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Werk at Play: Exploring the Creative Play of a Graduate Student Writer to Reimagine Graduate Writing in the Humanities

Michelle Lafrance and Jay Hardee

Abstract: *This nontraditional essay poses the imaginative possibilities of fostering creative, intellectual play in graduate classes in the Humanities. Exploring the case study of a vlog produced by a student in a graduate seminar, the essay traces how the hybrid, multimodal writing—writing that meshes the digital conventions of creative and scholarly genres—in the course enabled this student to “reimagine” the purpose and stock moves of effective “scholarly” writing as the student blended voices, identities, and genres in his work. Creative play can be understood as an important pedagogical tool that allows graduate students to resist coercive and exclusionary processes of socialization, the co-authors argue. Such assignments encourage powerful interventions into traditional models of academic preparation, opening literacy landscapes of reimagined “world-building” and belonging.*

This essay explores creative play as a pedagogical tool that allows graduate students to resist coercive and exclusionary processes of socialization, as it opens a literacy landscape of “world-building” and belonging, where difference and activism may become rhetorical assets.

More accurately, this project began in two moments of “fuck it.”

But let’s not begin there.

We begin instead by putting three quotations into conversation. We ask you to read them as a call to reimagine graduate student writing, the subject of this essay.

Play is not in excess to writing. . . Writing as play means that fictional elements are valid aspects of critical writing. Play involves performance, critical engagement with texts, considerable rhetorical skill, audience awareness, capacity to negotiate voice and tone, and an understanding of social relations—pragmatic, rhetorical knowledge, in other words. In addition, though, play entails wonder, curiosity, idealism, hyperbole, and imaginative leaps—an expansive horizon that purposefully exceeds predetermined limits.” (Micciche 182)

[I]nspired play (even when audacious, offensive, or obscene) enhances rather than diminishes intellectual vigor and spiritual fulfillment.... As long as words and ideas exist, there will be a few misfits who will cavort with them in a spirit of *approfondement*—if I may borrow that marvelous French word that translates roughly as ‘playing easily in the deep’—and in so doing they will occasionally bring to realization Kafka’s belief that a novel should be an ax for the frozen seas around us.” (Robbins 61)

Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (Halberstam 2)

Play. Performance. Curiosity. Imaginative leaps. Experimental. Appropofundament. Unmaking. Undoing. Unbecoming. Creative. Cooperative. Being in the World. These are not terms typically associated with pedagogies that support graduate student writers.

Indeed, a cursory glance at the proliferating resources available for graduate students and those who support, mentor, or study them shows that graduate student writing is often characterized by deficiency, anxiety, and struggle, posed as a problem to be solved, or reduced to pragmatic how-to's and/or "hacks" (see, for instance, Brooks-Gillies, Garcia, Kim, Manthey, and Smith; Simpson, Caplan, Cox, and Phillips; Allen). Rarely in field literatures or texts do we see writing characterized as joyful, comforting, or playful.

Because graduate studies is a highly politicized site upon which many of the larger discussions of the value, purpose, and outcomes of education and professionalization play out, Burford, Amell, and Badenhorst argue, graduate student writing inevitably indexes the thorny disciplinary complexities, interpersonal challenges, and institutional hierarchies that give shape to other highly prescribed aspects of graduate professionalization. We would be remiss if we did not also acknowledge the ways that the shrinking academic job market and the continuing adjunctification of higher education provide an ominous backdrop for graduate degree-work, lending a sense of gravity to graduate study, urgency toward training in formal written conventions, and weighting professional publication. Conversations about graduate-level writing are often subsequently highly instrumentalized, producing overly generalized, meritized, and institutionalized conceptions of writing. We join these authors, along with the growing cadre of writing studies scholars who center the mentoring, support, and studying of graduate student writers in their professional projects, in asking how such writing might be reimagined within these 21st century contexts. As Burford, Amell, and Badenhorst note, the invitation to reimagine the writing graduate students produce is also an invitation to blue sky thinking about what "might enliven our ideas of what doctoral writing may be and how it might be researched" (6).

Hey y'all, can I just sneak in for a minute? It's me, the Irreverent Rhetorician, here to spill the tea about vlogs I created during a pandemic-era summer sesh with Michelle. I'm so excited for the opportunity to revisit that project, that I'm having a hard time waiting my turn. Sorry, Michelle. This playful project was key to helping me unlock my identity as a queer academic and finding a scholarly voice that feels both suitably authoritative and satisfyingly subversive, a voice I want to deploy in future text-based scholarship as well as in this newfound videographic side gig.

Who knew four vlogs about fetish porn, ethical riots, bisexual Barbies, and gay-sounding voices could do so much? It was liberating to have the space to explore such spicy subject matter; like Stacey Waite, I also have "a kind of mission to illuminate [the world's] queerness to others" (113), and my vlogs certainly did that. Yet, while it was devilishly fun to bring gay porn into the classroom, I was most profoundly—appropofundely?—impacted by the encouragement in Michelle's class to eschew traditional academic prose in favor of creative writing play. In this play, I

not only illuminated dark corners of the queer world out there to be explored by us learned academics, but also shined a light on my own queer presence within academia itself. I'll say more, in due time, don't you worry, but I need to let Michelle back in to set shit up.

This essay, which alternates between genres of traditional academic narrative and other forms of personal and academic storytelling, teases out the value of centering graduate study in the Humanities around creative, intellectual play. The imperatives are all around us: a global pandemic that has remade the spheres of schooling and work, the increasing impact of global climate change which requires dramatic, immediate, and creative working solutions, and the undeniable persistence of systematic, dehumanizing social inequities—as Naomi Klein notes, institutions often perpetuate the problems they were created to address, and institutions of higher education have been integral to the perpetuation of each of these issues.

It is no time to play small. Inseparable from the other unsettling futures we have called up, the future of graduate study must, necessarily and unabashedly, be creative.

Ohmygod, yes! Now is not the time to play small, y'all.

Reflecting on the vlogging of the Irreverent Rhetorician (the nom de plume of co-author Jay Hardee), we explore the ways that one graduate student embraced creative play as his primary intellectual undertaking in a summer graduate seminar. In the Irreverent Rhetorician's discussion about how hybrid and multimodal forms opened queer being-in-the-world and self-making, we see the possibilities for both reimaging what "writing" and writing assignments look like for graduate students in the humanities *and* for more effectively supporting these students' diverse goals, identities, and needs. In our reflections about what Jay gained in his experiments, we re-see graduate preparation in the humanities as the training ground for emergent professionals who are **empowered toward Jack Halberstam's "being in the world," a form of change-making and purposeful activism conceptualized and realized in their writing projects.**

Inspired by the feminist, queer, and literary scholars we cited in our opening, we see our piece as purposefully modeling the types of play with voices, genres, and conventions that we advocate be more central to graduate preparation in humanities. In our text, the Irreverent Rhetorician uses *italics* and other markers to interrupt, share, and theorize his story. Michelle continues in the straight-man role, making the necessary academic linkages across and through the Irreverent Rhetorician's reflections. **Dr. LaFrance interrupts, using bold and brackets—a clear indicator of her authority—to advise, caution, and carefully socialize Jay and his work into institutional norms.** Many of these insertions are pulled directly from comments, communications, and endnotes Dr. LaFrance provided graduate students in the summer course, including Jay. These interventions demonstrate the powerful stakes for those who bend or refuse academic conventions within the contexts of graduate study.

With these moves, we intend to explore and explode the expectations of traditional academic forms for writing and knowledge making practices and to play with conventions and traditional scholarly registers to adopt strategies of refusal, dis-ordering, assemblage, "braiding," and constellating that have been integral to many nonacademic

forms (see for instance Cixous; Deleuze and Guattari; Waite; LaFollette; Powell et al.). As such, we do not intend for this text to read seamlessly but instead present moments where readers grapple temporarily with the meanings they make across seemingly unrelated moves and assembled parts.

Our Story Begins: That First Moment of “Fuck It”

Pandemic summer, 2020. People were dying—first in distant places, then in “our” cities and neighborhoods and families. Business as usual seemed a tone-deaf response to so much social turmoil.

And yet, Emergent Pedagogy, a summer grad class that treated the newest conversations about teaching, learning, and academic writing in writing and rhetoric, was impatient to be designed. How to conjure an antidote, an escape hatch, Tom Robbins’ “ax for the frozen seas” of endless zoom classes, masking, social distancing, no vaccine in sight? The thought of assigning the usual—drafts of literature reviews, conference presentations, journal articles—was weighty and colorless.

It had been such a hard year. Where was the joy?

“Surprise me,” she typed. “Delight yourself,” a more genteel way of saying, “Fuck it.”

The semester’s readings were richly interconnected and provocative, covering the embodied teacher and student, material rhetorics such as disability, queerness, contingency, emotional labor, as well as the deep work of listening, mindfulness, and reflecting on community. Why shouldn’t the writing assignments offer ways to shake off the languishing of the previous months as well?

The description for the summer’s writing assignments began with a reminder that genre choices are often deeply intertwined with ideals of character and embodiment. Students were asked to choose a character, persona, argument, or topic to “embody.” The goal was to “take up and explore the concepts, themes, and conversations presented in our readings and class sessions,” while encouraging “*fun*, creativity, character play, and VISION,” in ways that fostered audience- and genre-awareness, but also pushed against those conventions (see appendix for full text of assignment).

In response to the invitation to write big and write weird, co-author Jay Hardee proposed a series of “vlogs” that would take up queer theory and “unruly rhetorics” (Alexander, Jarret, and Welch). Running with this assignment, he scripted humorous, highly individualized, and cross-audience video-treatments of his responses to course themes and readings.

The Possibilities of Play

“On a basic level, we learn through play about the ball, the labyrinth, the dance, the mask, the drum, and about sport. Through play, we test our relation to the world, to others, and to ourselves”

—Eichenberg, *Questioning Play*

While “play” itself is “is a complex, overdetermined term fraught with contradictions and ambiguities” (Rouzie 629), so “notoriously difficult to define,” (Daniel-Wariya 118), educational theorists, psychologists, philosophers, and Writing Studies specialists alike have enshrouded the generative and developmental functions of play for writers and learners in decades of scholarship, often posing play as inseparable from crucial forms of personal and professional development (Sutton-Smith; Fergusson). “Play has resisted definition mainly because it is difficult to render dynamic relationships into language,” Scott Eberle writes, grounding his own working definitions of the term in the “pleasures” of imagination, anticipation, and expectation, as well as surprise, curiosity, inquiry, discovery, delight, satisfaction, joy, happiness, and/or fun: “an ancient, voluntary, emergent process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of play that leaves us poised to play some more” (231).

Right, who's not down for some more hedonic humanities? Embrace the value of pleasure-seeking in knowledge-seeking, y'all.

Similarly, Patrick Sullivan argues the benefits of centering writing pedagogies on creativity, as a crucial component of effective writing, “If we theorize creativity as a highly sophisticated and valuable form of cognition, it must also, then, by definition, be regarded as a necessary and indispensable part of any curriculum in a writing classroom” (19). Sullivan notes that recent paradigmatic shifts have seen creativity (and its related cousin “curiosity”) gain greater value as it is increasingly associated with problem solving, critical thinking, and other well-valued higher order cognitive processes. Similarly, Spencer Jordan re-imagines “creativity” as a “tactical intervention,” particularly into “affective change, [or] what Donna J. Haraway calls ‘troublemaking’” (2). “Creativity is not just the production of physical artifacts or performances,” according to Jordan, but “is also an inherent part of cognitive psychology, the ongoing sense-making process of our brains” (34).

Scholars in rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies have used both terms to denote and study classroom spaces that encourage curiosity, exploration, experimentation, risk-taking, and crucial reflection on the self and other, the rhetorical situation, and composing practices (see for instance Sirc; Gee; Batt; Shipka; Oleksiak). The benefits of play for learners in many contexts, then, lies in its ability to encourage identity exploration/formation, self-directed problem solving, skill development, and rhetorical awareness, as play is argued to make implicit or unrecognized rules or boundaries more explicit, tap the imagination, and (potentially) lower the stakes of experimentation. Play with genre and hybridity has also been central to discussions of the overlaps and differences between the texts enshrined by creative writing and those central to composition (Hesse; Graff), the nature of “experimental writing” (Patricia Sullivan), as well as multimodal approaches in writing studies pedagogy (Arola and Wysocki; Rhodes and Alexander).

Re-conceiving graduate student writing as a form of creative play amplifies a number of similar interventions into rote conceptions of academic writing—especially via the intentional or exaggerated use of transgeneric forms (LaFollette), transrhetorical storytelling strategies, “constellating” or assemblage (Powell), purposefully unconventional writing processes and forms (Waite)—and aligns with feminist critique, indigenious

storytelling methods, and queer world building that highlight the “messy, complicated, embodied, intimate...matrices of oppression that complicate privilege and marginalization” (Oleksiak 307). (For example, Timothy Oleksiak’s goal in embracing queer world making and slow process is to move writing classes away from what he names “the improvement imperative” (307), an additionally crucial component of reimagining the surrounding contexts and stakes for graduate student writers.) The resulting reconceptualizations of self, the messiness of meaning making, the unbinding of the composing process, and other conventions offer emergent writers the opportunity to stretch, flex, and remake texts.

Speaking of which, I’m over here stretch, flex, and ready to run with some text. Can I tap in now?

Playing with Your “Self” Online

*When my good Judy, Michelle, asked me to write this with her, I gotta be honest, I wasn’t that well versed in Creative Writing Across the Curriculum (CWAC) scholarship. So sis dug in, reading all about the potential for CWAC to deepen students’ engagement with course material. Like, Alexandria Peary defines CWAC as an “enactive” pedagogy that enables students to “learn by doing” (352). This, in turn, stimulates a richer engagement with course material as students creatively put concepts “in action” and show how an idea is “subject to change in a particular context” (353). First person narrative assignments, for example, “in which the student becomes a character effectively activate course concepts” (359). Cool, I get that. And, werk, activating course concepts is totally awesome, but my experience in Michelle’s class leaves me with firsthand experience in the deeper knowledge of *self* that CWAC offers. Y’all, *I* was activated.*

Michelle instructed us to take up our chosen genre as “a character” to “embody” through our deliverables; and “[c]ostumes, characters, . . . and ensembles [were] encouraged” for vid-casts (syllabus). This direction required me to pay careful attention to the mise-en-scene of my vlog, which in turn made me think more deeply about a genre that was entirely new to me as a writer/creator. But the Irreverent Rhetorician was not just a vlog; it was a character, so I had to think about who that character would be and get to know him. How to become him? Sure, he’s me, but how do I want to perform myself in academic contexts? Which parts of Jay get revealed in journal articles like this one? How would I creatively construct a hybrid-persona that cited, commented upon, and extended or applied scholarship? And how would I speak and embody myself on camera?

Ultimately, if you’ll pardon my trip back to the 90s (which are totally making a comeback, so get over it), the Irreverent Rhetorician is like a Jim Carrey Bradshaw. In other words, I try to exude a sense of style that extends from my wordplay to my wardrobe, but I deliberately undermine this cool influencer-before-influencers-were-a-thing vibe with the cartoonish malleability of my face that I deploy with all the subtlety of a silent film star. Some might see a Randy Rainbowishness to the Irreverent Rhetorician, and that would not be wrong, but I actually think he’s

more like The Kids in the Hall's Buddy Cole, if Buddy were to trade the barstool for grad school.

Attention to character in the Irreverent Rhetorician allowed me to rehearse the persona of a queer scholar, mined from my own personality and life experience (and clearly a bunch of Gen X cultural references), and to put it on its feet in an academic setting. However, I am less interested in the way these vlogs deepened my understanding of course concepts. I am more excited by the way that playing a character—playfully—and approaching the vlogs as a multimodal storyteller allowed me to discover my voice and ethos as a queer scholar, and to make some space for my own brand of subversiveness in academic contexts.

[I give this project a HUGE greenlight and two thumbs up, Jay, it's exciting and fresh work. But I do want to caution you that there may be people in our class and field who may not understand why your work is important and timely, or who may be offended by the topic you take up. Let's keep talking about how to manage these situations and audiences as you prepare to share your work in class sessions. —Dr. LaFrance]

Fuck It, We're Writing About Porn

The Irreverent Rhetorician kicked off with "Lance Hart's PervOut," about my high school friend who is now an award-winning Renaissance man of hardcore pornography. Lance is an occasional contributor to mainstream publications, like Cosmopolitan, where he discusses the ins and outs of pegging, but I wanted to celebrate his construction of a sexual identity that refuses easy labeling, developed in his website and blog PervOut. As I note in the opening of the episode, I set out "to dig into the dark recesses of the internet to unearth some seriously counterpublic discourse"—and, gurl, I found it.

My exploration of Lance's corpus drew inspiration from one of the readings that framed the class: Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes' "Queerness, Multimodality, and the Possibilities of Re/Orientation," which advances "a theoretical approach to the multimodal construction of queerness that situates such a figuring as a challenging possibility for queering sexuality, for queering our understanding of the queer and heteronormative, and for queering our interaction with multimedia and multimodal texts" (189). Alexander and Rhodes argue that multimodal compositions have the potential to complicate representations of queerness, playfully enacting queer modes of being; to connect the "queer diaspora" scattered across cyberspace (192); and to resist the disembodiment and desexualization of "queer," which they note has become "'safe,' or at least legitimate, institutionally" (206). We are here for the queering, y'all! And grateful for the opportunity to follow the Irreverent Rhetorician's prurient curiosities and to playfully render the queerness of fetish porn scholarship that is both unflinchingly frank and funny.



Figure 1.

[For this class exercise, work that is “hybrid” seeks to balance academic and non-academic conventions, demonstrating deep and attentive reading of our core texts, cross-audience awareness, and a clear exigence. I love how you’ve pushed the envelope, but I also want to encourage you to lean a little more into common academic conventions—citing, summarizing, and paraphrasing from our core texts more frequently. –Dr. LaFrance]

Undoing Limits through Play in Queer Worlds

You know who else is here for queer and I’d like to think would be down for my brand of irreverent rhetoric? Stacey Waite. I found myself nodding and “yas queening” to her “Queer Literacies Survival Guide.” She writes, “the world is a queer place, and as I grew up and left home it became a kind of mission to illuminate its queerness to others, to ask that others see the queerness in this world, and even imagine the possibility of queerer worlds” (113). My own desire to spotlight the subversive and urge to erect queer worlds led me out of the gate to fetish pornography. Natch. What can I say? I wasn’t looking “to queer” some esoteric academic shit; I wanted “to academic” some kink that was patently queer to begin with. Like the foremother of porn studies Linda Williams, I find pornography fascinating as a “discourse of limits” (36)—the rhetorics of what Williams dubs the “on/scene,” what mainstream culture deems obscene but nonetheless finds its way onto screen (37). This desire to provocatively transgress the limits of academic discourse—as well as the limits of public discourse—and to make room for queerness motivates the Irreverent Rhetorician. And that’s what Michelle’s Emergent Pedagogies enabled me to do.

*Right, but you might ask, did I really *need* CWAC to write about porn? Why not just write like Linda Williams? OK, smarties, sure, I could have waxed old-*

school-scholarly about porn or any of the other queer shit I explored in my vlogs but the playful premise of Michelle's assignment was wonderfully disinhibiting, and the creation of my scholarly queer alterego propelled me, fuck it, compelled me toward naughty queer worlds ripe for rhetorical analysis. And so the direction to play and experiment with genre and character enabled me to bring my queer world and the world of my queer friends into the classroom, undoing the boundary between my academic self and my queer self and allowing me to be fully embodied and engaged in both worlds at once.

[Be sure to balance the citations you include with your chosen voice, so that the work you compose centers on the academic texts at the center of your interest, even if your unpacking of those texts is about illuminating or demonstrating your lived experience. —Dr. LaFrance]

My Queer “Aesthetic Artifact” and Sense-Making Affects

The Irreverent Rhetorician wasn't just here to explore queer worlds, but to engage in some queer world-making of my own, so I was deeply invested in my vlog as a queer “aesthetic artifact” (Peary 355). I wanted to demonstrate to my professor and peers (and anyone else who finds my vlogs on YouTube) what a queer academic world might look like. As the first episode opens, I speak directly into camera—the gender plural “y'all” of my address—introducing myself and aligning my project with Alexander and Rhodes' queer rhetorical scholarship. I try to affect the tone of your sassy gay bestie, playfully gossiping about some queer shit. To create a sense of intimacy and camaraderie with my viewers in a queerly affected space, I frame my head and shoulders in the shot, as I sit on a cushy chair in front of a bright pink and deep blue backdrop and allow myself room to lean into the camera to emphasize certain moments. Although I adhere to the language and moves of standardized academic prose and popular/scholarly video essays, I sprinkle naughty words and queer vernacular idioms throughout the script like pixie dust. I elaborate a scholarly conversation, citing and visualizing quotes from esteemed authors, before using this framework to analyze a text, but the text I analyze is porn and I see fit to include a clip and graphic images of it, along with some hopefully hilarious reaction shots and delightfully bonny bon mots. (“Lance got his foot fetish in the door of the porn industry” is a good one, ya gotta admit.)

[Even as I encourage you to push that envelope as far as you can, let's also be sure to touch base about the stakes of this sort of work for you all. How do some exigencies encourage us to confront audiences that may not be ideal? —Dr. LaFrance]

Consummate performer that I am <wink>, I aimed to evoke viewer pleasure in my vlog about PervOut—like when I intercut a scene from an outré sci-fi porno (in which a bound and naked Lance Hart comically gets electrocuted with CGI space lasers) with closeups of my face making clownish reactions of surprise and disgust, and I ask the camera, “Gurl, what the fuck are we watching?!” It was important

to me to include clips of Hart's work; I wanted to communicate that even gay fetish porn has something valuable to teach us if we're bold enough, queer enough to see it—opening rhetorical scholars' eyes to performances of sexual identity that simultaneously confirm and resist the very notion of sexual identity itself, and to the generative tension between fantasy and honesty that exists in Hart's world of fetish porn. But I was also aware that my mixed audience would include people who do not share my penchant for a pedagogy of porn. Therefore, I selected a deliberately campy scene that was X-rated but also extremely absurd and I incorporated myself to function like a Greek chorus, channeling the response of my audience and humorously giving permission to the discomfort that I had deliberately provoked. In this way, I use the humor of this particular porno scene and my ludic looks to camera to introduce BDSM to the rhetoric classroom and to then manage my audience's discomfort; thus, through creative cheekiness I prime my not-queer audience to engage with the queer academic world I wish (us) to (co)inhabit.

[Is some/most/all academic work “activist” by nature? What does it mean when we blend the two identities, scholar and activist? What about other personas often embodied by popular authors—comedian, influencer, detective, adventurer, politician, boss, witness, visionary? What balances must be struck for these roles to claim a scholarly center? —Dr. LaFrance]

Playing with Discomfort

At times, I didn't want to diffuse the unease my audience might be feeling and preferred instead to lean into uncomfortable affects. As a professional actor I can tell you that some scripts are comedies and others are tragic, but play can find the truth in both. In the final episode I produced during the semester, I experimented with form to emphasize the sonic rhetoric of gay-sounding voices, as I put forth my idea that the materiality of queer voices creates intimate sonic publics. Citing both Eric King Watts and Frank J. Macke, I argue in the vlog “that the queer voice ‘announces [the queer speaker’s] idiosyncratic presence in the world’” (Watts 181); “it is his ‘sensual bodily insertion’” (Macke 136) into the public sphere, and this ‘resonant encounter’ between queer and normative sounding bodies can affect a strong response” (“Irreverent Rhetorician 1.4”).

To make this argument, I played with an aesthetic approach that foregrounds the sound of my voice. Atop a high-key B/W still image of my face, I overlay a pulsating pink circle, providing the only visual movement on the screen as it vibrates to the hum of my voice. I deliver the scholarly monologue slowly, deliberately, in a seductive voice that might seem more apt for the bedroom than the classroom. I intend to intone a frisson of eroticism as I almost moan: “Jesus, I can’t count the times I’ve been ridiculed for the sound of my voice, but I’m lucky; I’ve never been violently attacked for sounding funny as some gay men have” (“Irreverent Rhetorician 1.4”). In this vlog, I wanted to perform the idea that sound and sonic rhetoric are inherently intimate, and that this intimacy renders queer sounding speakers vulnerable to phobic violence because of the ways sexuality gets read in the mate-

riality of voices like mine—even when I’m not whispering sweet nothings in your ear. I want viewers to draw a connection between their discomfort at the sound of my voice and the humiliation and violence that gets redirected at speakers who sound like I do, and I attempt to achieve this through creative forms of writing and performance.



Figure 2.

[Jay Hardee’s fantastic “Irreverent Rhetorician” Vlog will be the topic of our first student-led class discussion. It is both impressively engineered AND a brilliant piece of new scholarship. But the Vlog does also contain explicit content and, while tastefully compiled and very well argued, I want to recognize that some viewers may find the material discomfiting. The questions central to how we handle difficult, uncomfortable, and potentially fraught topics in our classrooms is crucial for all teachers and scholars to sit with. I know we’ll have a very productive, classroom-as-community-building conversation. –Dr. LaFrance]

Creativity Is Inherently Political

Jordan reminds us that the storymaker is “troublemaker,” and “creativity becomes a tactical intervention whose end is affective change” (2). The troublemaking Irreverent Rhetorician thus seeks to make a world of “alternative modes of thought, both transgressive and resistant to social or economic norms” (36), such as the norms of White cisheteronormativity. In Episode 1.2 of the Irreverent Rhetorician, my queer worldmaking project takes aim at my own, holding other White gay men accountable for the loss of queer ethos from our supposedly queer community. In “Stonewall and the Rhetorical Riot,” I use chapters from Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics to argue, as Nancy Welch does, that “civility...may be a virtue, but not one in service to democracy” (110), and to suggest the possibility of ethi-

cal riots working “in service not of the mob (ochlos) but of the demos” (Alexander and Jarratt 15). I was moved by anger to create this vlog after I saw a White gay friend share a story on Facebook about graffiti on the Lincoln Memorial during the riots sparked by the murder of George Floyd. This friend called the desecration of national monuments “disgraceful,” and that pissed me off.

I open the vlog with a montage of images from the riots and other reactions to George Floyd’s extrajudicial killing, and I set the montage to an upbeat version of “June is Busting Out All Over” that Leslie Uggams heroically soldiered through on live television after a cue card fiasco left her without the words. Uggams resorts to nonsense lyrics, but she does so without missing a note or a beat and with style and showmanship that is nothing short of inspirational. I worry that playing with this song as I do toes the line of acceptably irreverent discourse from a White gay man; my intention, however, is to creatively underscore a poignant irony that I develop in the episode, which laments the seeming loss of radical ethos from the annual celebrations of gay Pride busting out all over June.

Episode 1.2 quickly moves from discussing the BLM riots of June 2020 to a history of the Stonewall riots of June 1969, which catalyzed the gay liberation movement that fateful night Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera led a multi-racial crowd of young radical queers in violent protest against a frustratingly familiar police raid of queer spaces. The ensuing riots were “the death knell for mannerly” politics of earlier homophile organizations like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis (Faderman 176). Within a year of Stonewall, the Gay Liberation Front and other radical gay groups had spread across the country with a revolutionary message of gay pride—a tactic, Lillian Faderman notes, that was inspired by “militant black groups” and their defiant declarations of Black pride and beauty (179). Thus, given the radical roots of Gay Pride, I find it dispiriting to see Pride coopted by the kind of conservative respectability politics that dominated pre-Stonewall gay organizing. And I get real pissed when I see White gays with their rainbow-branded corporate merch policing Black anger. So, I conclude with a reminder to pearl-clutching gay men upset about uncivil BLM protests that the gay civil rights they currently enjoy (however tenuously) are indebted “to the embodied rhetoric of a catalytic riot” (“Irreverent Rhetorician 1.2”).

[I want to note again that the video does include a few explicit images borrowed from gay porn videos and websites. —Dr. LaFrance]

Gaiety and Utopia in Grad School—Who Knew?

My most nakedly political vlog was about the rhetoric of riots, but even my most playful episode of the summer was nonetheless a queer world-making endeavor that tapped the “critical-utopian capacity of storytelling” (Jordan 36); it just did so with dolls. The vlog “Tiggy Upand & ‘Queer World-Making’” analyzes the bisexual themed webcomic Upland, about a pink-haired bi activist who works at a Boston hostel, as well as the companion webcomic Tiggy Goes to Jail, about Tiggy’s experience volunteering for the Massachusetts Bail Fund. Tiggy and all her friends in

both webcomics are played by an array of dolls and so I thought it fitting to stage my discussion of this work as a play with dolls as well. I searched online for queer dolls and surprisingly/unsurprisingly I found quite the cache, including Barbie-adjacent dolls with some killer looks—one doll I dub “Gay Spicoli” for his pastel tie-dye tank-top and long blond hair; a guy fashionista (fashionisto?) rocks stylish shades and a manbun to make my bald head envious; and an androgynous boy doll serves 90s club-kid realness in platform trainers and cropped green hair fabulousness. A shirtless werewolf from Twilight, who I jokingly dub “Wolf Trade,” makes a cameo, and I enlisted my friend to voice Billie Jean King Doll—but she never leaves her original packaging because “you never know what a ground-breaking lesbian Barbie could be worth one day” (“Irreverent Rhetorician 1.3”).

I staged the vlog as a play with queer Barbies not only to pay tribute to Tiggy Upland’s doll dioramas, but also to creatively engage with Sara Warner’s Acts of Gaiety, elaborated in Londie T. Martin and Adela C. Licona’s chapter in Unruly Rhetorics, “Remix as Unruly Play and Participatory Method for Im/Possible Queer World-Making.”

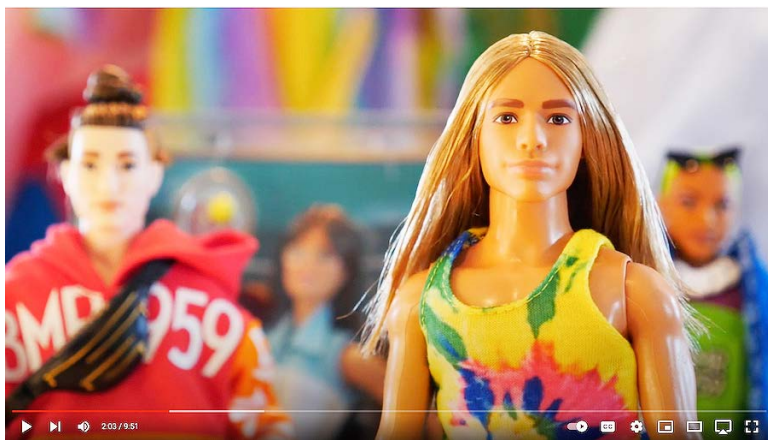


Figure 3.

Martin and Licona contend that play creates a space where “cheeky, irreverent, and spontaneous fun works collaboratively with a vulnerable, deadly serious insistence on a queer presence” (251-252). My vlog argues that Tiggy Upland’s multi-modal compositions use this form of play and the queer affects of gaiety in a utopian world-making project. Warner describes acts of gaiety as “comical and cunning interventions that make a mockery of discrimination and social exclusion” (xi). She argues that the “positive affects” of queer gaiety “involve pleasurable sensations and foster jubilant practices of life, art, and activism” (4), and have played “an integral part in the establishment and maintenance of LGBT public cultures” (6). I see this utopian gaiety in Tiggy Upland’s bi webcomic, and I want to enact this politically potent affect in my own work. And so, I roped in my friend, her

tweenage daughter, and my almost-eight-year-old twins for a gaily subversive play with dolls, which you can now view on YouTube and TiggyUpland.com (Ya know ya wanna see it for yourself).

[Let's think about where you can take these videos for publication, Jay—they're so impressive, cogent, timely, and provocative. I want them to gain a wide viewership! A multimodal/online journals may be interested in them as video-texts, but we'll also want to think about fit for your content. —Dr. LaFrance]

Shablam!

Having the space in Emergent Pedagogies to exercise this creative gaiety in an academic context was incredibly empowering. Like Martin and Licona and Warner, I am deeply committed to José Esteban Muñoz's sense of queerness as a utopian world-making project in which "representational practices help[] us to see the not-yet-conscious" (3). Muñoz's Cruising Utopia contends that "we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic" (1), and tips us off to the power of these aesthetic "wish-landscapes" to imagine and summon into being "the territory of [queer] futurity" (5). Creative compositions, like the Irreverent Rhetorician's vlogs, have the power to destabilize institutionalized thinking "through the more nuanced avenue of feelings," and so enable us to rethink identities and modes of being that challenge cisheteronormativity (Warner 3). Thus, Martin and Licona urge us "to risk pursuing the pleasure and transformative potential of a playful orientation [to scholarship] because it provides us with a way to imagine" new forms to "resist hetero/normative logics and neoliberal imperatives" (245). In other words, the playfulness I experienced, and which is encouraged by these creative opportunities, creates space within the academy to challenge the norms of institutionalized cisheteronormativity and other systems of domination.

<tongue pop!>

[I want to pause here and ask again about your audience. Who are you imagining your ideal viewer to be? —Dr. LaFrance]

The Stakes: Who Gets to BE in Academic Worlds?

"We will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which...no one gets left behind."

—J Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

Though we came to this project about reimagining graduate student work through our own moments of exasperation, questioning, exhaustion, and the desire for freer movement as writer and mentor, we quickly realized that we do not stand alone in this effort. We are neither the first to make calls for nor to explore the possibilities of creative play for graduate student writers at many different stages of study, nor the first to challenge rote and overly professionalizing ideas about graduate preparation in the Humanities. In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* opinion piece that laments the creative opportunities missing from traditional graduate study in the Humanities, Grace Lavery wonders whether the teaching goals of graduate programs, teachers, and mentors adequately recognize the highly creative backgrounds or the imaginative and nontraditional aspirations of her students, particularly in light of the collapsing academic labor market. Graduate students come to the humanities with a thirst for innovation, social change, and creative exploration of critical work, Lavery writes, yet, professionalization into academic standards and preparation for the dismal realities of academic career paths seem to sap “the magic” from process, product, and student. “These structures may very well help students communicate their ideas,” Lavery writes, “but they also supply them with the mystifying delusion that all good writing is good in the same way, and that the best writing is that which abides most fully by the established rules.”

In this essay, we’ve joined a growing chorus of scholars, researchers, and graduate students interested in what creative forms (essays, life writing, constellated rhetorics, ethnographic fiction, and storytelling methodologies) lend academic work and academic writers. As Aja Martinez demonstrates in her work on counterstories and critical race theory, many of our students must write their way into an academy that has little interest in seeing them for who they are; countering the stories that would silence, disenfranchise, erase, or remove them is not just a means to resist, but also offers opportunities to reimagine, remake, and reform the structures and epistemic patterns of academic culture, creating more spaces for authentic belonging (8). Shawn Combs argues similarly that an embrace of creative writing often gives a graduate writer “liberty to live, move, and have [their] being on the page” (137).

But the stakes are high indeed, even for those students, like Jay, who find a natural affinity for experimental and boundary-breaking graduate work. As Julia Molinari writes, academic circles still lean toward quite closed epistemic understandings of academic production—graduate students who do not have the support of a close academic advisor may face severe consequences for rule-breaking or diverging from expected norms. Keith Rhodes laments “the current paradigm of readerly hegemony” (50) in scholarly writing and composition instruction:

In Bakhtin’s term, we’ve made scholarly writing, too, increasingly “monologic,” focused on having authors prove that they partake of the “conversation in the field,” fluent in all the latest genre conventions, jargon, and (ahem) affordances. . . It’s almost as if the most successful writer will be one who surprises us the least, conforming most expertly to the model we already imagine, constructing readers as masters to be served in precise, settled ways. (48)

We hear the urgency Waite, Martinez, Malea Powell and others—*who argue they are often writing for their very lives, writing so that they may “be in the world”*—bring to

our understandings of the stakes of this conversation for graduate students learning to write. Waite confides in her “Queer Literacies Survival Guide” that “Without the ability to develop and cultivate alternative ways of reading and composing, I might be dead” (111). Powell invites us to “play language games lovingly, tenderly, remembering that ‘all acts of kindness are lights in the war for justice’ (Harjo...), all acts of scholarship are battles in a war of words, and of worlds” (21). Adapting playful and experimental writing pedagogies, as Waite points out, “is deeply political work—feminist and queer work,” but it is “work we must do as scholars in composition and work our students must do in order to be more complicated thinkers and better writers....[W]e must find ways to blur the boundaries, so that we can push them, so that we can take our field and our students outside the bounds of where we think we can go, outside the bounds of what kinds of knowledges we can access, and how” (54).

We’ve argued above that these types of explorative exercises can lead graduate students to greater understandings of the self, of others, of the social world, of audiences and readers, and of the many factors that lead to rhetorical awareness and effective writing. Jay’s experience creating the Irreverent Rhetorician affirms the possibilities we point out of expanding our ideals of creative play via writing to open such spaces and restructurings. We recognize that not all projects may be playful—some may be healing, angry, grief-stricken, sad, or reconciling. Some, like Jay’s, may be about the current work of a former classmate-turned-porn-star. But the opportunity to narrate lived experience, to break with conventions, and explore texts as a representation of an emergent scholarly self can lead to a greater sense of belonging to and *being in* academic worlds that see and support all those who wish to dwell within them. Our active remaking of graduate student writing in the humanities establishes many of the foundational conditions for reimagining graduate studies at large.

On this note, we end with the Irreverent Rhetorician’s own words:

Authoring the Irreverent Rhetorician empowered me to speak in my own vernacular and communicate through queer affect, while I channeled my life experiences, my queer interests, the materiality of my voice and body, and even my friends and children into my scholarship. Creative academic play opened the gates to a classroom literacy landscape where I was able to locate my ethos as a queer scholar and to experience that ethos as a rhetorical asset. Rather than leaving those parts of myself at the boundary of the classroom, I was able to locate all of me within the geography of my discipline, and Michelle’s CWAC approach to the semester showed me that these various parts of myself have power and that my ethos as a queer academic is a rhetorical virtue.

Werk!

Appendix

Choose Your Own Adventure Assignment

Game ON!: What adventure (persona) do you choose this summer?

Choose from one of the following. Though your work may take on many different shapes/actions/qualities this semester, please be sure that **the readings, materials, and discussions of the course remain the root content for what you produce**. I want to discourage any “pure” reflection or traditional “responses.” That is, what you produce should (creatively) take up and explore the ideas and conversations presented in our readings and class sessions. I encourage *fun*, creativity, character play, and VISION, even as I ask you to offer audience- and genre-appropriate attention to scholarly ideals in your work.

Vid-Cast Master: Get your 21st c School House Tiger King Rock on! With this adventure you will create 4 videos (of at least five minutes). Like any self-respecting YouTube star, you may even want your own online channel. Be sure to compose your vid-casts in ways that change up, model, extend, or challenge the many different genres of vid-play for educational and infotainment purposes. Costumes, characters, interviews of classmates and others, and ensembles encouraged. (You may wish to supplement your vids with a “script,” to demonstrate the time and attention you paid to production values.)

Captain Pod-Cast: Get your Fresh Air, Kojo Nnamdi, Serial, or Cult of Pedagogy on! With this adventure you will create 4 Pod-Casts (of at least 10 minutes). Like any self-respecting audio producer, you may even want your own online channel. Be sure to compose your pod-casts in ways that change up, model, extend, or challenge the many different genres of audio-play for educational and infotainment purposes. Points here for guests, interviews, creative audio, and other neat sound landscapes. (You may wish to supplement your vids with a “script,” to demonstrate the time and attention you paid to production values.)

Social Media Influencer: What’s on your mind FBuser?! Here, you will use a range of different social media tools (images, texts, vids, shares, conversations, events, etc.) to create a *four-week social media blast* (of at least two posts every other day—or at least 20 posts that mix media and up to 250 words of text). The goal is to change up, model, extend, or challenge the many different genres/constraints of social media for educational and infotainment purposes.

Auteur *Extraordinaire*: *Can you not see I’m working here?* This very serious solo genius will craft a long form creative nonfiction piece (of 15 or more pages) that draws on the course themes and readings. If you opt for this form you must complement our course readings with independent research and a bit of peer review/revision. (Plainly, this is to beef up the requirement, because the other

options require that students sink time into work with fussy tech.) Be sure to identify your venue in advance: *The Atlantic*? *The New York Times* Sunday? *Peitho*? *College English*? The new public and cultural rhetorics journal, *Rhetoric, Politics & Culture*? *Longreads*?

That Upstart Blogger: Here Comes Everybody! I *dare you* to yawn yourself to death as you blog this one out. Create, revive, or retool a blog that takes up an issue a week for six weeks. Posts must be 850 words or more in length, citing from readings and making connections to other blogs, news stories, and online content. Your blogs should bring in all the best of blogging—pithy and/or experimental expression AND juicy, nuanced, well-evidenced/cited content.

My GRRL Friday News Writer: Extra! Extra! Your goal here is to share the scoop with *a series* written for a popular news source such as Inside Higher Ed or the Chronicle's pedagogical "blog." Your series should entail five weekly installments. Essays must be 950 words or more in length and make academic concepts central to our readings accessible for a broad academic audience. Your news articles should adhere to the highest ethical standards for journalist writing—that is, your content must be well evidenced, supported and reasoned.

I Dropped the Map. We Didn't Need It: You tell me what set of assignments you'd like to produce this semester. I'm looking for 20plus total pages and/or around 40 hours above our reading and writing activities. Go for it!

Notes: 1) All deliverables *must be public*. We will "show and tell" these via the BB discussion Forums over the course of the semester. 2) **POST ALL DELIVERABLES TO THE DISCUSSION BOARD. All other work comes to me via email.** 3) Please watch your time, closely—I worked to "even out" the time commitment and workload expectations for each option, but there's just no way to tell how long some of these projects might take. ***Go simple, go small, and go lower-tech, when in doubt.*** 4) If you miss a deadline or need to change your plan, please submit your work with a brief *description of your re-alignment and the "penalty" that you have incurred.* 5) Submit all work to me via email, because BB is the worst and we're only using it because we are required to. I will post sharing areas for us to "view" and/or share and comment on your deliverables.

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