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"Where Is A Story Before It Becomes Words?": Understanding Queer Composition's Place in Writing Studies Through Lynda Barry's What It Is

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“WHERE IS A STORY BEFORE IT BECOMES WORDS?”: UNDERSTANDING QUEER
COMPOSITION’S PLACE IN WRITING STUDIES THROUGH LYNDA BARRY’S *WHAT IT*

IS

BY

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“WHERE IS A STORY BEFORE IT BECOMES WORDS?”: UNDERSTANDING
QUEER COMPOSITION’S PLACE IN WRITING STUDIES THROUGH LYNDA

BARRY’S *WHAT IT IS*

BY

JAMES FRANKLIN MCCLURE III

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Queer Theory has maintained an unstable place in Writing Studies because of the ever-changing political and social uses and definitions of the term “queer” in contemporary western society. In this essay, I discuss how composition scholars must reinterpret their understanding of Queer Composition from a writing genre to a writing heuristic in order to stabilize queerness in Writing Studies. I show how the Queer Composition heuristic functions within a text by using Lynda Barry’s creative and pedagogical text *What It Is* as an example that iterates queerness as an accessible and inclusive practice for all writers.

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Introduction

“Reading *What It Is* makes me want, more than anything, to be Barry’s student.”
– Andrea Lunsford, “Reflections on Lynda Barry”

Writing Studies as a discipline seeks to grapple with the shifting social values and expectations of new western writers. So, as social concepts are applied as lenses in which academics can view different and new types of writing, the social impact of those lenses become reflected in the collective, academic understanding which can develop into a field within the Writing Studies discipline itself. Schools of thought that develop this way within Writing Studies each come with their own cultural implications that dictate the future of their existence as academic counterparts to cultural phenomena. For the induction of queerness, a social concept as richly complex as it is thoroughly inclusive, into Writing Studies, the Writing Studies discipline has struggled to successfully find a commonality among those who seek to find what makes a composed work of writing “queer.”

Queerness has taken on a liminal role in Writing Studies just as how queerness takes on a liminal role in LGBTQ+ individuals who experience it. Yet, as individuals often choose to embrace that liminality as an aspect of their personhood, the Writing Studies discipline still struggles with maintaining a firm use of the term “queer” when defining forms of composition as the fluid use of the term “queer” among academics causes more confusion than clarity. The use of the concept of queerness finds its liminality caught between three different conceptual fields which all, in some way, reflect the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals both in inclusive and appropriative ways. When academics apply Queer Theory to their discipline, they are

typically discussing queerness as a matter of performative gender, sexual desire, or cultural phenomenon, all of which have merit in defining queerness.

Although each of these forms are important aspects of the contemporary, liminal understanding of queerness, confusion occurs as the liminality of the word stops academics from using queerness to identify or define a composition form as Queer Composition. Part of the liminality of queerness is not just caught between performative gender, sexual desire, and cultural phenomenon, but also to our contemporary shifts in social understandings of the term. As more and more insight on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals is made public by those individuals, our definition of the term “queer” expands wildly with each passing decade.

What I have set out to do with this project is find the connecting factor that embraces the liminality of queerness while also respecting the kairotic shifting of queer’s defining inclusivity. By embracing this kairotic shift as a complement to liminality rather than an obstruction, a level of reflection is introduced into the conceptual understanding of queerness. Now, alongside the queering of performative gender and the queering of sexual desire, queerness as a cultural movement and identity encompasses both past and present individuals, who identified and identify as under the LGBTQ+ spectrum, experiencing a collective trauma which builds their cultural collective memory.

Out of this cultural collective memory, Queer Composition as an accessible concept for Writing Studies emerges. As I discuss in the section “Redefining Queer Theory’s Place in Writing Studies,” defining Queer Composition as a Writing Studies genre develops a canon of Queer Composition texts. Building such a canon would be

paradoxical as the queerness Queer Composition as a genre would reflect rejects the act of building an essential ideology. Writing Studies theorists Jonathan Alexander and Michelle Gibson have defined Queer Composition as an approach of applying Queer Theory to Composition Studies that encompasses multiple acts of approaching queerness; the authors write,

We see some authors [...] attempting to focus the conversation on queer theory's usefulness for writing instruction and composition theory. As we see it, most of that work addresses the following issues: the queer teacher, queer writer(ly) identities, and queer classrooms and pedagogies. ("Queer Composition(s)" 15)

Working with Alexander and Gibson's all-encompassing gesture towards rejecting refining Queer Composition, I seek to address the issues of the authors Alexander and Gibson speak of while also attempting to refine Queer Composition's definition.

I argue that Queer Composition is not a writing format nor writing style but a writing heuristic in which the writers engage with their personal conceptions of "self" in order to express and make meaning of their own insights and understanding. A heuristic of self-expression does not negate nor function at the expense of communication with others, but, rather, pairs alongside rhetorical communication as a blurring of the boundary between self-expression and self-exploration. In order to iterate Queer Composition's place in Writing Studies, I seek to show how Queer Composition heuristically manifests itself in Lynda Barry's *What It Is*. *What It Is* is a hybrid book of creative nonfiction and writing activities written entirely in collage and composite imagery that seeks to unlock the process of engaging with the act of writing.

Through its complex composition between image and text, *What It Is* explores the perplexing questions surrounding Writing Studies such as *what does it mean to be a writer?* and *why do human beings feel compelled to write?* on each page. Through

hand-painted text and nostalgic photomontage layering of the “ephemera of education” (Kirtley 351), lined paper, bits of yellowed homework, and faded paint, pencil, and pen strokes, Barry asserts a commotion of poetic, yet rhetorical, questions to her readers such as “Why do / How do / What do / We Compose?” (41) and “What is self-consciousness? How does it come to us? When? Where from? Why?” (84). As *What It Is* explores the mind of the writer and breaks down the holistic components of creative communication, I explore how this book can help redefine Queer Composition as a valuable and crucial field to the Writing Studies discipline through its existence as an example of Queer Composition and also as a guide for others to compose queerly. In doing so, I hope to prove that Queer Composition is not just composing against a norm but a gesture in composing that any writer, queer or not, can tap into.

Writing Studies Literature Review

For this literature review, I am developing the current foundation on which Writing Studies is understood to better conceptualize how Queer Composition may assert itself into the Writing Studies discipline more deeply through Barry’s *What It Is*. By asserting Barry into the discussion of Writing Studies, I hope to better articulate how the text reiterates trends within the discipline in new and innovative ways so, later, I can assert how that reiteration reestablishes Queer Composition. Pushing beyond the postsecondary classroom, the field of Writing Studies works to afford college students a deeper understanding of their ability to clearly and creatively express themselves in both academic and nonacademic spaces.

Writing Studies encompasses the work students do inside of the university as well as the work people can do outside of the university. In the case of Writing Studies,

the diary on the bedside table works within the same boundaries as the first-year composition research paper. Although their goals are different, personal writing and academic writing both meet the criteria for critical value through the lens of Writing Studies. Both mentioned forms navigate human expression and exploration on the page as people try to communicate to an audience of academics, friends, or the page itself.

The scope of Writing Studies can be understood more clearly with a discussion of how Creative Writing Studies, Composition Studies and Pedagogy, and Rhetorical Philosophy all intersect to form Writing Studies. Creative Writing will inform our understanding of Writing Studies by addressing the philosophical struggles of why people feel compelled to express themselves in writing as well as the holistic, rhetorical gestures to which people hold themselves when working to express on the page. College Writing informs our understanding of Writing Studies by looking at how human expression for an academic environment manifests itself through writing and why the academy values writing and the ability to write effectively across disciplines.

In 2007, Tim Mayers wrote about how Creative Writing is navigated as a field of study in addition to a profession through supporting the idea that there is a clear distinction between creative writing as a practice and Creative Writing as an academic field but that the distinction comes with overlaps which identify philosophical questions found in the psychological practice of writing. Mayers establishes Creative Writing as a critical field by looking at the history of criticism in various English fields as he writes,

Hermeneutics is the primary, if not the exclusive, lens through which criticism is understood, even with regard to texts that, arguably, have emphases other than the hermeneutic. But what if there are other possibilities? What if we were to mine the history of criticism looking for texts that ask questions such as How can I make a text like this? or Under what conditions are texts like this

produced? as opposed to What does this text mean? or Under what conditions do readers understand the meaning of texts? (222)

By looking at the concept of academic criticism as something with shifting values between disciplines under the same field of English, Mayers distinguishes the value of critical thought to learn of writing and expression through a means of repetition and condition. Barry's *What It Is*, as a pedagogical text seeking to develop the writing skills of its readers, directly synonymizes critical thought with creative writing by positing that the two may not exist without each other. For academics of the Creative Writing discipline, like Barry, those who write and study writing are not looking only to understand texts but understand the experiences of the author as well. By focusing on experience, Creative Writing academics value the critical thought introduced into the text's creation and production rather than value the existence of the text beyond the author. This is achieved without devolving the value of critical thought on expression and its relationship with production as auteur theory.

As Mayers establishes Creative Writing studies as a developing field in the U.S. opening its practitioners up to criticism, we see this conversation extended in 2014 when Steven Earnshaw comments on the value of human inspiration and the history of putting that inspiration into practice in writing as people continue to redefine the idea of the artist over time. Looking past the Romantics' idea of the artist as a gift from god (Earnshaw 66), the Modernists' idea of the artist as completely separate from the work (67), and the Postmodernists' idea that the artist is inherently political (69), Earnshaw identifies the concept of the artist as a literary function (71). The idea that authorship serves as a function to the readers as well as authors themselves supports the concept that writing is a psychological practice of negotiation with reality and reception. *What It*

Is asserts authorship as directly having this function, which pushes Earnshaw's theory of readjusting authorial literary function from the conceptual to the literal as Barry's relationship to *What It Is* is not subtext, but the text itself by having her "self" serve three literary functions: Barry introduces herself as the author of the text, the instructor of her metaphorical classroom, and a character within the text as well. On this negotiation, Mayers writes, "the very fact that we have the works of the writer/author/artist before us as an index of these three elements makes the network virtually intractable in terms of understanding it" (74). In this moment, Mayer empowers complexity as an artistic quality of human expression.

Writing as complex expression and reception through the value of the author is discussed both by Mayers and Earnshaw as they each introduce Timothy Clark's 1997 book *The Theory of Inspiration*. Mayers argues that Clark's work "might help scholars in creative writing studies resist both the mystification and valorization of the concept of inspiration while still taking that concept seriously" (223). For Clark, it seems the concept of inspiration is used culturally both to value the literal work of the author and wrongly devalue the meaning-making done by the reader despite inspiration being extremely vital to the act of writing.

Earnshaw paraphrases Clark's conceptual understanding of inspiration by discussing the liminal role of the author and speaker of the art when he writes,

It is as if in the process of writing, it is what is written which doubles back on writers to confirm them and clarify what it is they are really thinking: there is a writing 'I' and a writer 'I' who, through the writing, comes to understanding what the writing 'I' was doing all along. (75)

Through juggling the agents of writers themselves and their subjects, Earnshaw supports that writing functions as a process of discovery culturally both as individuals

inside and outside of the academy make meaning of produced writing as art and how meaning-making occurs as a writer uses writing as a method of exploration. *What It Is* fundamentally channels Clark's concepts of exploration and self-discovery when Barry empowers her readers through interacting with the text as I explain in the later section "Lynda Barry's Implicit Teaching Philosophy in Practice." Exploration in Writing Studies is manipulated when Sidney I. Dobrin and Kyle Jensen connect the goals of Writing Studies and Writing Studies research to the concept of "abduction" and "abductive reasoning" by claiming that abduction is a viable reference point of, viable orientation for, and desirable orientation to Writing Studies (4) because of the discipline's strategy of meaning-making.

The use of the word "abduction" works in opposition to "induction" and "deduction" because abductive reasoning in writing holds an "absence of positive assurance [that] can be both scary and invigorating" (Dorbin 2). The concept of abduction, in this case, is both literal and non-literal in that writers are removing and remixing agency within their own writing in empowering and non-empowering ways. Through the lens of abductive reasoning, writers like Barry are able to focus on the experience of creating meaning through writing without a means to fulfill a goal.

In their work, Dorbin and Jensen introduce Susan Miller who argues that it is the focus on the production of writing rather than the finished text that distinguishes Writing Studies as an academic field. Looking more closely at Miller's work, I find that she does not wish for Writing Studies to remove texts from their cultural implications by focusing on text production as writing is always contextual whether works are

written for reasons influenced by context or kairos or written for someone or the writers themselves. Rather, Miller argues,

Emphasizing writing over reading, production over consumption, and description over always tacitly evaluative interpretation is not accomplished by retrieving the categories and legitimacy of formal systems of rhetoric. My claim that writers necessarily precede readers instead follows from work that tacitly reevaluates patriarchal histories of rhetoric as manly influences and Great Performances. (50)

Miller is identifying problems scholars of Writing Studies might encounter as they remove the agent of the reader from the existence of a written text. By removing the reader, researchers of a text may be quick to remove social implications (such as social patriarchy) defined by the work, but Miller argues that writers still maintain that societal connection to a work because of their existence as a human being interacting with a text.

Just as how Barry empowers herself (Mayers) alongside her readers (Clark and Earnshaw), Barry's work also reflects Miller's positioning of emphasis. Barry emphasizes herself as both a reader and writer of the text through narrative meta-text as her narratives, as I later discuss, act as responses to her writing activities and "Essay Questions" (Barry 13). It is only the shift in focus from reader to writer, to Miller, that may obscure the researcher's understanding of how to interpret text. This obscurity in understanding puts both Barry and Miller's work alongside feminist thinkers like bell hooks, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and Patricia Bizzell who all seek to dismantle standard methods of empowering different ways of thinking and meaning-making in their discussions of feminism's role in the self as well as in writing.

These feminist insights are continued as Candace Mitchell discusses meaning-making when she puts into perspective Donald Murray's "Teaching Writing as Process,

not Product” through a lens of Immanuel Kant’s philosophy that knowledge comes from the individual. Mitchell writes that Murray suggests,

[Writing] Form will emerge naturally as long as opportunities to engage in the ‘process’ are provided. No explicit statement about what constitutes good form is needed, because the assumption is that students will come to uncover the implicit expectations of the academy. (42)

Like Murray, Barry suggests that goals for developing a writer are not dictated by the good-or-bad binary. We see this as she writes to prompt critical thought within the reader, “Good or bad. Q: Is one always in exchange for the other? Is there some thing missing in both?” (Barry 74). Mitchell’s paraphrasing, like Barry’s prompting, implies that learning from the practice of writing can only be offered as opportunity rather than plan and structure, but her word choice suggests something more about writing.

By using the word “naturally” for describing how writing emerges from the individual, Mitchell posits the questions *what does it mean for something to be natural? How does writing occur in nature?* Answers to these questions can be found with a discussion on Narrative Theory. Narrative Theory seeks to identify how human consciousness and representation manifests itself in expression and storytelling. As conscious thought passes through writers and onto their pages, each writer’s narrative finds itself explicit within the text for much of Creative Writing and implicit within the text for much of First-Year Composition.

Mieke Bal offers a first look at contemporary perceptions of the function of narrative within human expression as she writes,

Subjectivity, understood as the crossing, in culture, of individual and social existence, also characterizes the concepts themselves. The provisional definitions [of characteristics of “the narrative”] given above, and the more elaborate ones that follow, have in common a special focus on agency. (12)

Bal perceives meaning-making as a function of the agent and creator of the narrative. Individual perceptions of people generate the narrative through which those same people define and “characterize” culture and the conceptual understanding of the world. In this regard, people who understand the world and make meaning from it through critically understanding and valuing their own narratives are natural “writers of the world around them.” Barry, as I discuss later, aligns with Bal’s reasoning as Barry brings subjectivity to the forefront of the metaphorical classroom she builds within her text and her prompts about writing narrative. Mitchell’s assertion of the “natural writer” comes from the function that both narrative and personal perception play in the creation and documentation of the perceived world. Therefore, Writing Studies informs how writing can be a form of natural creation rather than a synthetic, purely academic creation.

Narrative has also been represented in more experimental forms of writing and composing. Collage as a composition tool plays a prominent role in the history of Writing Studies as it offers a visual form of how meaning can be made from breaking down and reforming components much like composing ideas and narratives with words. Virginia Burke in 1959 writes of this ability to compose using collage in “Why Not Try Collage?” The title implies a hesitancy from the late-fifties composition community which creates the idea of an English language scholar scoffing at the sophomoric perversion of the writing media when collage is in use. Yet, Burke argues,

Collage became significant for its unexpected juxtaposition of unrelated materials and for its power to evoke feelings and associations. Montage and photomontage, while bearing some resemblance to collage, aimed for a more pictorial effect in which narrative elements sometimes appeared. (231)

This comparison between collage and photomontage as being distinct from one another introduces the common dichotomy in Writing Studies of what element about writing holds the most value: aesthetics or narrative. Placing value on different aspects of writing verifies marginal understandings of composing while simultaneously devaluing aspects that work alongside what is valued. By understanding that all writing is inherently multimodal (Palmeri, *Remixing Composition*), value can be dispersed among different concepts of writing more evenly which provides students of writing a more holistic value of expression and communication. Barry, through utilizing collage-imagery as the technique for composing every page, publication information and all, reiterates her approach of teaching a more holistic understanding of writing in *What It Is*.

Burke continues later discussing the educational opportunities that assigning a collage in a classroom may have when she writes, “Collage making could, however, be easily related to autobiographical, narrative and descriptive writing to serve as a means of relating associations and memories, so important in these types of writing” (233). This multimodal perspective on collage as a type of creative writing within a writing course captures how feminist theory and Writing Studies intersect. In these moments of creativity, writers both inside and outside of the classroom are tasked with building a self-imposed narrative which, therefore, disrupts the power dynamics of assigning aesthetic value to creative work.

Creative Writing pedagogy and First-Year Composition have a history of cross-pollination regarding student success. In a 1957 workshop report titled “Creative Writing in the Composition/Communication Course,” the Conference on College

Composition and Communication (CCCC) addressed writing poetry in the first-year composition classroom much like Burke's discussion of remixing the classroom with collage. CCCC concluded that composing beyond academic language into the creative writing field gave students a more articulate understanding of language at the sentence level. During this time, the field of composition was just getting its footing, yet the lines between the academic audience and the "audience of the self" were already being blurred as students composed and created for the sake of practice, rather than the sake of developing a product as practice, by using creative process pedagogy. Currently, there is a lot of support for process pedagogy, but Chris M. Anson's focus on process as a method of "cultivating interest" (213) in the student rather than developing a product is the current manifestation of the CCCC's 1957 workshop's claim.

Anson often references John Trimbur who exposes the common critiques of collaborative pedagogy by claiming that finding a common consensus among process writing practices is not in favor of the students' needs. Trimbur, instead, argues that process works to provide students a greater awareness of the power dynamics and dominations that occur in common communication as well as academic communication. This connection between process and collaboration is discussed by Janet Emig in 1976 who writes how students' most accessible form of language is verbal language. Verbal language, in its accessibility, is the currency with which the university and the world outside of the university is navigated. Therefore, in writing's function as simply a method of expression, personal writing and academic writing both coexist as a method of social performance.

The act of social creation and psychoanalytic performance directly aligns with creative writing and its connection to expressive pedagogy when Judith Harris in 2001 discusses how creative writing in its self-reflective nature can act as a form of psychoanalysis for students, and in our case, readers of Barry's work. Once writing acts as a form of psychoanalysis, writing's function as a method of expression for an audience becomes obscured as the focus is on the writer rather than the audience. CCCC published a commentary on creative writing in the composition classroom again in 2010 where the author, Doug Hesse, concludes that the inclusion of different technological composition methods blurs the boundary between Creative Writing Studies and Composition Studies even further than traditional textual writing. With the focus of Writing Studies now being on the writer rather than the outside reader, the way Writing Studies utilizes methods of nontraditional composing like collage and photomontage may also benefit the act of self-discovery and meaning-making.

Redefining Queer Theory's Place in Writing Studies

Often, Queer Theory has theorized the idea of a Queer work as a work that disrupts a canonized form. This concept of disruption is present in the appropriated denotation of the word "queer" by the LGBTQ+ community. The etymology of the word "queer" pushes back all the way to its Proto-Indo-European verb-form roots of the conjectured "terkw-" or "to twist" (EtymOnline) and remained as a denotive remark of disorientation as for someone to be queer is for them to disorient the heterosexual norm.

Although "queer" has been re-appropriated as a blanket-remark for western LGBTQ+ individuals, its connection to its twisting nature has not lost its turn in Writing Studies. In a 2018 book review, Jason Palmeri reviews Eric Darnell Pritchard's

Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy, Jonathan Alexander Rhodes and Jacqueline Alexander's *Techne: Queer Meditations on Writing the Self*, and Stacey Waite's *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing* where he argues that each text "demonstrates the power of storytelling as a queer methodology of disruption" (472) while also intersecting his own queer stories into the review to blur the conventions of academic composing.

Each of these texts, including Palmeri's review, work to discuss composition as a discipline, and also offer a queered method of discussion that focuses on narrative as a primary text rather than supporting evidence while also transcending conventions of composition modality and form. For example, Rhodes connects spoken poetry with composite imagery video while Alexander's poems are recorded video of him reciting his poetry. In this connection, these vignettes of poetry bring narrative insight on Alexander's discussion of self-perception and understanding of homosexuality in the heterosexual world. On this video of a poem, Palmeri writes that Alexander "consciously calls self-reflective attention both to how his storytelling has been shaped by oppressive social structures and to how he has engaged in conscious acts of resistance and reimagination" (475). These queer compositions that compose against typical academic form through poetry, narrative, and video all value the self as the defining focus-points for outer critical insight.

Valuing narrative insight in critical or academic work is something that is not inherently queer but something that is deeply connected to the form of Queer Composition. When academics view these rhetorical gestures appearing across medias that are meant to value logic and objectivity aligned with a heterosexual norm of an

academy, queer composing is no longer simply a disruptive act but, rather, its own form. Alexander and Rhodes have previously confronted this claim in 2011 when they assert that Queer Composition exists as a method that privileges expression and articulation over definition and recurrent form. The authors argue, however, that defining a form as “Queer Composition” exists as a paradox as creating a definable queer composing method un-queers Queer Composition by its definition.

If queer composing is composing that goes against the norm supported by academic heteronormativity, then it is true that finding a defined form of Queer Composition would go against the values of queerness itself. Academic heteronormativity is defined through a queer academic lens by David L. Wallace and Jonathan Alexander in 2009 as they discuss how heteronormativity functions at the university as a product of society’s normativity of heterosexuality despite increasing efforts to diversify with the inclusion of queerness into disciplines (e.g. Queer Theory and Queer Composition in English Studies). Wallace and Alexander define heteronormativity within the context of the university through the context of society itself as they write,

We understand heteronormativity as not only a social domain of power but as a rhetorical domain of power. A set of powerful controlling discourses, heteronormativity effectively divides people into two distinct categories - homo and hetero - and clearly privileges heterosexuality and what has come to be called the “nuclear family” as the normative mode and venue of intimacy and basic social organization. (794)

The distinguishing factor here supplied by the authors is that heterosexuality is not “the norm” from which society functions, but heteronormativity is the norm from which people understand and function within society.

I argue on behalf of a different definition of Queer Composition that I seek to support in this project. Queer Composition cannot exist with a set of criteria for texts to meet that funnel the texts into a “queer form” or “queer subject matter.” By establishing such criteria, the academy would inadvertently develop a canon of queer texts and, therefore, un-queer Queer Composition as canons promote normativity which queerness fully seeks to dismantle. Rather than establishing this set of criteria, I argue that “Queer Composition” not be understood as a set criteria of form or subject but, rather, be understood as products created through a heuristic composing process that values the self as the privileged body of knowledge from which these texts are created.

By valuing their own personal narratives as sources of evidence from which they can build critical thoughts and communicate those thoughts, writers truly engage in queer composing. By regarding personal narrative and “the self” as the wealth of knowledge from which to draw from when composing a text, a writer is not engaging with a paradoxical definition of Queer Composition because a queer canon of texts is not formed, just as the paradox implies. Heterosexual forms of writing currently exist as a position of privilege and value because of the existence of academic heteronormativity, and its reflection of western society’s heteronormativity, while the narrative-valuing and narrative-privileging form of Queer Composition does not create a canon because the insights and expressions of the writer are now the canonized material only accessible to that specific writer. Laura Micciche discusses a similar depth of self-canonizing in her discussion of “coming out” applied to both queer studies and disability studies. Micciche writes, quoting Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Debra Modellmog,

The two fields [of queer studies and disability studies] have “effectively questioned the traditional expectations for the kind of knowledge that can be shared with students, thereby redrawing the lines between the intellectual and the personal, the sanctioned and the taboo, the academic and the experiential.” (137)

Writers, under Queer Composition, are free to walk the boundary between the analytic and the expressive both when they write personally and academically because all forms of writing, through queer composing, are encouraged to “question expectation” by writing through the self.

Valuing the self through queer composing comes from the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people, yet the lived experience of the writers as a position of expressive privilege is what makes Queer Composition so “queer in form” rather than “LGBTQ+ in form” or “disruptive of the writing norms in form.” The disruption does not come as a twist in iconography, content, or privilege as Alexander and Rhodes assert in 2011, but the disruption comes as a shift in the value system of the writer: a shift away from the outer-analytical and into the form-representations of expressive compositions. Where expression, form, and self converge is the uniting factor that makes Queer Composition; Queer Composition is not disrupting any writing form but valuing the self as naturally disruptive.

The Queer Self as a Disruptive and Non-Disruptive Self through Performative Gender and Sexual Desire

Queerness, as an academic concept, can be understood in relation to how queerness functions as a social concept in many ways. For a more concrete understanding of such a fluid term, queerness can be understood through three distinct, conceptual perceptions: one, performative gender; two, sexual desire; and three, cultural memory. These three forms of the queer self will contextualize our understanding of

Queer Composition as a composing method inclusive of the identities that queer composing values and exclusive of the identities queerness inaccurately encompasses. When I discuss queerness, I do not use it as a catch-all term for all the letters in LGBTQ+; “queer” should not be used as an all-encompassing term without understanding who has been historically oppressed and suppressed by the use of the term as a slur. Also, the internal use of the term “queer” comes with its own history as the erasure of asexual, intersexual, and transgender people within the LGBTQ+ community is still a prominent issue. To combat this erasure, I aim to identify how “queerness” separately captures an essence of cultural memory while simultaneously dismantling the essentialism that surrounds sexual desire and performative gender as aspects of queer culture.

When I discuss the “queer self,” I use the phrase conceptually rather than socially. As I discuss these three concepts of queerness, I will not use the phrase “queer self” to refer to people who identify themselves as under the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Instead, I use the term within the context of each form. “Self” will continue to identify a person’s unique, narrative consciousness throughout this project while “queer” will shift meaning between the three forms for this discussion. This fluidity of the term is precisely why this discussion is needed. By understanding the perceptions of the idea of queerness, we are better able to grasp an understanding of how Queer Composition can be a heuristic rather than a genre.

The queer self is represented as an aspect of performative gender as gender is inherently performative for its role as social currency and function as social comfort. Performative gender does not negate the common idea of someone who identifies as

transgender, gender-queer, or gender-fluid as “born this way” (Lady Gaga) as the assignation of gender at birth is something that everyone experiences. Socially constructed understandings of gender are navigated by everyone, but those social constructions are constantly shifting and changing alongside the growth of humankind. Because of these shifts and changes, socially constructed understandings of gender do not truly follow the man-woman gender binary or male-female sex binary, despite the binaries still holding the power of being the privileged ideology of gender. The queer self, or the self that does not align with the privileged ideology of gender, shifts and changes as well in addition to those that do align with this ideology.

A foundational text for this school of thought, alongside the works of other Queer Theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Teresa de Lauretis, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is Judith Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” which discusses the problematic and paradoxical navigation of sex and gender as concepts through western society. Butler writes on this paradox,

Gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in some sense ontologically necessitated. (528)

Butler sees gender not as something that is essential to the human experience but an extension of the human experience. The norms presented as the social ideology of the sex and gender binary between man and woman only exist to support social hierarchies

of power. Yet, those who perform their gender differently from the social binary are unsupported by society.

People are not acting in opposition to the gender binary but are working within the superstructures to benefit their own gendered desires rather than uphold some sort of essentialist idea of gender performance. As individuals choose to fulfill their natural urge to express gender, those expressions that do not align with privileged social ideologies are shunned and shamed by the societies in which these individuals function. The urge to express gender is natural, but what is unnatural is the aggression individuals are met with after having expressed their “true selves.” Although true selves are curated by the individual who experiences that self, all selves are curated, queer or not. However, it is the queer self that knowingly curates the self as the societies in which the self is curated bring attention to the queer self as the Other. The idea of performing gender alongside the norm rather than in opposition to it is what makes gender performance “queer,” and it is this queerness of working alongside the norm that is represented in Queer Composition.

The queer self represents itself as a form of sexual desire not so much as a homosexual desire but a desire that thwarts the heterosexual standard. Concerning the power of repressing human sexuality, Michel Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*, “we are dealing not nearly as much with a negative mechanism of exclusion as with the operation of a subtle network of discourses, special knowledges, pleasures, and powers” (72). In Foucauldian thought, a queer sexuality is not homosexuality but is sexuality that exists to empower the sexual standard set at play by institutions of power

such as governments, schools, and churches by existing socially “beneath” the sexual standard.

These institutions educate the public and mandate the public’s understanding of sexuality. For Foucault, sexuality is the currency of power. Sexuality is contained and navigated by those who control the power in order to have a stronger control of the people who live under social institutions. Individuals who control social power are many-structured but ever present from large scale political leaders, such as politicians and private company executives, to small-scale leaders, such as church clergy and public and private school teachers. So, for any individual that does not fit the sexual norm outlined by the systems of power, that individual would be “queer” to the heterosexual privilege. Much like Butler’s idea that everyone is performing gender, Foucault’s perspective on the idea that power is sexuality argues that everyone is subversive to the sexual standard because the idea of a sexual standard only exists to control people rather than free them.

Queer sexuality would act as a subversion of the societal, heterosexual norm if it were not for the fact that queer sexuality cannot subvert that which does not exist. Although heterosexuality aligns with the biological opportunity of reproduction, its existence does not form against nor outweigh the existence of queer sexuality. Rather, the sexualities coexist. Just like how most people have sex for pleasure as well as procreation, queer sexuality is a sexual existence that fulfills the need for pleasure much like heterosexual sexuality may fulfill the need for procreation. Foucault argues that these discourses that surround sexualities, which inquire beyond reproductive need, mirror the need for sexual existences. People must discuss sexuality for consent,

education, and safety. Therefore, sexuality is policed much like language. Once that policing no longer controls the sex act, the individuals involved in the sex act become “queer” to the power structures holding sexual control. At its most raw, theoretical form, queer sex is not sex that is not policed but sex that resists policing and celebrates freedom from social control. This does not mean queer sex is non-consensual, uneducated, and unsafe, but, rather, consent, safety, and education is not discussed by sexual partners as a means to fulfill a social ideology but discussed as a means to achieve mutual pleasure.

Queer sexuality is a sexual experience that only holds social value within the individuals acting themselves and does not inform or create a larger cultural movement or concept as those individuals engaging in queer sex acts have increasingly shifting and developing understandings and performances of sexuality just as how their queer performances of gender vary greatly from person-to-person. Queerness retains social power via its fluidity regarding sexuality and gender from an individual-by-individual basis, but that fluidity is why queer conceptions of sexuality and performative gender cannot dictate the standard in which we identify acts of Queer Composition. Once criteria is based off of sexuality and gender, the academic field of Queer Composition will develop canonized texts that establish a queer ideology in which all these texts are valued for entry into the “Queer Composition” label.

By looking at the concepts that overlap between queer conceptions of sexuality and performative gender, I found that the valuing of individual thought and self-reflection in order to compose a sexuality or perform gender greatly ties the two concepts together and it is much needed in our understanding of what Queer

Composition can be for Writing Studies. Yet, it is our contemporary ideologies from which queerness is navigated that stops Queer Composition to use these concepts of points of definition as we must remove developments of ideologies. By looking at the historical moments from which developments of queer understanding occur, I find that capturing the kairotic fluidity alongside queer fluidity of defining sexuality and performative gender develops a queer cultural memory reflective of collective trauma. From this collective queer cultural memory, we can grasp a Queer Composition heuristic because the collective is ever-growing as more histories are uncovered and more experience are being had by LGBTQ+ individuals with individual conceptions of queerness.

Queer Cultural Memory through Collective Trauma as Narrative Self-Building

Although queer identities do not exist solely as responses to extremely negative situations, the points of contact between queer identities and their straight power-holding counterparts have caused the most lasting impact on LGBTQ+ and our understanding of queerness. This impact has led to a collective trauma that disrupts the queer cultural memory which creates the sense of “disruption” as an element of cultural memory itself.

Self-doubt, a sense of exile, and self-policing are all behaviors that stem from queer collective memory. LGBTQ+ people use introspective qualities such as appropriation, performance, self-modification, reidentification, and disidentification (to use language from Krista Ratcliff developed from Kenneth Burke) to help them safely navigate a straight-aligned society. They also engage with the public of western discourse as the Other and, therefore, compose their own counterpublic dictated by

modifying (to use language from Michael Warner) their sexual and gender performances to better navigate that public. This act of self-modification implies a self-reidentification for the LGBTQ+ people to maintain some level of comfort and acceptance as the Other. As acts of rebellion and freedom, however, LGBTQ+ people also dis-identify with their appropriated, labeled identities (both given and chosen) as they compose their new queered identities that transcend common form (Muñoz).

Although these behaviors are responses to collective trauma, they also benefit LGBTQ+ people because each introspective quality provides practice into critical thinking and creative composing. On establishing a queer history, Jack Halberstam states,

By engaging a perversely feminist method, one that uses present-day insights to make sense of the complexities of other eras, we can see that multiple modes of gender variance exist in both contemporary society and nineteenth century society. If contemporary models of gender variance tend to presume some continuity between lesbianism or transsexuality and cross-gender identification, in the absence of sexual identities, gender variance must have meant something different. (59)

With Halberstam's assertion of the queer theoretical concept of "perverse presentism," Halberstam argues against building a queer understanding of history as current conceptions of gender privilege gender and sexuality in ways that do not reflect past understandings. By looking at cultural memory, I am not trying to develop a queer history as the values and biases present in my contemporary understanding of gender and sexuality are not dismissible. Rather, by looking at a traumatic cultural event deeply associated and coded with both former and contemporary perceptions of queerness, I am establishing a cultural memory which builds our conceptual understanding of Queer Composition as a heuristic.

One of the most influential moments in history that developed the current queer cultural memory through collective trauma was the AIDS epidemic. Although there are many more moments that build queer cultural memory such as the Stonewall riots, Harvey Milk's election, and the 2018 midterm elections, the AIDS epidemic holds lasting power within the cultural memory for its political and emotional impact. The lasting impact of this experience makes it the best candidate for establishing a cultural memory from which Queer Composition can develop its heuristic and for showing how Queer Compositions often occur within academic work that seeks to discuss queer issues.

AIDS as a building block of queer collective memory is clearly discussed in Joshua Gamson's 2017 article "'The Place That Holds Our Stories': The National AIDS Memorial Grove and Flexible Collective Memory Work" where he discusses the characteristics of trauma through organized collective memory regarding the single federal U.S. AIDS memorial: The Grove. The Grove works to develop our understanding of collective trauma, but it is also beneficial to think of this memorial site as a form of public composition. As an affective rhetorical device attempting to build a physical space where people can remember, mourn, and celebrate the lives of individuals surrounding the AIDS crisis, The Grove also becomes a location for future moments of self and group composition and for composing group and individual identities responding from the collective trauma The Grove seeks to compose within.

Gamson addresses collective memory through the lens of many definitions, all of which seem to work within the concept of AIDS and collective trauma, rather than

proving one over another. The definition of collective memory that informs Writing Studies comes from Barry Schwartz, who states that the term

refers to the distribution throughout society of what individuals know, believe, and feel about the past, judge the past normally, how closely they identify with it, and how much they are inspired by it as a model for their conduct and identity. (10)

Collective memory, for Schwartz, is not a reliable wealth of past information a group of people carry with them equally but is instead a function of a group of people responding to a common experience and policing their behavior in response to it.

As Gamson writes of the public response and function of The Grove in the creation of the site as well as the site's public reception, he claims,

We see forces encouraging . . . resolution and fixity, in a dominant narrative rooted in a memorial hierarchy and a didactic memory technology. On the other hand, we see forces facilitating . . . irresolution, changeability, and multiple voices. (45)

For Gamson, having studied the memorial, the collective memory that is built, both literally in the memorial itself and theoretically in the queer public's reception and creation of the monument, is not a set of definable traits and memories but an impact on the attitudes of future LGBTQ+ people living in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic. Therefore, the memory of the millions of people who died from the neglect of the U.S. government to provide healthcare, and the memory of the millions of people who protested for queer recognition in the public eye, builds a trauma in the minds of contemporary LGBTQ+ people, both that lived through the AIDS epidemic and those born after, that the institutions that empower heteronormative ideologies actively promote a fatal ignorance concerning a health epidemic targeting those who are ostracized by that ideology.

Rarely before the AIDS epidemic has queerness been targeted so publicly as the Other. The cultural memory surrounding this trauma is reflected in the behavior of queer individuals. This modification of behavior is reaffirmed by Margaret Morrison when she discusses queer representations of shame in respected literary works. By looking at such literature, Morrison identifies the frequency in which LGBTQ+ people experience shame as a result of trying to function within a heteronormative society and ironically, therefore, function under a collective trauma. Morrison writes,

When queers say we value life, we don't mean idealized life; we mean life in all of its varieties and harshness . . . Most of us do in life what we must do to survive and what we do is what we are constantly becoming. If dominant culture deems that what I do is non-normative, abject, and undignified and therefore of little worth, the shame I feel among other queers is a shared shame that imparts dignity because we value our differences from those in dominant culture even if, to the latter, what we do is disgusting or of little value. (26)

Morrison argues that the active choice for LGBTQ+ people to function within a heteronormative society is a willingness to persevere against collective trauma. But, in doing so, LGBTQ+ people must critically evaluate their position within that heteronormative society because they must do so before successfully performing their queer self as the society in which they perform has established itself as literally harmful and life-threatening to LGBTQ+ people.

Although Gamson's work is an academic case study and Morrison's work is literary criticism, each author values their personal narrative as supporting evidence for their argument. Gamson's article is framed with a personal narrative by opening with the phrase "For the life of me, I can't remember his name" (34) and continuing to slowly transition from his qualitative experience with an individual dying from AIDS to identifying the cultural function of AIDS during the time of the epidemic. Morrison's work is influenced by her narrative as she uses her real-life experiences as critical

evidence for queer shame. The opening line of the article, “When I came out to my father in the late 1970s, he responded that ‘Some things are better left unsaid’” (Morrison 17), establishes Morrison’s unique perspective as a person functioning under queer collective memory which can be used as evidence for the different manifestations of shame found within literary works.

These moments of narrative are saturated in lyrical language typically found in pieces of creative writing rather than academic research articles. For example, Gamson writes, the AIDS victims “helped each other die, and even as they fed soup and passed bedpans to boys who had just yesterday been so beautiful, floating on tubes on the Russian River or dancing shirtless in the streets, they figured they were next” (34). Gamson is gliding from one image to the next to inform the reader, sub-textually, of the intimacy of San Francisco queer life and its mirrored comradery in AIDS healthcare. These two pieces are examples of queer composition not because they are written by queer authors self-identifying within the text. The two pieces are queer compositions because each author valued their narrative experiences as textual evidence to support their individual argument and applied that narrative experience to the text itself in ways that identified the critical thinking needed to self-police their performed self.

From the three forms in which academics typically define Queer Theory’s concept of the queer self (i.e. performative gender, sexual identity, and cultural memory), cultural memory encapsulates the functions of both performative gender and sexual identity by focusing on the emotional reception of LGBTQ+ individuals and their understanding of society rather than focusing on LGBTQ+ individuals’ function or role within society. In this regard, defining queer theory for Queer Composition cannot

attach itself to “queer” as a sexual identity or “queer” as a gender identity. Instead, we must define “queer,” for Queer Theory, through the lens of cultural memory to the redefine Queer Composition as a heuristic rather than a genre because where genre privileges ascribing identity, heuristics privilege individual perceptions of the self.

Introduction to the Intersections of Queer Theory and Writing Studies through Lynda

Barry’s *What It Is*

To reiterate why perceptions of the self are important to Writing Studies, I find that the needs from past interpretations of writing to new concepts of writing are similar in their mutual need to maintain their existence as a reflection of the expressive needs of individuals responding to dynamic and uncertain social change. As these individuals find the impulse to write, Writing Studies must remain open and inclusive of new methods and viewpoints of expression in order to both value everyone who communicates as well as sustain itself as an ongoing discipline. Contemporary practices under the Writing Studies discipline open space for both electronic and physical multimodality as mutual aspects of both creative and academic composing. Yet, those spaces are still not being understood as open for queerness within individuals writing both explicitly and implicitly with queerness as those spaces, in their innovation, still arise from exclusive conventions of the academy both in the Creative Writing field and in academic composing.

Queer Composition has not found its consistent understanding within Writing Studies as the liminality of queerness as a lived experience is difficult to capture with an all-encompassing application of Queer Theory to Writing Studies. The current fields within the Writing Studies discipline are unable to capture the depth and complexity of

human interaction with writing as queerness continues to go undefined as a sub-discipline or field under Writing Studies rather than a topic addressed by Writing Studies. Yet, although the Writing Studies discipline has been unable to grasp Queer Composition with consistency, queerness and the act of writing, both academically and creatively, continues to intersect, unnoticed.

Barry's connection between creative writing and composition pedagogy is what establishes her place in Writing Studies both as a renowned figure of the creative arts as well as an author of various pedagogical texts seeking to spark creative thinking in the reader who is willing to learn. As self-expression, self-exploration, and psychoanalysis is threaded through her works as an educator and an author, Barry's mission aligns flawlessly with the mission of Writing Studies to provide insight into people's impulse to write. It is through the way she threads her personal experiences within her teaching materials in unpredictable, multimodal ways that Barry unintentionally embraces the Queer Composition heuristic. For the rest of the project, I will be showing how Barry's book *What It Is* will help us better understand the function and presence of the Queer Composition heuristic on completed narrative and academic work as well as the applicability of the Queer Composition heuristic on upcoming writing projects among both creative and academic writers.

Literary Criticism of Lynda Barry's Work

Lynda Barry's work as both a writer and a visual artist has been praised for its inventive form and innovative approach to the concepts of creativity and expression whether that be to painting with her 2010 book *Picture This*, to post-secondary teaching in her 2014 book *Syllabus: Notes From an Accidental Professor*, or to writing in her

2008 book *What It Is*. These three books are regarded as a trilogy of creative thinking from the mind of Lynda Barry as each book is composed completely, publication pages and all, out of composite imagery, painting, and collage.

Each page within these books exists as a piece of visual art, but as the subject matter shifts between books through painting, teaching, and writing, each book tasks readers with shifting their preconceptions of critical thinking regarding painting, teaching, and writing away from all expectations in order to relearn what creativity is and how they can act on that creativity. In each of these books, Barry's audience is often addressed directly as she understands her audience's interest in these different avenues of creativity. Although, as forms of writing, *Picture This* and *Syllabus* add to the discussion of Writing Studies, *What It Is* is Barry's direct contribution to Writing Studies by existing as an "activity book" in which individuals curious of how to reach their full potential as writers, specifically, are called upon by Barry to explore their understanding of creative processes they may take for granted such as their definitions of memory, image, and form.

We can more precisely understand why Barry's *What It Is* fits in with the larger conversation surrounding Writing Studies with a discussion of the brief scholarship surrounding Barry's greater body of work. Melinda L. de Jesús writes about Lynda's "alternative conceptions of being" ("Liminality" 220) regarding Barry's identity as an American woman and Filipina. De Jesús identifies Barry as one of the few Filipinas to popularize her autobiographical work in the American public and reiterates the impressiveness of maintaining that popularity with artistic graphic works. De Jesús argues that the book

refutes the idea of Filipina American ‘unrepresentability’ because its formal (aesthetic/artistic) and thematic foci link mestiza consciousness to decolonization. Is a testament to surviving racialization and erasure in the imperialist US and to the importance of art to theorize, raise consciousness, and to heal. (248)

By establishing a connection to the artistic value of Barry’s work and the progressiveness of its material in *One! Hundred! Demons!*, de Jesús opens the perception surrounding Barry beyond just a comic book artist and more into a visual artist and creator worthy of deep critical thought.

De Jesús provides a closer look into the characters of *One! Hundred! Demons!* beyond Barry herself in another article published the same. In this article, de Jesús explores Barry’s feminist iconography through the comic form, claiming “Comics are an inherently postmodern art form; however, like most writing by U.S. women of color, Barry’s comic value multiplicity while resisting alienation” (“Of Monsters” 20) and continues, “through her cartoons Barry remembers and honors her own experience, as well as the realities of her mother and grandmother . . . offering us a model of understanding and compassion” (21). De Jesús here is linking the values of feminism with the practice of narrative as Barry values and reclaims her memories as valid stories to be told.

Two years after de Jesús’s conversation, Barry as a subject enters academic discourse again as Theresa M. Tensuan claims,

The narrators of Barry’s work . . . literally as well as figuratively question the social codes and communal assumptions that engender limited and limiting roles and establish specific parameters in which these roles can be enacted. (954)

To Tensuan, Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!* offers a very clear representation of societal ideologies, in her case *Filipina* girlhood in America, and through representing those ideologies visually with the comic medium, Barry makes more apparent her

questions as the control over visual form is tighter with iconographic shorthand compared to long form Creative Nonfiction. Barry's readers see gendered injustice on the page through the eyes of her childhood self as manifested in the art style of the comic with its "deliberately 'naive' graphic style [to complement] the brutally honest musings of its young narrator" (de Jesús, "Liminality" 220). What may seem like an appeal to emotion, this youthful art style, is really a practice in honesty that pushes concepts of racism and sexism to the page's surface for the reader to struggle with and consume.

Classifying Barry's work alongside the success of Alison Bechdel's graphic novels, Scott McCloud's criticism, and Johanna Drucker's poetic insight, Hillary Chute writes of Barry's visual poetic form, through stating

Barry's gorgeous recent books, *One Hundred Demons*, *What It Is*, and *Picture This*, make the materiality of prose in comics clear, she 'breaks up' the visual surface of her handwritten text - she ruffles it, we might say - by switching from lowercase to uppercase letters and print to cursive within the space of one sentence and even one word. Barry establishes what I think of as an extrasemantic visual rhythm that is similar to what poetry also offers." (380)

Chute's observation of Barry's "extrasemantic visual rhythm" is deeply effective in Barry's work because of the rhythm's accessibility to the reader even though it requires quite a bit of participation on the part of the reader. But, there is an interesting connection being made between teaching texts and poetic texts as Barry's books, at least *What It Is* and *Picture This*, are almost forms of textbooks through being dawning "activity books" by Barry herself.

From this short review of literature, we find that de Jesús argues Barry's feminist work is racially and ethnically progressive and that this progressiveness is clear in her writing and her visual composing. This suggests Barry presents a liminal social

space within her writing of which Tensuan argues combats the idealization of limiting and refining social codes and assumptions in ways that, according to Chute, do not disrupt the playfulness of poetic voice and art style. These authors' discussions of Barry all assert her as a leading beacon of insight regarding the harnessing of ambiguity as tool with which writers can make meaning. What makes her work a work of Queer Composition, however, is how all these varieties of ambiguity converge in her use of narrative storytelling alongside instruction, with both types of writing acting as forms of self-exploration as well as self-expression, for both her audience of readers and herself as a reader of her own work.

Lynda Barry's Implicit Teaching Philosophy in Practice

Connecting the visually poetic to the pedagogical, *What It Is* remains one of the most undeniably accessible and unique books that teaches writing. Although *What It Is* was not designed to fit in the academy as a teachable primary text, that does not imply the book exists beyond pedagogical means. The book itself is the classroom, designed from Barry's teaching experiences in her actual classroom, and the prompts within its pages are the attempts to teach critical thinking and creative thinking to the readers who are engaging with the book to learn how to write. Much like early anti-textbooks such as *Writing Without Teachers* by Peter Elbow and *Telling Writing* by Ken Macrorie, *What It Is* promotes a level of receptiveness to writing that more highly academic works do not fulfill with their gatekeeping practices of inhibiting public accessibility with price, upper-level academic language, and need for supplementary in-person instruction.

By looking at *What It Is* as an educational tool for individuals to be introduced to compositions, Barry seems to take the advice of Murray when he writes,

What is the process we should teach? It is the process of discovery through language. It is the process of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language. (40)

Although Barry never cites Murray, her values align almost completely. Tasked with teaching creative writing and creative thinking with this book, Barry writes to prompt her readers to discover through the creative strain that already runs through them. As these feats of great introspection promote metacognition within Barry's readers, *What It Is* does not exist solely as an activity book but crosses multiple genres of composition where page-by-page the reader is met with a visual art collage prompting critical thinking, autobiographical comic-strip vignettes, and writing prompts to pair the two.

Throughout these narratives are single page collage works that prompt readers to think critically of their own minds. Each collage acts as an art piece of identifying metacognitive strategies that ask the reader to question themselves rather than the text. These strategies are called "Essay Questions" (Barry 13) which echoes the academic language she is queering in her work. Barry addresses the creative strain in her readers as being the connection between memory and image as she writes, prompting her readers with an essay question collage through a mix of painting and cursive in pencil which emphasizes process over the product of the page,

What is an experience? Is it something you have? Or something which has you?
Is being little an experience? Do experiences require thinking? What becomes of
an experience after it's been had? What form does it take? Can it ring a bell?
(22)

Barry, here, is not just recreating Murray's pedagogy but expanding upon it. By asking her readers introspective essay questions which do not only engage them in the act of writing process but also pushes her readers to make-meaning of the concept of process

itself as she identifies how processing past memories and images as experiences conceptualizes how writing informs our own self-awareness.

The essay questions Barry uses to prompt both herself and her reader align with Paulo Freire's perception of oppression in educational models. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire writes, "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (72). The questions that occur on each page of *What It Is* that prompt critical thought are "restless" in their inability to be answered and their repetition. Questions like "What year is it in your imagination?" and "Does your imagination know what year it is?" (7) both occur on the same page to reposition the thinking of the reader in favor of staying in the problem space. The reader is now inquiring, hopefully, about how "an imagination" can traverse time. The second question evokes a similar response in the reader; there is still hopeful inquiry, but it personifies the concept of imagination.

Students have always used personal perception as a position of learning, so to personify "imagination" allows for Barry's readers to stay away from finding a solution to the essay questions. The goal of Barry though these essay questions is not to provide insight into what imagination is but to spark the journey within the reader to find that answer for themselves by identifying that imagination is not bound by time as we rely on the past to influence our future actions. All these questions are written on separate pieces of paper, not typed, and pasted onto the legal pad collage that makes up the page. This collage implies that no questions should be regarded as "first" although the size and proportions of each question, like words on a word cloud, infer importance. "What

year is it in your imagination?” (Barry 7) occurs in the middle of the page which focuses the reader to perceive all other questions in regard to *their own* imagination and *their own* relationship to time.

Discussions of importance relate back to Freire when Barry’s metaphorical classroom is examined and not just in her collage. Freire states that those who oppress must be the ones to initiate the change to dismantle the power structures in place that support such oppression when he writes,

Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes other, is unable to lead this struggle. (32)

This discussion of the destruction of power within Writing Studies is reiterated in Joy Ritchie and Kathleen Boardman’s critical history survey of feminist works in composition; the authors write, “disruptive narratives in composition have begun to analyze the established narratives of the discipline and the agency of students and teachers constructed by those narratives” (600). Barry’s work, like the works Ritchie and Boardman discuss, is a disruptive work both within Writing Studies and within the writing metaphorical classroom structure that exists within the book itself.

If we apply Freire’s pedagogy alongside Ritchie and Boardman’s insight on feminist composition to Barry’s metaphorical classroom, Barry, as the power-holder, is tasked with the responsibility of allowing her readers to wage for a fuller humanity and dismantle the power dynamics. Power as a paradox within the role of the teacher is identified by Ann George’s discussion of Critical Pedagogy as she, building from foundational texts like Freire, writes of the power of the teacher as unavoidable but also paradoxical as educators must continue to push against it. George writes, as teachers,

We train and problematize, we create freedom with authority; we teach resistance and hope for cooperation. These paradoxes are neither solvable nor necessarily debilitating. They keep teachers honest and inventive and, well, critical of their work. (109)

Barry aligns with George's criticism as her work is as critical of herself as it is critical of the classrooms and disciplines she is entering. As I discuss later in the section "*What It Is* as Redefining Queer Composition in Writing Studies Through Self-Reflective Narrative," Barry cannot fully remove herself from the position of power, as she is the author of the book, but by participating with the activities through narrative explorations of the self, her role as a student is apparent to the reader and, therefore, Barry is able to join their fight for humanization.

The second half of the book Barry identifies as entries of what she calls an "activity book" (137) and states that it "contains some of the exercises we use in the class to help us find images and follow them as they take form. Though we use writing here, once you feel what an image is, the form is up to you" (138). By using language like "activity book" rather than "writing prompts" or "writing exercises," Barry is opening her readers up to multimodal composition by freeing the writing practice as encompassing image and text, just as her book composing technique does, all while conjuring up a nostalgia for children's coloring and activity books in the reader. The activities provide the readers tasks in writing that act to contradict writer insecurity about the creative process rather than fulfill the reader's hope to produce publishable or economically-viable content from using the book. The purpose of the activity book sections is to complement the narratives and the essay questions by providing avenues to explore the gaps created by the metacognitive work of the reader. If read in one sitting, the narratives and essay questions would introduce to the reader questions about

memory, perception, understanding, and content production while the activity book provides instructions for using that memory and perception to understand *understanding* through content creation rather than content production.

One example of an activity that captures the visual and pedagogical structure of these activities is Barry's "Let's Use the Picture Bag!" activity which asks her readers to collect, at minimum, 25 pictures from anywhere, she suggests old magazines, put them into envelopes, and put those envelopes in a bag (184). Then, her readers are asked to choose an envelope and, before they open it, tell themselves that they are either in the picture or the picture is what they see, and, after they open it, her readers answer questions like "Where are you?" "Why are you there?" and "What does it smell like?" (185). Prompts like these seek to reorient the reader by displacing them from their own memories and experiences and replacing them in synthetic memories.

By doing so, the readers practice composing while building a deeper perception of how they understand the world around them as they are asked to create the world inside the image around them on the page. She indirectly pairs prompts like this with her own memory work in the beginning of the book. A brief example that pairs well with her picture bag is her story of being taught by the painter Marilyn Frasca to whom *What It Is* is dedicated. Barry writes of her creative process when painting while studying under Frasca,

If there wasn't a lot going on in my painting, something was starting to happen in other ways of working with images that I didn't expect. Marilyn taught a way of writing she learned from Ira Progoff. It was a way of keeping a journal that made parts of my life come back so vividly I didn't stop to think things out before I wrote them. In fact, stopping to think about it stopped the experience. It seems that thinking and experiencing are not the same thing. It's the difference between trying to remember and the sudden flood of memory that comes from a song or a smell or a certain slant of light. (121)

This narrative is featured as clusters of text surrounded by collaged journal-drawings, margin-doodles, and brush-work self-portraits which all provide visual insight into the Barry's narrative. In this moment, she finds one answer of many for a central question in the book as she writes,

What is an image? It's the pull-toy that pulls you, takes you from one place to another. The capacity to roll seems to be what Marilyn's way of working brings back. The ability to stay in motion, to be pulled by something, to follow it, and stay behind it. (122)

The Frasca story relates to Barry's Picture Bag in two ways: first, Barry is telling a story of how she learned to re-think former methods of creating (such as painting and journaling) as a way of exploring her past; secondly, Barry is telling a story of how she was able to make-meaning from allowing images to spark and shape her point of view regarding her memory. This manipulation of the kairotic moment of remembering is what Barry is prompting with her Picture Bag activity as the enveloped images force the reader to position themselves with their perception in ways that first seem unnatural but begin to uncover themselves as more natural than previous methods of composing.

Lynda Barry's Pedagogy in Comparison to Other Creative Writing Prompt Books

Through manipulating perception this way, unlike other books of creative writing prompts, *What It Is* pushes its readers to unlearn the economic and material value of art and writing and instead place value on the act of creating as activities like the Picture Bag are there to help the reader explore through writing rather than produce a manuscript. By comparing Barry's work to other books of genre-blurring writing prompts, we will understand more deeply how *What It Is* uniquely provides a deeper

insight into “creation” which takes readers’ understanding of the Creative Writing field and broadens their scope to Writing Studies.

Most other books that provide creative writing prompts put emphasis on asking their readers to practice the art of writing rather than explore the reader for writing. For example, in Caroline Sharp’s *A Writer’s Workbook*, the difference begins in the title. For Barry, writing is an act of activity through her channeling of playfulness and child-like expressivism within her activities, but for Sharp, writing is an act of work through her channeling of workbook-like formatting and discussions of what makes writing difficult. This does not make Barry’s book more effective than Sharp’s, but the two similar attempts of teaching writing are both identified as having different goals: Sharp is teaching Creative Writing; Barry is teaching creativity through Writing Studies. What makes Sharp’s book one of the most effective Creative Writing prompt books is how each entry acts to fulfill an insecurity a writer has about their writing. Through discussing writing as a need, a draining need, Sharp acts to help the reader practice their own method of story creation, world expansion, and Creative Writing process, while Barry’s is more akin to Writing Studies as her writing prompts view all writing as an act of creation. By framing her work this way, Barry does not mean to value skill practice or content creation but value exploratory action.

Barry’s *What It Is* is not on its own when it comes to remixing narrative into the act of teaching writing. Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* and Lee Gutkind’s *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up* both provide prompts much like Sharp does, but the two also approach their pedagogical methods through very personal means. Lamott, like Sharp, approaches each section of her book as a way of combating

writing insecurity, but unlike Sharp, her narrative evidence of combating these insecurities are more thorough and emphasized which makes the prompting align with storytelling and Creative Nonfiction rather than a workbook. Lamott provides an aura of disseminating knowledge on the upcoming writer; where Sharp provides instructions, Lamott provides advice. We see this when Lamott writes in the last chapter of her book “exploring and understanding your childhood will give you the ability to empathize, and that understanding and empathy will teach you to write with intelligence and insight and compassion” (225). Lamott is providing solid advice for a writer, but rather than prompting her readers to write about their childhood, she has framed her work to prompt her readers to instead take her advice about childhood-focused writing. By imposing writing techniques through inferring her own experience rather than telling how to experience, Lamott contextualizes the act of writing more deeply with writing’s process than Sharp.

This advice-driven prompting is mirrored by Gutkind as he, focusing on teaching Creative Nonfiction, organizes his book in two parts with the first part providing a foundational understanding of what Creative Nonfiction is and the second part tasking the reader to apply that understanding in their own writing. Between the smaller sections of the book, such as “Subgenres” (10) and “Passion and Practice” (47), are brief exercises for the reader. However, these exercises are not writing exercises but are, rather, *writer* exercises that task the reader to broaden their scope of the writing practice with prompts such as “purchase copies of the magazines you most appreciate . . . begin to study what other writers are doing from a craft point of view and also how

they are treating subject matter” (28). Again, this is solid writer advice, but the advice is instructional, like Sharp’s, yet holistic, like Lamott’s.

These exercises are continued in the second part of Gutkind’s book where he is providing literal writing advice with sections focusing on framing (227) or clarity (232). This second part is multi-tiered between deconstructing passages from example texts to learn from mistakes and successes, vignettes of narrative advice from Gutkind’s personal experience, and more holistic advice for the readers on applying their new knowledge to their craft. Yet, Gutkind still does not achieve the level of holistic teaching that Barry provides in *What It Is* as Gutkind, throughout the work, discusses writing and creativity with a focus on craft standards and market expectations while Barry dismisses everything about achieving a standard or meeting market expectations and instead deeply explores only the depth of creativity needed to write at all, not just write *well*.

What It Is closely aligns with the goals of Natalie Goldberg’s book of writing prompts *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writing Within* as Goldberg also dismisses standards and expectations to explore the creativity in writing. In her section, “Why Do I Write?” Goldberg seeks to provide insight into the question that built the entire foundation of Writing Studies. In the passage, she provides an example of a text she wrote in her past where every statement begins with “I write because” where many answers are provided. She writes because she is schizophrenic, because the tangibility of the written word makes permanent her internal thoughts, and because it helps her heal and hurt more (115). But the take away from this section, what she is prompting the reader, is to understand that writing has many functions for the soul of the writer

rather than the soul of the reader. In this gesture, Goldberg and Barry share the same school of thought. What distinguishes Barry from Goldberg, however, is how Barry works to obscure our understanding of the components of creativity and explore the idea of “creativity” itself while Goldberg is setting out to promote creativity as a method of emotional exploration. In this way, for Barry, writing may also be a tool to discuss the function of thought rather than writing being the only focused discussion of *What It Is*.

What It Is relies on preconceived expectations from its readers such as how writing prompts are meant to work towards creating a product. For Barry’s work, the product is the practice of writing itself rather than the composed writing created from the activities within the book. By modeling a classroom this way, the thing being created or generated in a writing class, the reward and acknowledgement for working with the class, is the practice and process rather than the product that may have been created. Creating a product as a means of learning is a well-supported idea in writing pedagogy and other educational texts. Support for this practice is shown in Anson’s discussion of writing as means to create a product when he writes,

Process pedagogy is designed to help students engage in their writing, to develop self-efficacy, confidence, and strategies for meeting the challenges of multiple writing situations. These goals, like the methods that help to achieve them, are now deep in the discipline’s bones, and are the lifeblood of its praxis. (226)

Although Anson is focused on process rather than product, the “process” is still functioning in the attempt to create a product. Barry’s work seems to disagree with this idea that creating a product, even if the focus is the process of creating the product, is effective for learning process. Process pedagogy in its ubiquity has one central defining factor that binds all composition education tools: a student-centered approach. Barry

deeply uses this by prompting questions for the readers that she has no intentions to answer while also not intending for them to find the answers either. The leaning is not framed by a lecture model with the book but, rather, a workshop.

Process pedagogy focuses on the building of elements to create a larger whole, but there is still a product to be made, which this student-performed process is building towards. This arrival at a product is more a result of the education system than the process pedagogy itself; the product's existence is still present in the minds of the learners as they create. Yet, with Barry, that destination is not present in the writing. Rather, she pushes the students to stay within the problem-space to continue to learn while building an awareness that the products they may be creating from the book were firmly never intended for publication. The importance is the experience of creating rather than the creation or process to create that same creation.

Looking at both the creating that the readers are doing with Barry's prompts as well as her creations of collage work on the page, Barry's intent can be highlighted through Palmeri's discussion of the connection between multimodal composition studies and creativity in his work when he introduces Emig's argument that the creative process is not wholly alphabetically textual nor imagistic but that it is the connection of those two that develop creative spaces (*Remixing Composition* 27). Palmeri extends this argument by claiming that having an interdisciplinary focus would also help the disciplines themselves notice the ever-changing and shifting perceptions of what being "creative" is considered within different disciplines (31). As Barry forces her readers to stay within the problem space to develop their creative writing and creative thinking skills, she tasks them with composing both inside and outside of the alphabetic text at

the same time. We can see this most prominently in what I will call the “Stay Inside the Image” exercise from *What It Is*.

For this activity, Barry asks her readers directly to “make a list of the first 10 cars that come to you from early-on in your life . . . Number your page from one to ten. Write down the first 10 cars you remember. Now choose one that seems vivid to you” (143). Then, Barry tasks her readers to “look around in this image. Picture this car in your mind’s eye then answer the questions below” (144) which ask the following scattered on the page rather than in any linear form: “Where are you?”; “Are you in the car or out of the car?”; “If you are inside - which seat are you in?”; “What are you doing?”; “If you are out of the car, what part of it are you facing?”; “What time of day or night does it seem to be?”; “Why are you there?”; “Who else is there?”; “What season?” and “About how old are you?” (144). The student must choose the ones to answer first as to let the natural remembering process uncover aspects of the image as they occur rather than forcing information that may have not been uncovered yet by the mind.

Barry continues to push the boundaries of this moment by then asking her readers to “turn around inside of this image” (145) with another non-linear chart of questions involving space. With this exercise, Barry is pushing her readers to identify objects within their memory of the car to expand and flesh-out the image that they are creating within their minds. Barry asks, “What’s in front of you?”; “What’s to your left?”; “What’s to your right?”; “What’s behind you?”; “What’s above your head?”; and “What’s below your feet?” (145). The activity does not stop there as Barry then tasks her readers to “keep your pen moving” and “write in the present tense” with the free-

writing prompt: “beginning with the words ‘I am,’ tell us where you are and what is happening in the car image that has come to you. Can you fill this page and the next? Can you write what comes to you? Can you do it without stopping? Can you stay inside the image?” (146).

The readers experience this same image-building exercise spatially a few pages later concerning a list of 10 people’s mothers from memory. They are asked to expand the image of the same space much like the cars earlier in the activity book, but when it is time for them to “stay inside the image” like the earlier free-write, they are instead asked to fill out another chart that prompts them to “write what you see” and to “turn all the way around look down and up” identifying the same questions concerning space (153).

What makes this serial writing activity multimodal is the way the readers’ works act as collages on their pages in the moment of process; the act of creation here is interdisciplinary between Writing Studies and visual art by sake of organizing pieces of reflective narrative on a visual plane. Like Palmeri asserts, interdisciplinary creativity must value both the privileged definitions of creativity among all disciplines involved as well as the definition of creativity in the mind of the creator. One of the best articulations of what Creative Nonfiction under Writing Studies defines as the creative standard is written by William Zinsser in the introduction of his creative nonfiction guide *On Writing Well* when he writes how a good Creative Nonfiction writer is one that lets the self emerge on the paper no matter the subject matter and continues saying,

Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from one paragraph to the next, and it’s not a question of gimmicks to “personalize” the author. It’s a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength. (6)

Creativity for the creative nonfiction writer is a creativity that can imply the personal through the social. Yet, Barry does not imply the personal but asserts it and asks her readers to do the same. As I explore in the section “What It Is as Redefining Queer Composition in Writing Studies Through Self-Reflective Narrative,” it is the privileging of the self’s perception of different disciplines’ definitions of what is creative that allows readers to queer their own composition through Barry’s activity. Barry’s readers are then valuing their own insight against the values of their discipline because even though Creative Nonfiction values self-driven, narrative creativity, Queer Composition must value such a creativity as exploratory of the creator and the creativity itself.

What It Is in the Composition Classroom

These connections between the function of thought and the function of writing are deeply intrinsic to Writing Studies and, more specifically, the composition classroom. Some scholarship has been written regarding the use of *What It Is* in the composition classroom, yet, although *What It Is* is pedagogical text, it is not a standard textbook. *What It Is* functions much like a standard book with the author disseminating knowledge to the reader, but the book deeply blurs this one-on-one dynamic between reader and author by re-identifying Barry as a “the instructor” (Barry 138) rather than the “author,” on the back cover of the book and at the opening pages of the activity book section (137). With this approach, Barry’s language within the text reflects classroom discussion instead of an intimate conversation despite the activities within the book pushing the reader to such intimate places of their memory. Sometimes, Barry addresses her reader directly using the “you” pronoun, and we can see this when she prompts the reader, “Do you wish you could write?” (139). But, often alongside that use

of “you,” Barry addresses her readership as if they were her students with the pronoun “we” which we can see when she writes, “Can we remember something that we can’t imagine? What makes us able to imagine something?” (35). By addressing her readership like students in classroom instead of a reader with “we” rather than “you all,” Barry humanizes herself by putting herself within the leaning group. Her language identifies herself as a student of her own work which makes the metaphorical classroom she is building with *What It Is* much more approachable. Because this metaphorical classroom provided by Barry is so accessible to the reader, some scholars have discussed the use of *What It Is* in their own teaching experience.

The most thorough discussion of using *What It Is* at the university comes from Susan Kirtley who explores invitational rhetoric as opposed to persuasive rhetoric through the work of Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin where the distinction between the two forms of rhetoric is defined as:

Invitational rhetoric is an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination. Invitational rhetoric constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor’s world and to see it as the rhetor does. (Foss 5, Kirtley 340)

By asserting the distinguishing factors of invitational rhetoric, the concept of persuasive rhetoric is inversely not an invitation but a forcefulness in rhetoric where the audience is not provided an opportunity but is sold the opportunity through the rhetoric.

Kirtley defines Barry’s goal for *What It Is*, by arguing that Barry “resources the trappings traditionally associated with education and invites the reader to render experiences and images through his or her own writing practice” (340), and uses the book as an example to articulate that “invitational rhetoric in the classroom can help foster a noncompetitive environment that strives to include all student voices in an

atmosphere of respect and tolerance” (341). By using *What It Is* as a text to teach invitational rhetoric, Kirtley posits that what her students as readers of Barry experience is how

Barry emphasizes the import of each reader’s experience and creates a structure for calling up and expressing these images, and she does so without anticipating a particular product. She therefore allows the audience great freedom of choice in deciding how to respond to the prompts. (354)

The first-year composition students in Kirtley’s classroom are still engaging with composition and learning composition techniques. What separates their experience from other students is that the students are now openly in control of their level of engagement with the act of writing without pressure being put on the product the students are creating for an audience.

University engagement with *What It Is* does not stop at first-year composition as one of the founders of contemporary Composition Studies and practice, Andrea A. Lunsford, reflects story-like on Barry and her book *What It Is*. Lunsford is quick to connect Barry’s personhood as an educator with the curated self she presents in *What It Is* as she writes, “Barry is a teacher who connects immediately with students, whether they are freshman at Stanford or those who sign up for her fabled workshops on writing and drawing” (311) and continues by quoting Barry’s discussion of children’s impulse to tell stories as a motivation that “‘you need to keep alive now’ . . . ‘It’s directly connected to your mental health’” (311). Lunsford is speaking on behalf of Barry’s insight into what is natural about Writing Studies, just like the discussions of Burke and Emig earlier, Lunsford is mindful of Barry’s approach to seek the nature of expression in the act of writing. On actually teaching the book, Lunsford writes,

What It Is is a dizzying, exhilarating, sometimes even maddening performance of teaching. At first glance, my students felt a bit overwhelmed by this book:

“How do we begin?” they said. But begin they did, and as we worked through the text, they were surprised to find themselves responding viscerally to Barry’s challenges and enticements. (313)

It is not surprising to hear of the students having a visceral reaction to the book as Barry constantly and steadily with each page tasks them with breaking down the barriers of creativity that schooling reflective of heteronormative ideologies has built in their minds.

With prompts for writing with notes of “we are practicing a physical activity with a state of mind” (Barry 154) the disorientation students must feel when engaging with this text is instructionally invigorating compared to the typical learning methods students often encounter in classrooms that use standard writing textbooks and anthologies. Continuing to scaffold and develop her exercises, Barry insists on writing as a physical activity again when she states that Sea-Ma, the sea monster and classroom monitor of the metaphorical classroom created by the book, says “even if the story stops it will start back up if we keep our pens moving. She says another way to keep your pen moving when the story stops is to have another piece of paper nearby where you can work on a spiral or other kinds of pen moving” and then continuing in underlined writing, “Don’t stop and think” (156).

By assigning writing as an equally physical and intellectual activity, the boundary between the muscle memory and critical thought is blurred for the student and the visceral nature of learning with *What It Is* is promoted at a more natural, corporeal experience in those engaging with Writing Studies. I discuss in previous work of the self-awareness Barry’s readers need to effectively use and grow as writers through the lens of the composition classroom (McClure). In my discussion, I express how first-year composition instructors can implement Barry’s activity book to evoke critical thought

needed for effective first-year communication. On Barry's "Stay Inside the Image" activity, I write that,

[The self-awareness] is vital to critically reading texts in the [first-year composition] classroom; when students are asked to engage with an academic text after creatively writing with this exercise, they are able to navigate the text's meaning and social implication while also responding to it with the same reflective clarity and precision as their own memory. By using their own memories as texts to critically read for this queered form of creative writing, these students are privileging their personal experience in the same way an oppressive classroom privileges a textbook. (McClure 10)

This level of diverse introspection helps Barry's readers become effective communicators, at least in the first-year composition classroom, as the act of introspection is a vital element to the metacognitive and critical thinking skills required for effective queer composing. What Kirtly does not discuss and what my past work has only briefly explored, though, is how *What It Is* helps Queer Composition join the conversation of Writing Studies.

What It Is as Redefining Queer Composition in Writing Studies Through Self-Reflective Narrative

The response of viscosity in Lunsford's students is where Queer Composition comes in as the viscosity pairs well with the narrative portion of Barry's text. The autobiographical sections open the reader up to a narrative of Barry's first experiences with creativity and reclaiming her haunting sense of memory. Looking at the self as a position of authority when composing is something inherently valuable to feminist pedagogy. Inversely, these feminist methods of metacognitive self-reflection are deeply rooted in creative writing pedagogy as well as a form of expressive pedagogy that privileges the student's voice rather than a canonical voice.

From the discussion of Queer Theory, I am no longer defining Queer Composition as writing that was written by someone who identifies as “queer,” whether that be their gender or sexuality, nor am I identifying queer compositions as pieces of writing that focus on queer history or LGBTQ+ people. Finally, Queer Composition is not a genre of postmodern writing that deviates from “standard form.” Rather, Queer Composition is a heuristic, or set of guiding approaches with which writers can simultaneously, one, value their own narrative understanding of their experiences and their “self” and, two, compose with an awareness of the heteronormative ideologies that dictate a “common” value system of what is “good” writing and what is “bad” writing.

These two elements of the Queer Composition heuristic may seem shallow and too common to truly identify a piece of writing as a piece of Queer Composition, but that is exactly the point. Queer Composition under this lens is intentionally applicable as it promotes an accessibility in writing and commonality that the ideologies of a heteronormative society work to promote to seem inaccessible. This commonality presents itself so clearly through Barry’s work that *What It Is*, as a discussion of writing itself, can act as a window through which we can look at Queer Composition function in Writing Studies. First, I will discuss the narrative portions that identify *What It Is* as a work of Queer Composition through how they value “the self” as composed work. Then, I will look at how those narrative portions enhance the pedagogical efforts of the book to reaffirm Queer Composition’s role as a heuristic in Writing Studies.

The opening lines of the first narrative section of this offer perspective on Barry’s voice and her concept as a comic or graphic style. Although she is discussing *One! Hundred! Demons!*, Chute writes about Barry’s common narrative style that, from

my own reading, holds over into her later work like *What It Is*. Chute writes of the visual presence of the narratives themselves,

Barry's work calls attention to itself as a multilayered composition, the self as collage, in its rich open layers of painting, words, and bits and pieces of ostensible debris: feathers, stamps, buttons, cotton balls, old labels, denim, felt, and the odds and ends from magazines. ("Materializing" 292)

Then, Chute discusses more specifically narrative when she writes,

In part the recursivity in [Barry's] work indicates a temporal scrambling introduced by trauma, but more broadly its collection of nonsequential pieces - chapters - of visual and verbal narrative suggest how memory works, as well as offering a view of narrative identity that eschews the notion of a fixed self persisting over time. (297)

Defining the self as not fixed, but un-movable in essence is paramount to Barry's use of narrative in *What It Is* as she heightens the developmental properties of process pedagogy with her interjections of narrative vignettes.

The opening narrative acts as an introduction to the book rather than a first chapter although it is not explicitly labeled as "introduction." Above the frames of the crude yet expressive drawings of Barry and her husband discussing their troubling thoughts, Barry writes,

There is a song called, "My Mind's Got a Mind of its Own," it's a good way to put it. The thing I call 'my mind' seems to be kind of like a landlord that doesn't really know its tenants. Who is playing that music? That song I say is "stuck" in my head? Which apartment are they in? Where do sudden troublesome thoughts come from? Why is there anxiety about a past we cannot change? The top of my mind has no answer for this. There is another part of my mind which seems to not know what year it is at all. (5)

The tonal and structural motifs for the entire book are revealed in these first lines of the book: one, visual narrative form will either be obstructed by quizzical voice or questions prompting the reader; two, the prompting questions will engage with the readers' conceptual understanding of perception *alongside* Barry's perceptions as a

reader herself to dismantle the power structures created by a society dictated by heteronormative ideologies imposed on Barry, “the instructor” of the metaphorical classroom she builds within her book; three, the entire book will be presented as a collage and will be non-linear with information both textual and visual by filling the gaps of the margins of the page which creates a thematic presence in the form of doodles, annotations, clippings, and paintings; four, there will be no answers to the questions as Barry identifies the problem space of critical thought as the space where learning, creation, and writing happens.

The narrative vignettes of this book reflect Barry’s own life rather than offer hypothetical situations of fully-fiction stores. Barry has taken some liberty in composing these captured images of her childhood which allows these narrative moments fit so well into her activity book curriculum. Barry captures the idea of meaning-making through the blurring and often fictive remembering of the past in the introduction of *One! Hundred! Demons!* when she writes in her classic, open-ended question form “is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?” (7). Barry presses no further with this struggle, and the struggle is still mirrored in *What It Is* as the book’s readers are asking “is this a work of creative nonfiction? Is this a portfolio of visual art? Is this a textbook?”

By mixing all of these elements together, Barry is letting her readers know that she is one of them - a student of her own mind and a reader of her own work. By doing so, Barry emphasizes how her book works as a classroom where the instructor provides examples from her own life to give context for the tasks given to students. Barry is setting the basic agenda for using the activity book as she selects and curates the student

content that makes its way into the published material, yet this is still an act of collaboration where her readers are receiving a level of authority they otherwise would not have had with a classroom or another text of prompts. Although Barry is still the instructor and the position of power within the classroom, by showing her readers her own examples of her creative writing in addition to her creative thinking prompts, Barry is engaging with *Queer Composition*.

What makes Barry's pedagogy feminist is the dismantling of power by making her personhood as an instructor accessible to her readers, yet what makes her composition queer is that same dismantling of power achieved through providing narrative work that seems to respond to the text. Barry is not just providing her own work or her own examples to humanize herself, she is providing personal narratives that tell stories specifically about her engagement with creativity. Barry's narrative work openly values her insight as a person trying to unlock the answer to the burning questions of why we write as identified by her essay questions.

The narrative through-line of the book begins with Barry reflecting on her childhood when she often sat as still as possible waiting for the toys and creatures around the room to come "alive" in the absence of her "presence" (10). Present thought and the concept of being alive are motifs that are discussed in her essay questions. The first essay question that puts the reader to task is "What is an image?" This question is what the pronoun "it" is referring to in the book's title. Barry relates the toys and the creatures around the room to images within her reader's minds and the stillness to the creative process as she writes,

At the center of everything we can "the arts," and children call "play," is something which seems somehow alive . . . alive in the way thinking is now, but

experience is, made of both moment and imagination, this is the thing we mean by “an image.” (14)

This concept of “play” though the “arts” that she tasks her readers of achieving is the social currency of the metaphorical classroom she is creating between herself and her readers. By evoking this sense of “play” though drawing and writing, Barry pushes her readers to understand the importance of creativity similar to the same way people first engage with Writing Studies whether that be in a first-year composition course or a creative writing course.

Barry writes, “writers call it ‘writer’s block.’ For kids there are other names for that feeling, though kids don’t usually know them” (52). This moment creates the idea that there is no such thing as childhood innocence but more so childhood ignorance. Children have the same emotions and perceive the same world as adults, they just do not have the language to express articulately. Barry uses the same image across time to represent this proposed phenomenon of childhood understanding: Barry has the same stone-cold face staring at the television set as a child as she does now as an adult (53). These discussions of “play” and trauma present in the text are what queer her pedagogical methods for her writing prompt metaphorical classroom.

Because the examples Barry uses are of her own life though her created work, she is pushing against the limitations of typical composition textbooks and creative writing discipline textbooks. This self-perception is the direct focus Barry wishes to instill in her readers; self-perception as queer experience within this text is aligned with Barry’s shift in narrative need from expressing herself to giving examples to her readers. In this case, Barry’s self is policed and navigated to benefit the needs of her

readers rather than only herself and in doing so, Barry is, again, transcending the form of the classroom.

Because Barry is trying to push her readers to find creativity within themselves rather than appropriate creativity, these narrative moments fill in those needs for the readers by directly identifying those moments within her own life. The importance and dangers of appropriation are discussed in David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" when he writes concerning post-secondary education,

Students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. (4)

Barry continues in later narratives about how, in her late teenage years, she refined her craft of "doodling" (103) with her introduction to underground comics. Underground comics, for Barry, allowed her to see content that pushed the boundaries of form and social structure. Now that her understanding of form and social structure was obscured by her ability to copy and mimic underground comic characters, Barry wanted to continue her life by living the life of those that she admired. Her experiences of copying underground comics have since converged with her unique perspective on creativity (that I am exploring in this project) which offers a glimmer into Barry's future of entering the discipline of comic-making as she is now regarded as a successful comic strip artist with *Ernie Pook's Comeek* and an associate professor of interdisciplinary creativity at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

By revealing such information in narrative, Barry shows herself to her readers as a student of the comics as she engages with the act of appropriating the comics' form

just as how Bartholomae asks his students to appropriate the same of works within the academy. Barry's narratives identify her as a creator seeking to mimic the language of the comic and engaging with Bartholomae's compromise as the idiosyncrasies at play reflect both the consistencies within the work she is copying but also the forms she is using to translate the images with her own hand. She is building her own knowledge of drawing convention while also learning the frame of the characters she copies just as how Bartholomae's students build their own academic, specialized discourse knowledge. Barry uses this moment to build a comfort in her readers because they too are trying to find their own style by learning and appropriating the styles of others.

Barry's values surrounding appropriation seem to align with Bartholomae as her work implies that she understands this need to appropriate form to build confidence, but she also understands how stifling it can be for personal creativity. Appropriation to Bartholomae looks like taking a concept from a discipline and relating it to the self; he continues, "This act of appropriation becomes a matter of courage and conquest. The [student] writer was able to write that story when he was able to imagine himself in that discourse. Getting him out of it will be difficult matter indeed" (15).

By telling the story of how she, personally, went through the stages of appropriation on her own as she began her career, Barry is alleviating the insecurities of her readers. Barry alleviates by developing a classroom model through feminist pedagogical methods of showing her students that she is still a student herself. Barry also uses queer methods of pairing that feminist pedagogy with showing her readers her introspection on being a student in the past. Barry is allowing her students to learn from

their own perceptions as they appropriate her form through participating in her activities.

The final directly narrative vignette in the book is titled “Two Questions” and goes back in time which develops a deeper connection to the Bartholomae’s discussion of appropriation. The two questions are “Is this good?” and “Does this suck?” (Barry 123). Though blunt, the questions are candid as they identify more insecurities Barry’s readers have about content creation and creativity. Providing insight, Barry writes,

For the next 30 years, I chased after only good drawing. While I drew, my main feelings were doubt and worry and when I finished my only feelings were relief and regret. I never drew for fun anymore - and I’d forgotten about that strange floating feeling making lines on paper used to give me. I’d forgotten how stories used to bubble up out of the lines and surprise me. It was why I started drawing - to meet those lines and stories. (129)

Here, the readers now become prepared to face their own battle with “bad” content creation as Barry herself has identified that she has not overcome this battle of appropriating voice while valuing her mistakes her entire life despite her career made from her creativity.

Appropriation is key to finding one’s self as a creator among many, but to allow that appropriation to dictate personal taste is what Barry argues is problematic. Not allowing the appropriation to fortify the foundation in which biases and privileges in form and expression exist queers the mind of the creator in favor of the creator. Through engaging with Queer Composition, creators exploring the self do not dismantle the heteronormative ideologies imposed upon them to promote this deep insecurity but, instead, work alongside the ideology not by privileging its values but by exploring each creator’s own awareness to both obscure meaning and create meaning.

Conclusion

What It Is establishes a place for Queer Composition in Writing Studies not for its ability to be used in the classroom but for its deep integration of the Queer Composition heuristic alongside its incredible accessibility. Since the subject's inception, accessibility has troubled Queer Theory as the high-academic language commonly used by thinkers engaging with the theory builds a barrier between the academy, with academics' comfort with higher levels of critical thought, and the public, with peoples' unfamiliarity with academic English. The most articulate critique of this trouble is claimed by Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele who write in their comic-style book *Queer: A Graphic History* that "queer theorists have argued back that academics should be allowed to express sophisticated ideas using complex terminology. Science, for example, is rarely criticized for this" (149).

Although the theorists prove a point, one that is ironically reflective of the gatekeeping practices that build boundaries between the heteronormative society and individuals experiencing queerness, the standard of thorough explanation through complex terminology to establish credibility, validity, and worthiness is a standard, once again, established by an academy built from a society that privileges heteronormative ideologies. With texts like *What It Is* disseminating the knowledge of an academic-level understanding of critical thinking and creativity through Queer Composition's heuristic methodology of both privileging and exploring the self creatively and openly, these concepts that build boundaries between Queer Theory and experiencing queerness become invalid and break down those boundaries as higher levels of critical thought become more accessible in common practice. Through texts

like *What It Is* and newly composed texts engaging in Queer Composition, the questions to which Writing Studies seeks to find answers open up to a fairer, truer audience of thinkers and writers welcoming of queer thought and creative self-expression and self-exploration.

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