

## Performance and the Possible: Embodiment, Privilege, and the Politics of Teaching Writing

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I believe my exact words were, “Do you wanna spar? Because I will win.” I was a twenty-one-year-old substitute teacher and recent college graduate, and I had been warned about how difficult this particular class of eighth-graders was to manage, much less teach. In that classroom in rural Arkansas, where I was sure Clint Eastwood rhetoric held sway—I’d grown up there, after all—I sounded more confident and authoritative than I felt. Narrowing my eyes at the misbehaving eighth-grade boy, I stiffened into my best go-ahead-make-my-day stance and hoped everyone in the classroom bought it, including me. Twice already, I had told this boy I was staring down to stop talking to his neighbor. Loud and mean and *twice*, I had demanded that he stop. And twice he obeyed me for mere moments before continuing his conversation. Standing as tall as my 5’3” frame allowed in my carefully chosen black, polyester, JC Penney version of a Power Suit, I was hell-bent on proving I possessed whatever this boy seemed to think I lacked.

So I basically challenged a thirteen-year-old to a fight.

I return to this performance of self—this *pedagogical performance*—regularly for several reasons, not the least of which is that it marks one of the first times I was in front of a classroom. With little teaching experience, I immediately defaulted to a performance of self that was directive, wholly top-down, and, for me, *mean*. This default is curious to me now, but not altogether surprising, when I consider the relationship between authority and embodiment. Had the boy called my bluff (fortunately, he did not) I would have felt that my only recourse was to press the intercom button and request that the principal—a middle-aged white male who, in this context, had nothing to prove—come to the classroom and restore order. To me this quasi-tattling maneuver seemed like the teacher equivalent of “just wait until your father gets home,” and I resented that I might need to resort to it.

I substitute taught at my old school regularly that year, and I got a reputation for being strict and mean. I learned about my reputation from the librarian who had supervised the yearbook staff that I was a member of just a few short years before. She shared this with me as a kind of congratulations. Toward the end of the year, the principal even asked if I might be interested in something more permanent. In this way, I was encouraged to take pride in my ability to keep students in line, and to this day I still believe that I was applauded because of my ability to discipline and intimidate more than my ability to teach.

The trouble was, I hated treating people the way I was treating those students. Furthermore, this stereotypically masculine pedagogical performance, which was so drastically different from how I experienced myself in my everyday life, drained all of my energy. I thought, though, that it was my only option because I had never questioned that a masculine performance of authority was “appropriate.” Because masculine authority was the *only* authority, I couldn’t see any other performative possibilities for myself.

Had I been older, I might have considered the teacher-as-nurturer performance as an alternative to my Clint Eastwood performance. Because of my age and familiarity to the students though, such a pedagogical performance did not seem available to me. Even if it had been, I'm not sure I would've chosen it. As I will discuss in more detail later, the teacher-as-nurturer role, which is well documented in composition and rhetoric scholarship, can be just as limiting to teachers (and students) as stereotypically masculine performances. Further, I would have likely experienced a pedagogical performance of teacher-as-nurturer as even more disconnected from how I experienced myself in my everyday life at the time, and it likely would've been even more draining because it would've felt so forced.

In this article, I turn a performance lens on the role of teacher. Drawing on the foundational work of scholars such as Erving Goffman and Judith Butler, I jump off from the assumption that all acts of teaching are performances, and I invite readers to explicitly acknowledge the inevitability of performance in our everyday (teaching) lives.<sup>1</sup> That is, teachers—like everyone else, all the time and forever—make choices about what to make visible and what to conceal in particular rhetorical situations. Awareness of these choices and their potential consequences varies among people and rhetorical situations. In a classroom setting, these performative choices have consequences for our students and for us.

A primary reason performance studies offers a useful lens through which to view teaching is that bodies are continually considered. Attention to embodiment and the influence bodies have in rhetorical situations is crucial to understanding teaching contexts, and this attention is sometimes missing from discussions of teaching. In his contribution to the *SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, Bryant Keith Alexander writes, "Performance pedagogy as a theoretical construct focuses . . . on engaging performance as a strategic pedagogy: performance as a way of knowing, performance as a strategic analytic; performance as a way of seeing and understanding the nuanced nomenclature of human social dynamics" (253). A performance lens trains our focus on our strategic choices and on bodies simultaneously. Of course, one's body influences the range of choices any particular teacher may experience as available in a given rhetorical situation. Adding nuance and caution to his conception of the relationship between performance and pedagogy, Alexander goes on to write,

[T]o look simply at the link between performance and pedagogy as a singular activity within the confines of the classroom situation is problematic. It is problematic if performance is reductively constructed as enacted behavior or aesthetic entertainment in the moment of its engagement without an accompanying recognition of its historical, social, or cultural antecedents . . . It is problematic if the performance-pedagogy link is not also seen as a complex and productive site of possibility that both disrupts and transforms the processes of knowing in the reified location of the classroom and, maybe more importantly, in the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of everyday living. (254)

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1. Goffman, a sociologist, introduced the idea of everyday performances of self in his 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and Butler established the relationship between performativity and gender in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. For an analytical comparison of Goffman and Butler's work, see Steph Lawler's *Identity: Sociological Perspectives*.

In what follows, I aim to situate pedagogical performances in context and point to the complexity of bodies performing in particular contexts for particular pedagogical purposes—always, of course, within broader social, cultural, and political narratives. I argue that viewing writing pedagogies through a performance lens illuminates the extent to which our pedagogies are tacitly tied to “appropriate” scripts for teachers and reveals what could be possible for teachers and students in writing classrooms.

To show how writing pedagogies are tied to the “appropriate,” I start by exploring habitual scripts for what I would term the “good (writing) teacher.” In doing so, I emphasize that embodied subjectivities are always already part of the classroom context and that overtly acknowledging this presence helps reveal the limits of “appropriate” pedagogical performances. Next, I explore how habitual scripts exclude writing teachers whose bodies are marked as different and ultimately limit not only the range of pedagogical performances that are available to everyone, but also limit student learning. Finally, I use classroom examples to illustrate what is made possible when writing teachers explicitly acknowledge bodies and read their pedagogies as performances. Ultimately, I aim to illuminate both the possibility and the responsibility that come with overtly acknowledging teaching as embodied performance.

### **Habitual Scripts for Writing Teachers**

Leading feminist scholars in rhetoric and composition have challenged habitual scripts that prescribe who writing teachers “should be” and have shown the limits of seemingly naturalized pedagogical performances. In what follows, I describe habitual scripts for teachers within American culture and university contexts. These scripts are generalizations that I’m using to show how pedagogical performances are tied to “appropriate” versions of the teacher and to invite readers to consider the extent to which these scripts may influence their own pedagogical performances. I share them with an awareness that, as Mady Schutzman writes, “The fundamental precept of performance as an unstable ground upon which all actors are subjects and objects at once sets the pedagogical stage. We assume scripted positions but we play them knowing that we are not what that position denotes” (281).

#### *Teacher as Disciplinarian*

This version of writing teacher conjures images of red pens and bleeding papers. Almost always a woman, the teacher-as-disciplinarian is scowling and humorless. In her 1991 monograph *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, Susan Miller famously critiques the “ambivalently situated” role of women composition teachers whom she calls “sad wom[e]n in the basement.” Miller shows how women composition teachers simultaneously occupy the contradictory roles of nurse/maid and bourgeois mother; that is, they are “at once powerless and sharply authoritarian” (137). The Clint Eastwood performance I described to start this article loosely follows this script insofar as I performed authority as meanness and knew full well I didn’t have much authority of my own. While women’s bodies are rarely read as inherently authoritative, the teacher has the authority that comes with giving grades (or calling the principal). The teacher-

as-disciplinarian often makes this power present in her pedagogical performance. She threatens. She scolds. In this way, she earns obedience, but not respect.

### *Teacher as Star*

This habitual script is commonly represented in Hollywood versions of professors. A good example is Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*. Usually male, this version of teacher is so inspired and inspiring that authority is rarely if ever a concern. The teacher-as-star is the center of attention and students are never, ever bored. He is not only brilliant, but *fun*.<sup>2</sup> His performance is marked by charisma. Two years after *Textual Carnivals*, in her article “M[other]: Lives on the Outside,” Lil Brannon critiques the masculinist role of teacher-as-hero/knower/star, showing how this image makes women’s place in the writing classroom more difficult. She writes, “The image of teacher as charismatic knower makes problematic the “feminine” values of a “caring” teacher: commitment and student-centeredness. If one is truly inspirational, he commands the respect and intellectual energy of all of his students” (459–60). Brannon’s descriptions of teacher-as-hero/knower/star and teacher-as-nurturer/mother not only show the stark contrast between the pedagogical performances that are available to (straight, white, middle- to upper-class) men and ones that are available to women, but also how limiting such scripts can be for both men and women writing teachers.

### *Teacher as Nurturer*

Unsurprisingly, this script is almost exclusively reserved for women. As Shari Stenberg reminds us, “Fixed assumptions about cultural identities limit the range of roles women are allowed to play in the classroom” (*Composition Studies* 58), and the nurturer/mother/caretaker role for women looms so large in our cultural imagination that there is barely room for other pedagogical performances for women. Unlike the teacher-as-disciplinarian, the teacher-as-nurturer is likeable—as long as she stays on script. While men may perform teacher-as-nurturer, they are probably less *expected* to do so. A woman who does not follow a version of this habitual script may be judged harshly for the absence of this performance. Eileen Schell critiques the nurturing mother-teacher role, claiming “it may reinforce, rather than critique or transform, patriarchal structure in the classroom and in the profession” (73).

### *Teacher as Objective, All-Knowing Pedagogue (or PedaGod)*

Perhaps representing the most privileged role of all, this script evokes images of bearded white men in elbow-patched blazers. This professor—and he is a *professor*, not a teacher—resides behind a lectern. He speaks from his vast wealth of knowledge, and his students let the brilliance wash over them. Some might call him a mind in a jar, but that implies far more universality than this script actually allows. That is, while many teachers may attempt to perform PedaGod, I would argue that the role is reserved for bodies

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2. Like authority, brilliance is rarely read onto women’s bodies. And as the teacher-as-disciplinarian overtly performs her meager authority, many female teachers feel they must overtly perform if not brilliance, then certainly intelligence and competence. See Jane Tompkin’s “Pedagogy of the Distressed” for one teacher-scholar’s experience of consistently performing Knower.

that are read as heterosexual, white, middle- to upper-class, and male. Like the teacher-as-star, the PedaGod need not concern himself with authority. He carries unquestioned authority in his body. The PedaGod differs from the teacher-as-star in that he need not be particularly fun or charismatic. His exceptional mind is most important.

Clearly, these scripts do not account for embodied difference. That is, not all bodies get to occupy these scripts, and individual bodies don't occupy them in the same way. Furthermore, while some teachers may follow a script fairly consistently (or attempt to do so), many teachers' pedagogical performances move in and out of various scripts. Nevertheless, habitual scripts such as these can function in American educational culture as a kind of standard or expectation for "appropriate" teaching. Because of these common expectations, habitual scripts also function as standards by which teachers may judge their own pedagogical performances, asking: Am I a "good teacher"? For teachers whose pedagogical performances fall somewhere outside "appropriate" habitual scripts, the answer is often *no*—or perhaps more often *not good enough*. Though habitual scripts are easily revealed as limiting and exclusionary, their influence on teachers and students' expectations persists.

The descriptions I offer above also highlight the difficulty of teachers whose bodies are marked as different, who implicitly violate academic norms before they ever open their mouths. The "appropriate" body performing the "appropriate" habitual script is likely read as neutral. Some bodies have no corresponding "appropriate" script and are therefore read, consciously or not, as "inappropriate" in academic contexts. Consider, for instance, how a teacher-performer's race could affect how a PedaGod performance is read.<sup>3</sup> A performance lens helps students and teachers to read these bodies—these *people*—as possible. As Miller, Brannon, and Schell show, habitual scripts "operate in our culture as *the way teaching is supposed to be* and is precisely what gets in the way of new, and perhaps more productive stories" (Brannon 459, emphasis added).

### Pedagogical Performance and Privilege

Donna LeCourt and Anna Rita Napoleone pose the question, "What academic body is normative [?]" (86). Scholars such as Patricia Bizzell have argued that the most normative features of traditional academic discourse "reflect the cultural preferences of the most powerful people in the community," and "[u]ntil relatively recently, these people in the academic community have usually been male, European American, and middle or upper class" (1). As Bizzell's claim suggests, while these men still tend to be the most powerful people in the academic community and would historically embody the answer to LeCourt and Napoleone's question, people who do not fit that description are increasingly present in academia. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, "Women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and ethnic minorities are becoming more commonly accepted and expected as classroom teachers and in pedagogical studies" (xiii). While this is true, the presence of women, people of color, LGBTQA people, people who are differently

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3. An in-depth discussion of the racial complexities of pedagogical performance is beyond the scope of this article, but I invite you to refer to scholars working at the intersection of composition and rhetoric and critical race theory. They include but are not limited to Frankie Condon, Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young, Asao Inoue, Aja Y. Martinez, Mya Poe, and Young.

abled or sized, and ethnic minorities in classrooms—teaching, and writing about teaching—does not imply that they represent the expected, respected “academic” body. Furthermore, the increased presence of non-normative bodies in university settings does not necessarily indicate that the habitual scripts are changing along with the demographics. Many teachers, then, find themselves in the difficult position of trying to enact an “appropriate” pedagogical performance with a body that is read, consciously or not, as “inappropriate” in academic contexts. This knee-jerk reading is one of the reasons why viewing teaching and writing as performance is so crucial. A performance lens invites, if not requires, teachers and students to question assumptions about non-normative bodies in academic contexts and beyond.

The bodies of people who don’t fit Bizzell’s description, while common enough in classrooms, do not carry unquestioned academic authority. Furthermore, as LeCourt and Napoleone contend, “Much like whiteness, the ‘normal’ academic body is a transparent signifier that is visible only when contrasted with what it is ‘not.’ . . . Academic norms for acting, speaking, thinking, and feeling, although difficult to define, can be recognized when they are violated” (86). While their critiques are specific to women, their analyses help us think about bodies that are not read as “appropriate,” bodies that are marked.

Teacher-scholars in composition and rhetoric whose bodies are marked as different have contributed scholarship about how they craft pedagogical performances in concert with how their bodies are likely being read by students (Kopelson, Waite, LeCourt and Napoleone). Inextricably tied to the pedagogical performances they craft are their progressive aims for student learning. Karen Kopelson claims that her pedagogical performance of neutrality “enhances students’ engagement with difference and . . . minimizes their resistance to difference” (118), while LeCourt and Napoleone hope their working-class pedagogical performances “open up opportunities to analyze and critically reflect on how [academic] social space is authorized to mark [working-class] moves as ‘other’ (and thereby expose academic ideologies to scrutiny)” (87).

These teacher-scholars’ explicit discussions of pedagogical performance are linked to a parallel and often overlapping conversation in composition that centers on embodiment. In the forward to the 2003 collection, *The Teacher’s Body*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes that “Body criticism . . . has both the impulse and the potential to revise oppressive cultural narratives and to reveal liberatory ones,” and the collected chapters “center on bodies that call attention to their own particularities and that refuse the polite anonymity and disembodied equanimity that has traditionally characterized education settings” (xii). In “Embodied Classroom, Embodied Knowledges: Re-thinking the Mind/Body Split,” Shari Stenberg “explore[s] the tendency to deny embodiment in scholarly and pedagogical sites” (44). Like the contributors to *The Teacher’s Body*, Stenberg focuses on “bodies that insist on being visible” (44). Like Kopelson, LeCourt and Napoleone, these teachers who explore embodiment in their scholarship fashion their pedagogical performances in concert with how their bodies are read and inscribed, and with what they hope to teach students. While the bodies represented in this scholarship vary widely, there are consistent characteristics among them: they are marked as different, and they have “both the impulse and the potential to revise oppressive cultural narratives and to reveal liberatory ones” (Garland-Thomson xii).

While I maintain, along with many others, that teachers' performances are socially constructed, I do not pretend that there aren't very real consequences for deviating from the norm and disrupting students' (or colleagues' or administrators') expectations for who a teacher "should be." Furthermore, teachers do not have an unlimited range of performances from which to draw. That is, performances are not separate from bodies. And bodies are read and inscribed in ways over which teachers themselves have very little control.

While there are many different subject positions that affect how bodies—and thus pedagogical performances—are read, gender is a primary way through which bodies are judged and is thus a useful category of analysis. In a popular lecture on gender that he gives across the country, sociologist Michael Kimmel discusses how, in recent decades, women have "made gender visible." The problem, he says, is that gender remains visible largely only to women: "Most men don't think that gender is about them, and this is political." He relays a story from his own teaching life that illustrates this point. Kimmel and a female colleague each teach a section of the same large lecture course, *Sociology of Gender*, and they give a guest lecture in each other's classes once each semester. When Kimmel—a middle-class, middle-aged white man—walks through the door of his colleague's class on the day of his guest lecture, a student says, "Oh, finally, an objective opinion!" After sharing this classroom moment in the lecture, Kimmel explains that, clearly, every time his female colleague had opened her mouth that semester, her students saw a woman. If his colleague said, for instance, "There is structural inequality based on gender in the United States," her students thought, "Of course you would say that. You're a woman. You're biased." But when Kimmel says it, the reaction is "Wow, that's interesting. Is that going to be on the test? How do you spell *structural*?" Just in case the audience doesn't fully grasp his argument, Kimmel goes on to point at himself and say, "This is what objectivity looks like. Disembodied Western rationality? [He waves.] Here I am."

To say that teaching is different for women than it is for men is obvious, but it's not enough. While gender is clearly one crucial category of analysis, there are many other categories to take into consideration, for "gender is intertwined with and cannot be separated from other social statuses that confer advantage and disadvantage" (Lorber 198). Since "the dominant hegemonic group sets the standard for what behavior is valued," (Lorber 199) it is no wonder that white men embody the standard for "appropriate" pedagogical performances. Using the conception of pedagogical performance as a lens through which to reflect upon student learning and aim for social change is insufficient unless "interlocking oppressions" are acknowledged (McIntosh 18). To what extent does teaching from habitual scripts continually reinscribe inequitable cultural hierarchies? If students, to varying degrees, watch/read their teachers to learn who they "should be," and their teachers continually reflect the dominant culture (through performing habitual scripts), then how will new ways of knowing and being in the world be practiced and legitimized?

Consistently performing habitual scripts could reinscribe inequitable cultural hierarchies. This is not only damaging to the teacher herself, but also to marginalized students who may look to their teachers as models. When teachers consistently perform in ways that reflect the dominant culture, marginalized students are implicitly schooled to con-

form or even reject their identities in order to succeed in school. This conforming can be particularly profound in writing classes, considering how culture and identity are bound up in language. Some students, unwilling to conform, will no doubt choose not to “succeed” based on school standards. For both students and teachers, the stakes are high.

One of the challenges for writing teachers who are committed to progressive pedagogies is to help our students see the systems of power that create inequitable social conditions. If we view teaching through a performance lens, teachers and students can work toward this goal together. Achieving this pedagogical goal is difficult no matter what, but it seems almost impossible if writing teachers ourselves do nothing to disrupt the habitual scripts that prescribe limiting roles and keep privilege invisible.

### **Presence, Absence, and the Politics of Pedagogical Performance**

Recent scholarship in composition studies reflects that teachers with bodies that are marked as different pay close attention to the politics of their pedagogical performances and to the effects that their performances have on their students’ understanding of difference, social justice, and inclusivity. Ultimately, I want all teachers of writing—no matter what our bodies look like, but especially if our bodies are read as neutral—to pay careful attention to how our pedagogical performances may reinscribe and reify limiting scripts and hierarchies. And I want us to pay careful attention to how disrupting these scripts and calling attention to these hierarchies might make new learning and thinking possible, for our students and for us.

In his 2010 *College English* article about whether and how to self-disclose in writing classes, Lad Tobin posits a conception of pedagogical performance and describes his own enactment of it. While our purposes differ, his conception of pedagogical performance is similar to my own. Drawing on both Newkirk and Goffman, he writes, “All teaching, like all writing, is . . . a ‘performance of self.’ And just as first-year students need to develop and perform a writerly self that works on the page, teachers of first-year students need to develop and perform a teacherly self that works in the classroom, the conference, and the marginal comment” (201). Tobin argues, as I do, that all pedagogical encounters are performances of self, and teachers’ pedagogical performances affect students’ performances of self. He focuses on the pedagogical effects of self-disclosure, saying:

Whenever a writing teacher chooses to reveal any personal information—whether that information is, say, a link to his Facebook page, a description of the struggles she had as a first-year writer, or the reason he is out as a gay man in the classroom and the world—the questions to ask are these: Will revealing this information at this point in this way to this group of students be pedagogically effective? Are the benefits likely to outweigh the risks? And a related question: Are there potential pedagogical risks in withholding this personal material? (198-99)

The answers to Tobin’s questions rely heavily on what the teacher hopes to teach students. As teachers deciding whether or not to self-disclose, Tobin says, “we are making a rhetorical move designed to help us achieve a larger goal” (198). Other work on pedagogical performance in composition studies emphasizes the influence that pedagogical performance has on student learning about difference, social justice, disruption of common scripts, and critique of academic ideologies (Kopelson, Jung, LeCourt and

Napoleone, Waite). The larger goal of this work is social change. More specifically, these scholars acknowledge their embodiment, fashion their pedagogical performances, and engage with the cultural narratives that inform how students read them.

Attention to embodiment is not missing from Tobin's work on pedagogical performance, however. Citing Michelle Payne's work about young female teachers and authority, Tobin acknowledges "[I]t is misleading and unfair to offer guidelines for self-disclosure without taking into account the very different material conditions that can constrain a teacher's options or influence a student's reactions" (200). As Tobin offers advice about self-disclosure, he is careful to limit his discussion to his own experience and emphasizes the importance of teachers' particular contexts to assess whether and how to self-disclose.

In describing his own pedagogical performance, Tobin writes, "I teach most effectively when the self I perform in the classroom is not totally out of sync with the self I generally take myself to be in my non-teaching life . . . I feel compelled to reveal enough of myself to feel like myself" (204). This statement implies that the revelation of "the personal" is optional for Tobin—he can choose whether or not to self-disclose, and he can assess the risk for both himself and his students. Unlike teachers who are marked as different, Tobin's essay implies that he can freely choose to perform a version of himself that feels like himself without fear of serious consequence such as student resistance, loss of authority, bodily harm, etc. For most of the people who contributed to *The Teacher's Body*, like so many other teachers, profoundly personal information is revealed in their bodies. They don't have a choice about whether or not to "strategically deploy" (Tobin's phrase) this personal information.

In the preface to *The Teacher's Body*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, "By evoking bodies that society takes to be woefully and often extravagantly divergent from the normative, anonymous scholarly body that we imagine to head the classroom, *The Teacher's Body* does the critical work of challenging oppressive representation and accessing liberatory narratives" (xiii). While the work that the contributors to *The Teacher's Body* have done is significant in its own right, I do not think the responsibility for "challenging oppressive representation" and "accessing liberatory narratives" should lie solely with people whose bodies are marked as different. I wonder, then, how writing teachers who live in "the normative, anonymous scholarly body" might also join in the work of "transforming the way we think about and act within the world" (xiii).

Tobin offers an example that not only illustrates how both students and teachers have a stake in the politics of pedagogical performance, but also highlights the inevitability of performance. Pointing out that acts of withholding are also part of teachers' pedagogical performances, he describes a hypothetical classroom situation in which a teacher doesn't say anything in response to a student's racist or homophobic comment, a silence that could indicate agreement with the statement. Emphasizing both pedagogical and personal consequences, he writes, "[I]n the quick cost-benefit analysis of the possible risks and rewards of speaking up, the largest part of that calculus is my projection of how my revelation of self is likely to be experienced by my students, while the other significant factor is how that revelation—or concealment—is likely to be experienced by me" (205).

Tobin's example shows commitment to inclusivity, personal integrity, and courage. In his example, the teacher, if s/he so chose, would offer a response, a reaction to the racist or homophobic comment. This reaction, it seems, would prevent the teacher from feeling weak or hypocritical and help her or him maintain personal/pedagogical integrity. Additionally, this reaction would model—and *make present*—for students an inclusive, socially responsible pedagogical performance that rejects the notion that teachers should consistently make their perspectives (in this case, on potentially polarizing or hot-button issues) *absent* from the classroom space. Furthermore, this pedagogical performance would disrupt the notion that “appropriate” academic performances are objective, anonymous, and dispassionate.

One thing I'm suggesting is that scholars, particularly those who are read as neutral, look for ways to be *proactive* regarding inclusivity, social justice, and critiquing academic ideologies, for their students' sake as well as for their own. Attention to pedagogical performance requires attention to embodiment, and attention to embodiment requires attention to embodied privilege. Conceiving of our pedagogies in this way—as embodied performances that are anything but neutral—urges teachers to sharpen our focus on what students may or may not be learning from our pedagogical performances.

### Reflections on Possibility

At the time of my Clint Eastwood pedagogical performance, I was almost entirely focused on how my gender and age appeared to students, and I perceived both as liabilities. Now I can see how elements of my identity conferred privilege. Young, yes, but I was still likely read as a Southern White Lady. It wasn't necessarily the kind of authority I wanted, but I had it nonetheless. My drawl, which matched my students', helped make my performance believable, and I daresay, *authoritative*, in that classroom context. Potentially adding to my quasi-authority was my familiarity to many of the students and their families. For example, I know the mother and grandmother of the student who was acting out. They wouldn't have been happy to hear that he gave me a hard time in class, and I'm sure he knew that.

To say that I cannot imagine the difficulty of performing authority in that classroom as anything other than a white person is an enormous understatement: every person in the classroom—and possibly even at the school, depending on the year—was white. A few families of color moved to town over the years, but they rarely stayed long. I didn't see my whiteness as a privilege at the time because, honestly, it would be years before I began to understand how whiteness works in the world and how I benefit from systemic racism. I wasn't thinking about my teaching in these terms back then. I was simply trying to do a good job in what felt like very difficult circumstances—which is, I think, what so many of us are trying to do. I recognize that my invitation to proactively take responsibility for privileged bodies is a challenging one, and I certainly don't have all the answers about how to do this work well. I firmly believe, though, that engaging in the vulnerable, messy work of carefully attending to our pedagogical performances will benefit our students and us.

What the conception of pedagogical performance I've offered asks teachers to do is choose—consciously, intentionally. Calling attention to all teaching bodies invites writ-

ing teachers to rethink what is “appropriate” and emphasizes what is possible. If teachers are always already performing (thus always making choices in concert with how their bodies are read and inscribed), then what choices are possible? Thinking of our pedagogies as performed can be liberating rather than limiting. As Mady Schutzman reminds us,

Identities-as-signs can be embodied and paraded for politically activist purposes without submitting to the potential tyranny of those signs. We play the fabrication critically. As we become more literate about the nature of signification, the ‘lie’ is retrieved from its censure as betrayer of truth and becomes, instead, the new paradigm for understanding precisely what truth is made of. We use ‘fictions’ as provisional platforms upon which to exercise agency. (281)

When teachers identify the habitual scripts from which they are teaching, and when they interrogate those scripts, they gain not necessarily control over their pedagogical performance but a heightened awareness of choice and intention. There are certainly risks to disrupting habitual scripts. While each teacher has to weigh the risks and rewards of performing alternative versions of self that disrupt habitual scripts and may offer students a wider range of possibilities for “appropriate” academic versions of self, I would particularly challenge those teachers whose bodies are often read as neutral (i.e. barely “read” at all, whose authority and competence are mostly unquestioned) to consider the pedagogical possibilities of strategically disrupting their own privilege.

Considering pedagogical performance also invites teachers to examine which aspects of their performance are pedagogically driven—that is, driven by their commitments to student learning, broadly conceived—and which aspects are driven by external factors such as institutional desires, programmatic desires, or habitual scripts. Considering performance and the different roles teachers play based on their different subject positions, be they institutional or otherwise, invites reflection on these roles and how they manifest themselves, or remain invisible, in the writing classroom.

Writing teachers know that we influence student learning in ways that go beyond strict subject matter. What my conception of pedagogical performance offers is a lens through which to reflect upon the choices we make when we stand in front of the class, craft writing assignments, talk with students in conferences, and so on—so that we can consider how our choices might be affecting our students and ourselves. Mindfulness about the relationship between pedagogical performance and student performance will improve the teaching of writing by inviting writing teachers to be more critically aware of what is driving the choices we make and what the possible effects of those choices may be.

My conception of pedagogical performance promotes teachers’ and students’ agency and responsibility to shape and perform a self in specific contexts that is consistent with their social, political, and ethical commitments. Calling explicit attention to the inevitability of performance invites teachers and students to recognize and question the habitual scripts they teach, write, and live by and to acknowledge the possibilities for new performances—for new versions of self—that may become just as (or more) rhetorically appropriate, just as real, to them as the self they performed on the first day of class.

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