Tau(gh)t Connections: Experiences of a “Mixed-Blood, Disabled, Lesbian Student”
Anneliese Truame

Do we, in fact, have the guts to say: “You may not like it, but here I am.”

—Susan Krieger

Once I realized it was going to be a fight, I decided to make it a beautiful fight.

—Townsend Carr

At the risk of being charged with false advertising, I'd like to admit right up front that the title of this essay is a misnomer; I misname myself as a mixed-blood, disabled, lesbian student. It is true that I am of Anglo/Native-American/Mexican heritage. I do have a chronic muscle condition that causes me pain, fatigue, and limited mobility. I do have sexual, intimate relationships with women, and only women. I am, in fact, a middle-class graduate student in English Literature. But when I identify myself in these ways, I feel as if I had taken truth serum in my morning tea, and I am forced to add: These identifications are contingent, partial, appalling. It would be more accurate simply to say that I am a lot of trouble. However, if I had subtitled the piece, “Experiences of Trouble,” instead of using the effective but limiting shorthand of those clumsy adjectives, I would be choosing accuracy over intelligibility. In the context of this essay it is more valuable to me to concede that point and highlight the process, my struggle to be true to my desires within the social texts of academia.

My desires are to represent the specifics of my experiences and insights in all their ambiguities and to respond actively to coercive efforts to modify or codify my representations. The difficulty of embodying my desires in this paper began with the title, with confronting the problems that particular categories are more easily recognizable than others, that particular points of view are associated with particular subject positions, that expectations are sutured to these associations. I am sensitive to these issues in part because I wear my ethnicity, my sexual orientation, and my physical limitations as primarily unmarked categories. Which is to say that most people looking at me would not instantaneously describe me as a mixed-blood, disabled lesbian. Thus, it is not surprising that I see verbalizing my identities as a way to make aspects of my experience visible at particular moments. I experience myself as shifting surfaces, rising out of the water in different forms, draped in different kinds of debris, depending on the current and location. I suspect that my experience is different in degree, not kind, from other people's experiences.

I see these moments of surfacing and creating visibility as useful in a continuing series of acts of struggle, not as endpoints in themselves or static representations that I must embody. This is an important distinction for me to make because my ambivalence about identifying as a “mixed-blood, disabled lesbian” stems from pressure to do so. I am wary of what happens once I am identified with a particular subject position, such as a lesbian one. A lesbian identification can take on meaning for others that does not reflect my experience; it can become ascendant in the representation which people recognize as me in ways that elide not just other parts of me, such as my ethnic background, but fundamentally who I am as a composite of changing interests. For me, it is not my particular subject position at any given moment that is most crucial. I am more concerned with my positioning, with the negotiated process of representing myself, for example, as a lesbian in a classroom.

If my representation of myself is figured by others, not as a ground for movement, but as a place I am expected to consistently occupy, and occupy in a particular way, it is easy for me to become frozen by the look that sees me in stasis. I am thinking here of the fixing nature of the gaze evident in the way that some of my heterosexual peers turn to look at me whenever they raise queer issues in class. That turning of the head is not an act of true recognition. On the contrary, it tends to mark the partial nature of someone’s recognition of me. I am asked to validate this partial acknowledgment by filling in the established and circumscribed place for my participation as a lesbian by talking on cue. This act of recognition is partial because it suggests
desire can I get out of my mouth and put on the map? How long can I hold out under siege? How many partners in crime can I find? The final question, of the size of the army I am fighting with, is the most important one to me. It is the people who remind me to keep reloading my bow, who encourage me to aim for the most difficult targets, who insist I strike with resolution, that make my fight possible.

I'm looking, not specifically for people who are queer in their sexual orientation, or who identify with other oppressed communities, but for people who are queer in the head, who have queer minds. By "queer-minded," I mean people who are unconventional in their suspicion of the coercive nature of the academic institution, who think what's just not thought and try to do what's just not done. I use the term advisedly. I do not wish to create a dualism between the sexually queer and the mentally queer. They may be the same people. I would go so far as to say that many times they are. Whatever the origin of their insights and whichever itinerary led them to meet me here on this battlefield, I am looking for them, the queer-minded veterans who still grace the war zone with their passion and persistence.

The first queer-minded person I met in academia happened to be the first lesbian professor from whom I took a class. She unnerved me by taking what I thought at the time were unnecessary risks. In a class of all straight women, except for me, she announced at one point that she felt like she had been given honorary straight status, reminding us that she was a lesbian. In a classroom where lesbian issues were treated by most as a threat of divisiveness to the feminist community we were trying to create, I was awed by the way the professor risked jeopardizing the tenuous acceptance of the class to assert the self she felt being erased. She encouraged us all, whether we were gay or straight, to come out, to think about the losses we and our communities suffered by hiding aspects of ourselves due to the fear that we would not be accepted if we spoke of them. She acknowledged that support was essential to staying out, but that one couldn't find the support until one took the initial step.

My struggles echo her words; keeping my queer mind is linked to asserting my authentic experience in the face of pressures to dissolve it and is maintained through the recognition of others. It is a twofold struggle. The initial difficulty is finding the courage to fumble around in front of my peers and my professors while I try to create questions that the discourse of the moment doesn't accommodate very well. Fear makes me feel inarticulate, dumb. I think of it as a cost-effective silencing tool of the academic community, perhaps most communities.

It makes the act of silencing a remarkably quiet act. The costs, to the self and to the community, may be severe, but like so many other crucial parts of my experience, those costs are not necessarily visible. Once I have spoken, however, recognition is not easy to elicit. Even when I share an ethnic background or sexual orientation with a teacher, it is no guarantee that s/he will be able to hear me. As a result, I am learning to respond to efforts to undermine my sense of truth as if I were performing physical self-defense; when someone tries to take me down, they are going to have to do it while my volume is calmly turned all the way up. I force my image back into the mirror as I am becoming an apparition in the face of someone else's lack of recognition. I break the mirrors that do not reflect my image back to me, or reflect an image of someone I do not recognize.

The struggles I describe are not easy for any of us, students or faculty. I acknowledge the particular pressures faculty have, the specific incentives they have to participate in academia in ways that reinforce the institution. In fact, I think it is in the nature of the relationship between the individual and an institution that the member's participation necessarily fortifies the institution. However, this can be foregrounded as a problem, instead of implicitly validated. Professors can acknowledge the power they have over graduate students, instead of attempting to erase the construction and maintenance of that dynamic and inducing graduate students to collude in that charade. It is not my experience that queer faculty have to be gatekeepers, owing to the history of their generation, but that it is possible for them to be experienced double agents instead. I am thankful for the supportive queer faculty with whom I have been able to work, particularly given the unfavorable odds and the difficult terrain. I am keenly disappointed, however, by the specific undermining of queer graduate students by queer faculty, to which I have also been subjected. It is my desire for a queer-minded community that makes the loss of allies, particularly allies possessing more power within the community, feel so profound. I have witnessed and experienced queer faculty encouraging queer graduate students to closet themselves, pressuring them to modify their tone or their insights, undermining them out of jealousy, or promoting models of being queer that exclude self-identified queers, primarily bisexual women, from participating in the queer community.

The latter two dynamics seem related to the economics of scarcity. This illusory economy plays on the fear that there isn't enough room for work by all queer scholars, that there isn't enough room for all queer scholars. I want to destroy the underpinnings supporting that
that I will no longer be recognizable if I move out of the specific lesbian space with which I have been identified. This interaction also warns me that if I contest the construction of the space that has been designated as lesbian, and if I point out that it has been established by the unmarked power of the individual heterosexual student backed by a heterosexist institution and not formed according to my queer interests, then I risk losing the space. By risking this verbal space, I jeopardize the possibilities of discussion and of relating myself intelligibly to other people within the academic community.

I am not saying that those risks should not be run. I am recognizing where the power lies, and the ways in which it is deployed to induce particular modes of interaction. The coercive nature of this dynamic is exemplified by the specter of scholars who are said to be so unassimilable into the available categories and to have developed their work so much according to their own desires, that they/their work became almost unspeakable, almost unfundable. It is their purported failure to assimilate that is frequently pointed out, not the academic community’s practices of nonaccommodation. I am concerned with what there is in each of us that is not representable, with creating a space for what is currently unintelligible. I believe the untranslatable is always rearing its head from the water. Aiding its surfacing is a matter of recognizing that I am seeing only a portion of what is present, of not erasing what I do not yet recognize, of exercising my near vision and far sight until I can glimpse a shadowy shape.

Lack of recognition of ambiguity is a prominent feature of the coercive, petrifying nature of categories. It is this characteristic, combined with the lack of control the identified has once the identity is in circulation, that not only keeps people participating in the categories of the academic community, but participating in specific ways, which may involve nonparticipation. For example, the desire to resist the negative effects of stigmatized categorization leads some women who are concerned about gender issues to insist on their nonidentification with feminists. I too am wary of the lack of recognition, or misrecognition that can follow identification of the self, the gap between what I make visible and what is seen. Categorizations as forms of visibility become clearly unsatisfactory to me when it comes down to the issue of filling that space with a body, how it feels when it is my body that fills that space.

I feel torn when the need is raised for a disabled voice, or a lesbian voice, or the voice of someone of color, and here I am, all three. What a bargain. So my response has to be to give people more than they reckoned on. This is partially due to the fact that recognizing aspects of who I am is not merely an additive process; my identities are exponentially interactive properties. In other words, it is not just a matter of taking into account my mixed-blood background in addition to my sexual orientation. Mapping who I am requires acknowledging multiple, interrelated axes that create a field of simultaneous activity, rather than isolated, parallel binaries that the eye can only focus on one at a time, like channels on the television. Instead of being placed on this side or that side of the gay/straight line, I am placed temporarily at the nexus of multiple lines, divergent trajectories. What it comes down to for me is that I am not willing to give up the visibility that categories afford, but I want to work them, question their relationships to each other, figure out what is being blocked out and reclaim it, figure out what is being valorized and level it. I am trying to learn how to flirt with these words, how to have long-term affairs with them, but never move into any or all of their houses.

It is due to my desire to represent myself specifically and comprehensively that my relationship to the academic community and its discourses is one of continuous struggle. A friend of mine once said, when I mentioned that in one of my classes I was dealing with racist and heterosexist tensions, as well as insensitivity toward people with disabilities: “You need to choose your battles.” At first I thought this was a great concept; then I realized that choosing among them still means I am fighting all the time. My visualization of my academic participation in these terms is partly due to my heritage. On one side of my family tree, I have the Pima, a warlike tribe that has a documented history of insurrection against European invaders dating back to 1633. On the other side, I am related to General Tecumseh Sherman, the man who ransacked the South and who coined the phrase “War is hell.” My people have never known peace. I am no exception. The particular form of my participation in this centuries-old battle is merely dictated by its present incarnation as a war of words and representations. I arm myself with academic vocabulary and my stubborn counterimages. I am a double agent with the urgent desire to teach the spiritual mechanics of individual survival. Pursuing my graduate degree is my means to that end, my cover.

The war is going on for some time. I need to discover how best to outfit myself for the long haul; I have tried futilely to fit in for too long. I need to ask specific questions about the war: How can I short-circuit my internalized fear, which keeps me from speaking my truths, the way I see written texts and lived texts? How much of my
illusion, assert the consumer need for more air time, create a sense of expanding space. I don’t want to just help fill the space of the category of queer studies; I want to be conscious of building that space. If part of the contract is square footage, I will negotiate not only for the largest space possible, but the least bounded. In the final analysis, I want to teach so much more than just individual survival in the space we have. I want to teach the art of exponential prospering, of communal healing.

I am well aware that the war will go on far longer than my lifetime. I stand at the center of the seven generations. It is the seven generations that came before me that allow me to be here today as the woman that people thought I was, as the woman I have decided I am. It is the seven generations that issue from me that I am always considering, the seven generations that I will affect as a teacher, that will carry on this battle. I keep the war in mind when I think about handing off the bow and quiver to the next runner, of giving her the quickest start, the warmest handoff that I can.

Notes

1. Susan Krieger, Social Science and the Self: Personal Essays on an Art Form (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 244. Townsend Carr, personal communication. I’d like to express my heartfelt thanks to Townsend Carr, of the University of California at Riverside, for sharing her thoughts with me on issues of queer struggle. They are presented here in gist and spirit.