students reposition themselves within and alongside a range of discourses, they may achieve what Muñoz calls “disidentification.” In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz writes that this strategy involves performing identity and doing politics such that one seeks neither complete identification with dominant ideologies nor utterly resistant counteridentification with them: “[R]ather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. [. . .] [It] is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local everyday struggles of resistance” (11–12). It is a means for the “remaking and rewriting of a dominant script” (23). It’s “about expanding and problematizing identity and identification, not abandoning any socially



prescribed identity component” (29).<sup>9</sup> Resonances exist between this performance of politics and the vitality of those writers Harris champions—those students who resist categorization and binary choices for identification. As they refuse to choose one of a narrow range of options, they create new possibilities—and, potentially, new worlds. A student-of-faith, for example, need not lose or change the texture of his Catholic faith as he determines how to reposition himself within Catholic discourse, and disidentify with it when he disagrees with an official position.

Repositioning and disidentification require opportunities for misrecognition, misreading, and confusion. Thus, I expect these and try to build them into the approach. Unpredictability is desirable. In *Authoring*, Haswell and Haswell highlight professional authors’ experience of unpredictability: “When authors find themselves writing things they had not set out to write, they feel surprised, delighted, self-affirmed, proud. They find they are more than they thought they were” (17). In fact, the coauthors note, the surprise of doing something other than what one intended “turns the usual academic assumption, that one writes out of a topic understood, on its head” (18). To harness the power of unpredictability as a resource in repositioning and disidentification, a particular sense of time is helpful. Within the culturally valued and academically necessary frame of efficiency, there’s supposed to be only progress. Misreading and unpredictability lead primarily to embarrassment and catastrophe. Efficiency’s attendant, capitalist time, whispers, “You’re always behind” to the teacher facing a stack of student papers and to the student confronting the term’s fast-approaching end with so much still left to do.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps “queer time” opens up new possibilities.

In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam articulates queer time as “models of temporality” that differ from the presumed normative pattern of maturation, adulthood, and “settling down”—from reproductive time that avoids risks (6). Halberstam claims “queer temporality disrupts the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding” (152). Queer time also has no “essential relations to gay and lesbian subjects” (6). Many students operate with a notion of research and writing governed by efficiency and immediate utilitarianism: achieve thesis, collect sources, and assemble essay. This caricature of one research process wouldn’t even be “reproductive research,” where research produces questions and informs one’s argument. In queer time, missteps can be generative, claim-making can be delayed, and desires for immediate usefulness can be downplayed.<sup>11</sup>

One practice that exemplifies what I mean by the free exercise of rhetoric is the classical sophistic strategy of *dissoi logoi*, arguing from multiple, contrary, or unexpected propositions. I might pose questions like these: How might Lady Gaga’s supposedly “blasphemous” song “Judas” actually be an act of radical devotion? How can Iran, a theocracy, provide state subsidies for sexual reassignment surgery? In try-

ing to come up with responses to these likely counterintuitive questions, students and I are led to a range of propositions and assumptions—and to reading and research that reframes our ideas. Daniell writes that *dissoi logoi* “helps students write and speak and so acquire and create knowledge” (“*Dissoi*” 83). This position affirms my own observations based on student work produced when course texts include arguments from diverse politico-religious moments and movements.<sup>12</sup>

### RELIGION AS A COURSE INQUIRY

Through a discussion of a second-year writing course with a thematic focus on religion, I illustrate some affordances of the free exercise of rhetoric. The course I taught opened with questions. For example, we wondered about how religious motivations fuel or participate in social change movements. How does religious identity intersect with (and/or diverge from) race, class, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, and ability in ways that construct the grounds for activism? Who benefits from such efforts? Students’ semester-long project of conducting research and generating claims in response to these questions began in the first class when students read the first two pages of Christian Smith’s “Correcting a Curious Neglect, or Bringing Religion Back In.” The piece, which students would read in full for homework, argues that research into social change movements—focusing on sociology—often ignores (for a variety of reasons) the influence of religion as an organizing power. Rather than start with what students know about religion, social movements, or effecting political change, we began by looking at a “neglect,” or gap, that we explored together.

With the first major assignment of this course, I hoped to enable students to, in a Burkean sense, enter a particular ongoing conversation. I asked students to take three of the texts we read as a class and one outside source of their choosing, interrogate those texts with specific questions they produced, and make an argument.<sup>13</sup> To produce a concentrated area for shared inquiry, the first four weeks focused on LGBT-religion intersections. This led us to new questions: how might we read the relief and joy voiced by a preoperative female-to-male transgender Iranian who finally felt comfortable having sex with his girlfriend because the Islamic state would subsidize his transition to life as a man? As part of her conclusion to an argument that examines the construction of a queer identity in that theocratic state, one student, Linda Behar, draws on her own experience as a practicing Jew to claim, “Spiritual violence is too often found in the everyday issues involved with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community. Coming from a rather traditional Jewish family, I’ve [ . . . ] seen many people in my environment that were strongly affected by the disapproval of Rabbis and the very Torah itself.”

A different question—what writing might students produce from watching video clips that show college students affiliated with the organization Soulforce ly-

ing down on the campus of Latter-Day Saints–affiliated Brigham Young University (BYU) to protest the school’s expulsion policy for LGBT students who come out? In response to these demonstrations, Lauren Spink, another student, writes, “Many of them [LGBT students at BYU] were very grateful for Soulforce being there, giving them hope and having a group of people fighting for what they want. But the negative side of Soulforce stepping in is that when they leave the school, that hope is gone.” Thus, Spink worries about the limits of community and support for queer Christian students “left behind” after a moment of solidarity.<sup>14</sup>

We wondered if Soulforce participates in the legacies of the Civil Rights Movement by conducting Equality Rides that entail civil disobedience at colleges and universities that expel LGBT students who come out. Students began considering this legacy as part of the first day’s homework assignment. After finishing Smith’s piece, students skimmed webpages about the Soulforce Equality Rides and the Freedom Rides of the 1960s. This sequence allowed students the chance to use—albeit limited—evidence to evaluate the histories claimed by Soulforce. Then students watched YouTube videos documenting Equality Riders protesting at several Christian universities, and they identified apparent binaries that shape the context of this conflict. This first set of homework assignments continued the process of engaging students in uncommon arguments early, not only through its content, but also, as one student mentioned to me during a conference in the second week of class, by taking a familiar aspect of the students’ media ecology (for example, YouTube) and putting it to academic rather than leisure purposes.

Spink names one oft-noted binary that separates queer lives from Christian community: “religion vs. LGBT.” In her informal, freewrite explanation of another closely aligned binary, “voice vs. oppression,” Spink writes,

[Soulforce activists were] young adults trying to protest something they were really passionate about and facing harsh consequences. They tried to express their “voice” which as an American citizen everyone is supposed to have. However, instead of being understood and respected they were placed under arrest. What kind of freedom is that? I don’t understand how some universities private or not can expel students just for being in the LGBT community. That’s seriously close-minded.

Spink promotes a classic liberal commitment to individual rights. She believes all American citizens should be able to mobilize and express themselves. She implies that if conservative Christian higher education administrators “understood” LGBT students, some change might come. Such an implication suggests a belief that the preservation and extension of liberty should govern policies that affect others’ lives—operating otherwise is “seriously close-minded.” Thus, Spink applauds the “passionate” activists who belonged to “the LGBT community.” Within this frame, it might seem irrational for LGBT youth to desire the right to full membership in

a community that would so deliberately exclude them. However, as Harris reminds us, all people constantly move within and across discourse communities. Either/or framings limit the available options. Desire and identification are not aligned in easily discernable ways. And yet, Spink hesitates at naming Soulforce protestors as members of the LGBT *and* Christian communities. This choice doesn't indicate deference to the definitional rights of those in charge of the colleges. She clearly counteridentifies with them. Perhaps the designation (and lack of designation) stems from her desire to highlight in Soulforce activists the element of their identity she finds most readily legible: LGBT activists. As I mentioned earlier, the Christian opposed to queer modes of life is a much more commonplace figure in our culture than queer religious folks.

As these brief excerpts from student work suggest, many write themselves into an understanding that gender, sexual, and religious identities may intersect in a number of complicated ways denied by the overheard complaint that opens this piece. Moreover, when juxtaposed against that overheard complaint, Behar's and Spink's written insights reveal how these intersections serve as rich sites filled with the potential for multiple, contradicting positions. They also point to the value and potential of not starting with students' experience with religion, while also not dismissing it.

#### RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AND STUDENT WRITING

In the remainder of this essay, I explore samples of writing by Spink, an environmental engineering major, and Graham, a chemical engineering major, who were both in the course I described earlier. Spink never claimed a religious identity in class or in her writing. Although she explicitly stated that she had no particular enthusiasm for religion as a topic, she did not avoid writing about it.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, she fits within the prevailing norms for US emerging adults aged eighteen to twenty-three. In *Souls in Transition*, Christian Smith and Patricia Snell present data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, the largest nationally representative study of emerging adults and religion. Among the findings relevant to teaching with religion as a topic of inquiry are the following: emerging adults don't really talk about religion very much but can if it comes up, generally feel indifferent to religion, fail to understand religious particularities as very important, and classify religion as personal and private more than institutional and social (143–65). There are certainly students who do not fit this description and whole colleges where these trends would not hold true, and I'll address that later.

Spink's freewrite suggests that even early in the term, she felt comfortable expressing her political beliefs. She continues to make political and ethical arguments in the excerpts that follow, which come from her response to the second major course assignment. I asked students to select some intersection of political or social life with

a spiritual or religious discourse, and to interrogate it in some way. One activity in the first week of that assignment was a “research as invention” exercise, in which I wrote inquiry-specific topics (that is, Sisters in Islam, Operation Rescue, Liberation Theology, and so on) on slips of paper that students randomly selected as they walked out of the classroom. Students returned in the next class with brief research reports on their topics.<sup>16</sup> My goal was not to tell students what they should write their papers about, but rather to build into instruction opportunities for students to become more familiar with the possibilities available to them.

Some exciting projects developed as continuations of these early encounters with the unfamiliar. In fact, Spink’s paper emerged from her misreading of the reparative therapy, or ex-gay, ministry Exodus International (EI) as a queer-positive organization. Ex-gay programs attempt to “cure” or diminish same-sex attraction through a combination of spiritual discipline and counseling. Spink establishes for readers the initial understanding that she, and perhaps others, came away with after a cursory reading of the EI website:

According to their website’s home page, they are an open-minded, Christian group that is trying to help people better themselves (<http://www.exodus-international.org/>). The pictures of happy, beautiful men and women smiling back at the camera give the impression that this is indeed an open, helpful organization that really is making a positive influence in people’s lives. Upon first glance the site seems to be one for an organization that is supportive of the LGBT community and appreciates them for who they are. In fact, I was under this misguided impression the first time I looked up the home site. I was conducting some research for my Writing class based on the assigned topic of Exodus International. Trying to get background on what the organization was about, I found its website online. Everything from the photographs to the opening paragraphs gives a false sense of the goals of this organization.

Spink indicates that the initial affect the Exodus website produced for her was unassuming and upbeat, which led her to a first impression of this ministry as a gay-friendly group. Noting the use of visual rhetoric, Spink addresses how the group associates itself with positive life outcomes for LGBT persons. Through the use of “upon first glance,” Spink readies her audience for the revelation of her own initial “misguided impression.”

Through the following narration of her research experience, readers can see that the initial exigency for Spink’s project comes from a complication of her first interpretation. She continues:

It wasn’t until after reading about Exodus International on more neutral sites that its true colors began to show. This disagreement in information [from other websites] is what initially hooked my attention and caused me to become interested with the subject. It became clear that it was not as accepting as first perceived, and after going back to the organization’s main page, the language, while soft and polite, had a different message than what I initially understood. The mission statement they give

cheerily states, “You can lead a life of fulfillment and holiness as God intended; a life far better than what you have experienced” (<http://www.exodus-international.org/>). Who said that lesbians and gay men need help to “free” themselves from this lifestyle, and who defines whether a life is fulfilled and holy?

Although Spink might further interrogate the notion that the other sources she drew on were more “neutral,” once she realized her first impressions were—while possibly warranted based on the image projected for a casual observer—not supported by further investigation, she found herself in the thick of a complex *dissoi logoi*, what she names a “disagreement in information.” This complication captures her “attention” and “interest.” Suddenly, concern and passion are mobilized.

By taking the time to recognize what has occurred—a troubling initial identification with a group she decidedly disagrees with—Spink desires an encounter with the world of ex-gay ministries. Spink responds to them. She questions their authority to delimit the boundaries of holiness in ways that exclude those who seek to embrace, rather than eradicate, their queer sexualities. Misrecognition becomes an occasion for learning through rhetorical analysis of how EI constructs community. Misreading is not evidence of “failed reading” or a “bad student.” Rather, it evinces the unpredictability that attends rhetorical encounters and the knowledge students can produce through repositioning within and against discourses that surprise or shock. In a conversation about this article, I asked her where her interest in this particular renegotiation had originated, and she said, “I honestly think it was from just writing. How can I completely misinterpret at first glance? How does that happen? Was it intentional?” She has a sense that she was misled as much as she misread, and the process of writing about it brought that fact into focus. Spink parses out the vision and attendant borders of Christian community articulated by EI, and determines their particular location along a spectrum of conservative Christian responses to queer lives. She writes,

Obviously the founders of Exodus International do not believe that it is possible to be a good Christian man or woman and be homosexual at the same time. [. . .] [W]hile many Christian organizations condemn the LGBT community as a group of sinners, Exodus International is more interested in “curing” them of these same sex desires.

Additionally, Spink situates her own affective response to Exodus as an influence on her research and writing: “It is hard to not judge this organization for their unusual and close-minded points of view on curing homosexuality, something that isn’t typically thought of as ‘curable.’ However, with a little bit of background knowledge it does become slightly easier to postpone personal judgment until all the facts are presented.” Interestingly, Spink’s self-reflexivity about the difficulty she experiences in delaying judgment against Exodus—even as she strives to do so until more evidence is gathered—speaks to a conscious transformation of her own position since that

beginning-of-the-semester freewrite about Soulforce. No longer does Spink simply label those she disagrees with as closed-minded. She fails to foreclose the possibility of open inquiry about a group that she finds reprehensible for their contribution to making an anti-queer world. Neither does she simply write them off. Rather, as a secular person, she sees her stake in arguments using religious discourses.

I've also seen how productive, unpredictable encounters can occur even in the context of students' writing about their own beloved religious traditions. As I noted earlier, taking up the LGBT-religion intersection and deploying the free exercise of rhetoric doesn't mean students must write about that intersection throughout a course. Likewise, queer theoretical frames are not useful only for examining LGBT subjects. In his sustained research project, Graham, a devout Roman Catholic, explored liberation theology. When later commenting on a draft of this article, he explained his feelings at the time he took second-year writing: "[M]y convictions about politics and religion were pretty strong. I wasn't interested in being confused, and looked mainly to strengthen those convictions."<sup>17</sup> However, during his research, Graham discovered that the Catholic Church has a more complicated relationship with liberation theology than he had originally thought. Admitting to me in a conference that he was confused, I instructed him to write about his confusion. The resulting essay examines how the stance toward liberation theology articulated in the 1980s by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) conflates liberation theology with the specter of a violent and atheist Marxism. Graham argues, "Whether Marxist or not, attempting to end poverty and oppression through the peaceful means of Liberation Theology successfully answers Jesus' call. [. . .] Therefore, the [Catholic] Church should reassess its understandings and teachings on Liberation Theology." His reflective essay about his research and writing process describes how he arrived at that argument:

My essay, "The Unjust Denial of Theologies of Liberation," was one of the hardest essays I have ever had to write. I was given a small piece of paper in class one day to do research on, and on the paper said Liberation Theology. I had studied Liberation Theology in my senior theology class in high school, and was quite interested in both the topic and examples of where Liberation Theology is used; however, while writing I encountered a problem: there was much more to Liberation Theology than what I had learned before.

In high school, we were taught about Liberation Theology and what good it does for the poor and oppressed, particularly through non-violent means. [. . .] But through doing my research after that day in class, I discovered that not all cases of Liberation Theology are peaceful. Moreover, I was amazed that Liberation Theology is looked down upon by the Catholic Church, the very institution that taught me the success and meaning of Liberation Theology. With this, I was stuck on what to write about.

I loved reading about Liberation Theology, but then realized I had such a confused view on the topic now that I didn't know what to write about. So, I decided to begin

writing about my confusion. I wrote about [. . .] how there are disagreements within the Church about it. Through this new type of brainstorming, I was able to base my thesis on my confusion: if [Dom] Camara and [Oscar] Romero are looked upon so highly and praised so much within the Catholic community, why then is Liberation Theology considered not compatible with Catholic teachings?

Although this essay was hard work, I am glad to have written on a topic that allows me to write about my views on the Catholic Church. Although I like to consider myself a conservative Catholic, I thought it was pretty cool to write about how some things in the Church just need to change.

Even as he claims the identity of a “conservative Catholic” at the end of the course, Graham takes pleasure not only in writing about an aspect of his faith, but also in arguing that the Catholic Church should reevaluate previous positions taken toward liberation theology. In so doing, the church would reclaim a resource that helps “answer Jesus’ call” to stand with those who suffer. Thus, the argument he advances deploys the skills of rhetorical analysis and research valued by all writing teachers, while it is also ultimately grounded in Christian warrants. One of the points I want to highlight about this research narrative is that even though Graham had prior knowledge of liberation theology, he was unfamiliar with much of the context and controversy surrounding it. By reading official Catholic documents and consulting other resources, he gained not only a new understanding, but also a new experience in his relationship to the Catholic Church (that is, confusion about what he’d learned before, and subsequent disidentification with a church position). No longer in full acceptance of the Catholic Church instructions, Graham eschews complete identification. Yet he’s still clear in his faith commitments, not counteridentifying. Taking the official discourse and producing a new articulation for himself, Graham achieves disidentification as he repositions himself in light of his research and confusion.

By treating religion as both a personal commitment and a discursive field, we open up space for unpredictability regarding how students will reposition themselves. I’m reminded of Harris’s point that teachers can promote student inquiry into the many “discourses that make up their own” as well as those “with which they are not yet wholly familiar.” Sometimes those discourses are the same. Religious discourses, like those that comprise Christianity, are multiple and filled with contradictions that teachers can invite students to wrestle with—or allow them to discover, as Graham did. As Graham wrote in response to this *College English* article, three years removed from the course, the writing course taught him this: “It’s okay to not know. And, when you explore *why* you don’t know, and *why* something’s confusing, you’re left with an answer that helps you see things in a more understanding light. And with the really sensitive topics, it leaves me with peace of mind.”

Unpredictability is not limited to an academic course. Rather, it defines our lives. Haswell and Haswell make this point about students’ *life-course*. A life-course



involves the activity of the student that both precedes and exceeds a particular class, but it also involves relationships that have enabled a person (teacher or student) to learn “something that lasted” (93). A writing class that attends to the life-course “would be a classroom that encourages learning not ending with the course” (94). However, according to the coauthors, the fact is that typically, “the English teacher and the English student, once the grade is submitted, diverge from the course of each other’s lives” (96). Graham’s confusion and disagreement, which graced him with understanding and peace, became the basis for an academic trajectory that exceeded the life span of his writing course. By the end of our class, Graham had decided to take up a minor in English, and he continued to write about liberation theology in upper-division literature courses. When asked by a campus ministry priest to guide a Bible study, Graham informs me that he adopted an approach similar to what he recalls from our class: “I just tried to help [study members] work their way through their confusion, and give them peace of mind. [. . .] Two contrasting interpretations always came up. But it was good to encourage a discourse where people could learn.” Thus, Graham has come to find his academic work influencing his faith life in ways he understands as positive and in ways the priest read as productive.

But, readers may wonder, what about my article-instigating concern with the intersection of LGBT and religious discourse? Graham writes, referencing Spink’s work, “I find myself a lot like Lauren. Her assessment of EI is something that I would totally agree with. I’m not sure if I would have back then.” Back then, at the end of a course that included a host of LGBT material with an approach informed by queer theory that helped produce for Graham an unsettling, confusing encounter with his own religious tradition, even then it wasn’t a given that he’d identify with Spink’s rhetorical challenge to the way ex-gay ministries constrain Christian community. Three years later, he does. Life is unpredictable.

In the context of composition classrooms, I’m not interested in teaching religion or sexuality for their own sake. Rather, my goal is to assist students in developing their abilities to read, write, and speak in the mess of competing and disparate discourses that make claims on their attention and lives—discourses they might reposition themselves within and/or against. Rhetorical education is ethical education. We never only teach “just writing.” Spink uses the term “just writing” to describe her own knowledge-making, which isn’t the same as when it’s used to forward a conservative ideology that narrowly defines literacy education as a set of skills. But I hope we can teach a *just* writing that enables ethical world-making. Work by Spink and Graham suggests what’s possible for students, whether they are secular or religious, when teachers explore religion in the writing classroom through an approach that privileges unexpected arguments, unpredictability, misrecognition, and dwelling in confusion.

### CONCLUSION: CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL SUGGESTIONS

Some administrators and teachers may wonder whether a particular departmental philosophy, university politics, or curricular design is necessary to support the kind of course inquiry I describe. That might be the case. Context matters. Material support matters. Institutional status matters. It's hard to walk very far on my campus without seeing a "safe space" or "ally" sticker here. There's an LGBT studies program and minor. There are high-profile initiatives around LGBT issues. As a graduate student, a difficult teaching experience would not cost me tenure or my being asked back if I were an adjunct.

While all that may be true, even if teachers or administrators in particular programs don't pursue what they view as an explicitly political curriculum, I'd suggest four considerations that may be useful across contexts. First, students will write in a range of contexts, academic and otherwise, throughout their life-courses, and that writing will be informed by their personal commitments as well as the discourses they encounter in college. That seems obvious, but it's easy to lose track of that reality. Thus, it serves us and our students well to create space for their passionate attachments, which, as I've demonstrated, doesn't necessarily mean starting with students' personal experience; but we also cannot discount it—even, and perhaps especially, if it comes in forms not readily intelligible to us. For some teachers, that means religious identities. Second, people are unpredictable. Students will bring up their beliefs about a range of topics and voice their attachments to particular communities regardless of whether course content invites it. We do well to make a place for unpredictability so that we might seize it as a teachable moment. Third, consider opportunities to incorporate materials that speak to LGBT-religion intersections in subtle ways as course readings, writing models, or options for research and writing. If rhetorical analysis is an assignment, many popular culture figures open the door to conversations: Lady Gaga ("Judas" and "Born This Way") and Katy Perry (her first album was Christian music) come readily to mind. When I shared with students my letter to the editor mentioned earlier, that was in the context of a genre discussion in a writing-about-writing-focused course. Fourth, and more polemically put, do whatever you can. People are dying because of the beliefs operative in the United States and elsewhere about LGBT folks. And sometimes deaths happen inside a person. Sometimes teachers commit "spirit murder" against students. Royster makes this point when critiquing how teachers can devalue students' home vernaculars and cultures ("When the First Voice" 39). Isn't it spirit murder against students when LGBT issues are never represented in course materials, and when heteronormative statements go without comment?

When I consider the immensity of the task and the weight of this responsibility, to forge a world—or, at least, a classroom—without spirit murder, as the old hymn

goes, “sometimes it causes me to tremble.” And yet, I’m urged on by transnational feminist and queer theorist M. Jacqui Alexander’s reminder that “the classroom is Sacred space” where its habitués might “imagine collectivities that can thrive outside of hegemony’s death-grip” (8). This sacred space can be a site for unpredictability and uncertainty. Charged, electric with transformative potential, these experiences allow us to see the world at another angle, slightly askew. At risk (or at play?) is a notion of who we’ve been. The promise of unpredictability is that we, and the world we’ve inherited, can be different. Who do we want to be? Answering that question is a task for rhetoric.

### AUTHOR’S NOTE

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### NOTES

1. Gina Patterson, a doctoral candidate at Miami University, is currently completing a dissertation that examines LGBTQ-Christian discursive intersections in English pedagogies.

2. Depending on their institution, gender performance, or perceived or actual sexual orientation, teachers’ avoidance of these issues may involve concern for their physical or emotional safety.

3. Though my focus is on Christianity, I hope that the dynamics discussed may be suggestive for other religious sites. Also, I do not aim to conflate religion and Christianity.

4. I am not suggesting that knowledge of alternatives makes change desirable or achievable from any given person’s perspective, but it helps.

5. Student work is used with permission. I have shared drafts of this article with the two students whose work I treat at length. “Linda Behar” is a pseudonym. Lauren Spink and Ryan Graham are actual names, used at their request. Interestingly, Spink noted, “It was weird seeing myself referred to as ‘Spink.’” For a rationale regarding the decisions (1) to create first and last names for the pseudonymous student and (2) to offer students the option of using their given names, see Amy Robillard.

6. Similarly, awareness of religious rhetoric doesn’t just help religious students, but all students who are bound to encounter faith-based arguments. Likewise, queer theory is not useful just for studying LGBT subjects and communities, but for critiquing any normalizing discourses.

7. Hairston took issue with explicitly political teaching that sought to change students’ beliefs. At the same time, her self-written obituary highlights her feminist commitments and her participation in theologically liberal Unitarian Universalism. She suggested, “[D]onations may be sent to Planned Parenthood in her name” (“Maxine”). One of her letters to the editor in the *Austin American-Statesman* resists “a small but very well-organized segment of the conservative religious right who want to impose their narrow views [about sex education] on all of Austin’s school children. [. . .] Unfortunately, moderates are never as well-organized as zealots” (“Group” A12). Ironically, another letter writer critiques Hairston for wanting to keep “the religious right from being fairly heard” (Nash A18).

8. Rebekah Nathan spent a year as a first-year student at the university where she taught. Among the many insights she reports in *My Freshman Year*, relevant here, is her observation regarding class discussion: “Most classroom discussion, when it does occur, could be described as a sequential expression of opinion, spurred by a direct question or scenario devised by the teacher” (95).

9. Muñoz is quite explicit about his indebtedness to the theoretical framework forwarded in *This Bridge Called My Back* (21–23). Gloria E. Anzaldúa, who co-edited *This Bridge* with Cherríe Moraga, is a familiar figure in composition studies.

10. Various means of religious timekeeping might also offer useful alternatives to capitalist efficiency. In the Anglican tradition that claims me, emphasis is placed on the liturgical calendar that repeatedly enacts the story of Jesus's life. Liturgical time whispers, "You're in the story—exactly where you're supposed to be."

11. In spring 2012, Halberstam presented a lecture at my institution: "Low Theory, Gaga Feminism, and the End of Normal." During the Q&A, I asked about connections between manifestos of queer possibility and the socially transformative energies that religions offer, referencing Michael Warner as someone who attends to religion's queer possibilities. Halberstam worried about such connections, resisting any link between her project and a "messianic" religion that narrowly circumscribes transcendent experience.

12. Duane Roen suggests to Mark Montesano that he have his students in religion and composition classes write from a variety of propositions, and Montesano explicitly connects this idea to *dissoi logoi* (Montesano 96). Margaret Himley, former director of undergraduate studies in the writing program at my institution, cites *dissoi logoi* as a useful practice in a curriculum that asks students to deal with issues they might find difficult or uncomfortable (459).

13. This assignment structure is indebted to Gale Coskan-Johnson.

14. In April 2012, BYU students released a powerful "It Gets Better" video. Although LGBT BYU students can now come out and engage in "advocacy of homosexuality" without being expelled, there is still a long way to go (Byuitgetsbetter). Michelle Wolkomir's study of Christian ex-gay and gay-affirming men's groups might frame this video as "maneuvering around and within dominant ideologies to open interpretive space within which a key piece of dominant truth could be deconstructed and suitably revised" (199). However, based on her study of religion and sexuality in college students' lives, Donna Freitas suggests that students need "the possibility of yes: [ . . . ] a person has the right to cross a boundary and say yes to a forbidden experience or relationship. This might be considered a kind of civil disobedience when it comes to sex, or even regarded as space for challenging the dominant ethical framework" (229). There seems not yet the possibility of yes at BYU.

15. However, she does become enthusiastic about the topic. Also, apparently, writing class fared better in her memory than did some others: "There are classes I don't even remember taking. I found notes in my handwriting for this sociology class that I took, but I don't remember this class at all."

16. I thank Anne Fitzsimmons for this invention tactic.

17. In this way, Graham fits with Smith and Snell's finding that a minority of US emerging adults are "committed traditionalists." They care very much about their faith and adhere to the guidelines they've learned (26–32, 166–67).

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