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## Queering Pedagogies.

### Running interference and going feral: twin strategies that work two ways – in to and out from the academy.

I am a queer-identifying teacher, artist and activist operating both within and beyond the disciplinary confines of a Theatre department in a conservatoire training environment – the Victorian College of the Arts, the University of Melbourne, Australia. I have been struggling for some time now with the ambivalences and contradictions this throws up, and have been asking: ‘As a queer artist (outside!) turned artist-scholar (inside!) who has been utterly domesticated by being subsumed into the normative institution of academia ... how [can I] continue to exist within that environment? What inequalities does one have to avert one’s eyes from in order to stay inside, to hold this position?’ (Campbell, 2019: 177)

To really queer pedagogy we firstly need to acknowledge the colonial bias and basis of our ongoing assumptions about education and academic institutions; at times I have felt that this actually requires the literal and/or metaphorical burning down of our houses or, at an individual level, leaving academia. In *A Third University is Possible*, however, pseudonymous author la paperson merges decolonizing thought with queerness in a radical but reparative/utopian move that insists it *is* possible to work from inside to produce change; to utilize the knowledge acquired within these very systems to question them and build new worlds. They assert:

Within the colonizing university also exists a decolonizing education.

... Regardless of its colonial structure, because school is an assemblage of machines and not a monolithic institution, its machinery is always being subverted toward decolonizing purposes. The bits of machinery that make up a decolonizing university

are driven by decolonial desires, with decolonizing dreamers who are subversively part of the machinery and part machine themselves. These subversive beings wreck, scavenge, retool, and reassemble the colonizing university into decolonizing contraptions. They are scyborgs with a decolonizing desire. You might choose to be one of them.

Scyborg – composed of *s* + *cyborg* – is a queer turn of word that I offer to you to name the structural agency of persons who have picked up colonial technologies and reassembled them to decolonizing purposes. (paperperson 1-2)

This work, and concept, has reinvigorated my thinking and helped me to stay ‘inside’, leading me to argue in this article that queering pedagogies requires a two-way set of strategies based on what we can do *inside* the academic institution (and specifically within Theatre/Drama/Performance disciplines) and what we need to take *outside* the institution. In the first instance this is about welcoming more queer students, staff and researchers into the academy (and keeping them) and, in the latter, taking the institutional bounties of our privileged positions out to queer communities and artists and sharing knowledge in a more grass-roots way; or, as I like to put it: going feral. I will document this dual set of strategies in this short article.

### **Personal catalysts towards recognizing the need for queer pedagogies**

At the heart of queer pedagogies in Theatre or Performance fields is a practical question about how queer artists learn to do what we do, about how we learn to be a (queer) artist and, at a deeper level, how we negotiate life as queer folk. Whilst I have long identified as a ‘queer artist’ (which has its own inherent terminological problems), setting

up queer performance assemblage wreckedAllprods with my long-time creative partner Lachlan Philpott in 2001 (*wreckedallprods*), the 'problem' of being a 'queer academic' did not really solidify for me personally until a series of events which left me quite clear that to be 'in' academia had entailed a slow but inexorable process of compromises and shifts in priorities that had gradually erased my lived experience as queer whilst simultaneously, ironically, that academic position was shored up by research into queer performance.

The first catalyst was an invitation to talk as a queer theatre maker at Queer Provocations 1 (2016), a series of 'thinking' events attached to Sydney Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras (*Queer Provocations*). This was a very grass roots environment and I felt immediately (and quite viscerally) how much I stood out in that space. After 10 years as a full-time academic I was now alien and the anomaly there – become middle class and comfortable through years of salary and domestication into the institution. It was a shock to realise that I was so used to being surrounded by similarly educated, privileged and institutionalised (often 'queer') people in the University – happily talking about queer theatre and performance – that I had not acknowledged my own increasing alienation from my community. It was a wake-up call about what this domestication in the institution does to queerness. The venue for Queer Provocations – the Red Rattler Theatre (*Red Rattler*) – was full of brilliant, hungry, queer minds that quickly made clear the gap between which 'queers' know how to write grant applications and articulate their work and become part of city/state/national/ international systems focused on developing their work and careers – and to even be in the right circles to know that you can do that – and which queer people are excluded from that information and privilege. While I have long understood this theoretically, the difference was that, in that moment, the embodied pain of the loss I felt, alongside a galvanising surge of energy from being in that space, finally overwhelmed the

trappings and pressures of academia, and produced a caesura in that relentless need to be achieving and producing within a corporatised educational system that is fully in bed with neoliberal goals of productivity. (Indeed, I have to question my motives for writing this article now...).

At that point I could no longer ignore the oxymoronic position of being a 'queer academic', developing a gnawing awareness of the hypocrisy and 'gentrification', as Sarah Schulman has put it (2012), of institutionalising queer work and training and funding. This made it feel impossible to stay 'inside'. Spurred on by that gathering I returned 'home' to the University, knowing that I could only be 'inside' if I was also back 'outside' the academy and among this community – which I knew I was in danger of talking about (research) but no longer being part of. This was the first event that led directly to starting to think critically about strategies I was already employing inside the academy that I had informally been calling 'running interference' and, also, to the idea of 'feral' strategies, such as Feral Queer Camps, that this article outlines below.

The second major catalyst was when I was 'encouraged' to apply for promotion and found myself in a dilemma: this sort of hierarchical climbing felt like anathema – the nail in the coffin for my queerness. After much deliberation I put in the application, convincing myself that being able to contribute to instigating change higher up the structural ladder was probably the most useful thing I could do for the queer community at this point in time, hopefully more useful than simply leaving. So I stayed 'in'; 'at home'. But these catalysing moments are the background to a radical shift in a move from researching, teaching, making and supporting queer performance to a more conscious process of thinking systematically about my own pedagogy and that of the institution I 'belong' to. In sum, in order genuinely to queer (my) pedagogy I knew that I needed to act at all times not just with my 'queerness'

upfront, which had been relatively straightforward for me in academia, but with the daily awareness of what my place in the academy meant for that queerness and for the queer communities I wanted to remain part of.

### **Queer pedagogical strategies: running interference and going feral.**

In light of this context, I would like to document here a set of strategies that allow me to move across inside and outside the academy. I frame this as a 'feral' *modus operandi*, based on acknowledging the fact that I have been fully 'domesticated' within the institution. Feral is defined as: 'in a wild state, especially after escape from captivity or domestication' (*Lexico*). In other words, a feral strategy might involve taking the the financial and knowledge resources from the institution and 'running wild' with them, and then returning inside again to build up more resources that you can take out again, in a reiterative cycle. I suggest it is a twin process, working both inside and outside the academy. It's a compromise – but, I would argue, a hopeful one as part of a whole set of queer pedagogical tactics.

### **Inside**

On the 'inside', these strategies include 'running interference', which encompasses a range of tactics. The most obvious and necessary is to queer the curriculum inside the institution. This will include changing chosen texts and teaching queer theory but, at a deeper level, it means changing the language we use in class and bringing our – queer – selves into the room. This is hardly a new discovery, and there is so much that can be learned from feminist past (and ongoing) critical interventions into higher education, but I think a similar queer process has been lagging outside of the specific fields of gender/queer studies. There is a dearth of awareness and education around gender and sexuality amongst otherwise brilliant

and knowledgeable colleagues. I argue here that we cannot leave it to our queer students to do this awareness-raising and educating. Some ways to do this include getting on committees and ensuring that the queer/non-normative voice is always in the room and on the agenda. It's useful to go as high as possible in the hierarchy to do this (i.e. take the promotion but remember why it's important for queer scholarship and the community and not because you want yet more money and prestige). It might mean stating your positionality early on and setting up expectations about the language used in class and on campus. Running interference means grabbing the opportunity to build queer research capacity in your area: being able to speak for ourselves about our own work is a decolonizing practice. Another is seeking new funding sources to support queer work, artists, theory, publications by giving access to teaching, to rehearsal rooms and equipment and writing letters of support. This is about creating a critical mass; a critical mass gets funding and opportunities.

It is really important to resist the urge to run away to gender and sexuality schools: theatre and performance studies really need our voices. However, I would suggest that it is healthy to leave the institution for sustained periods of time, if possible, to remember what it is like not to be on the relentless industrial-academic treadmill of producing, measuring, assessing. This is helpful for reminding us not to get sucked in to thinking that these strategies make it all ok: it's a compromise. Always *remember* your positionality. Always remember that you are privileged; that you *have* a home.

*Stating positionality.* I start the academic year by announcing I am queer to the whole school and new cohort. More recently that has grown to announcing it to the whole faculty and it runs something like this: I am queer and I am happy (here) – this is possible to imagine; I am queer and I write about and make queer performance; I am queer and I

research and teach about queer performance. It seems really obvious and straightforward, but I had, in fact, underestimated the importance of this simple action until approached some weeks into semester one year by an undergraduate that I didn't (yet) teach or know. She had stopped me to tell me what that statement had meant to her as a queer person starting her acting training. She had rung home that first day to tell her parents: 'I am in the right place'.

*Queering the curriculum.* But are they in the right place? When we get queer emerging artists into our training programmes there is a sort of assumption that in drama/theatre/performance we are all very egalitarian, left-leaning and open to diversity. But this remains an assumption. The principle does not necessarily play out in the daily, lived experience of our queer, trans, non-binary, genderqueer, gay, lesbian, bi students. One starting place is to listen genuinely to their experiences. In 2018, for the Australasian Drama Studies Association Conference, which was held that year at the VCA, a group of queer-identifying students and recent graduates of the VCA Undergraduate Acting programme: Josh Bell, Tahlee Fereday, Mark Nannup, Kurt Pimblett, Charles Purcell, Brooke Raynor and Karl Richmond collaborated with me to create a panel presentation to a room full of people who were their current and former teachers and the national peers of those teachers.<sup>1</sup> It was called: *Queering the acting curriculum: what would it take?* The opening premise was:

This panel session addresses actor training from the perspective of the queer-identifying actor. Acting curricula, including ideas about 'the normal voice', gendered workshop exercises and the characters in plays, still largely tend to sit firmly within a heteronormative, formally conservative paradigm, rendering queer students

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<sup>1</sup> I was convenor of the panel, but the content was driven and delivered by the students/graduates – it was about speaking for themselves about their own experiences.

marginalized and othered. This is undoubtedly an unconscious process, wherein highly-trained practitioners pass on their own training and expertise, but in the repetition and reiteration of a fairly long-standing (western) idea of what actor training is, the queer-identifying student can find their sense of self and identity undervalued or unrecognized. In this group we have been asking, then, 'what happens to (our) queerness within the institution?

Identifying that actor training is intimately bound up with a sense of self, the panel also aimed to open up a dialogue about how we might train the trainers to consider how gendered language and assumptions of heterosexuality diminish the day to day experience of gender and sexually diverse, usually young, actors in training, with lifelong repercussions. As the driving force, the speakers hoped the panel could be part of what they described as 'enacting the change that would enable queer-identifying students to feel comfortable and safe' in their training.

One of the main areas of discussion was language. Some questions posed were:

- What does it mean to state how we identify ourselves and how might this change the ways rooms operate?
- What do assumptions about gender binaries do/what is the impact this has on the gender diverse actor (in training)?
- And, very specifically, why is it important to get pronouns and honorifics right, and what does it do when we don't?

The language we use in teaching/training is one of the more visible or tangible areas of negotiating gender and sexuality. But, like icebergs, the structural and systemic ways heteronormative assumptions of gender and sexuality affect us can sit largely under the surface in wider questions of curriculum and training methods. This is particularly the case

in that major subset of the acting curriculum that is voice and body training – which of course is intimately interwoven with our sense of identity. At times this has raised the necessity for each of us to use assimilation (to the norm) as a strategy to cope in a world that works with a dominant logic different from our own. A member of the panel, however, raised their new awareness of the ‘price of assimilation’ within training.

The panelists particularly wanted to ask: ‘How *do* ‘you enact the change you need to feel comfortable? At what points can you intervene? At what points have you felt able to intervene or not?’

They offered some proposals:

- Above all – the need for conversation between staff and students, and rooms where these conversations are not only welcome but invited.
- Make positionalities explicit in the room. Don’t assume heterosexuality or heteronormative values. Ask about language, terminology, pronouns. Be willing to apologize if you’ve made a mistake – do this immediately and with openness and move on. We need an environment where we can make mistakes and learn from them.
- Invite students’ opinions on curriculum, on plays, characters, roles, casting. Ask students what roles they would like to play, instead of assuming they can only, or will only want to, do certain roles.
- The importance of teaching/understanding gender theories and their relationship to theatre: know what it means to keep reiterating the same subjectivities and plays on stage and replicating that in the training. Then constantly seek ways to intervene in and disrupt this loop.

The panel fully endorsed the position that learning about gender and sexual diversity is not an 'add-on' but is a vital part of actor training; given this, I suggest here there is still a lot of work to do.

What this panel discussion indicates so clearly is the cultural labor involved in having to intervene around issues of language, assumptions, curriculum and behavior in one's own training. We cannot leave this labor to our queer students. To queer pedagogy within drama/theatre/performance disciplines we need to self-educate, to advocate on their behalf, build up training for new colleagues and consistently call out outmoded and unacceptable practices.

## **Outside**

Motivated by that moment in the Red Rattler, I set about thinking through the idea of de-domesticating myself from the 'home' of academia and 'going feral'. My research collaborator Stephen Farrier and I began to formulate ideas for creating queer performance networks outside of the University. We thought one of the best ways we could do this with no funding beyond our time as paid by our universities, would be to 'piggy-back' on existing queer arts festivals – thinking about the queer people who love queer performance but may feel deeply uncomfortable in an educational institution, let alone be in a position to present a paper at an academic gathering. As Steve and I put it in our call for participants:

This is open to anyone in the community who has not had access to, or has been let down by, has run away from, or has chosen not to enter into, Higher Education but is hungry to encounter a utopian queer curriculum largely of their own devising. We welcome enthusiasts, artists, practitioners, audience members, programmers – anyone who loves queer performance. (Campbell and Farrier, 2018-20)

Essentially, we wanted to form a feral queer 'cohort' who would travel through the festival together, seeing work and talking about it together, merging their skills and knowledge with ideas and theories Steve and I could bring from the academy to help find ways to articulate responses to work; to build conversations with artists and work in a constructive way with them to help develop queer practice. We called this 'Feral Queer Camp'. In 2018 and 2019 we ran a FQC at Outburst Festival in Belfast, based around meeting, talking about what we knew/didn't know about queer theory and performance, and attending programmed events including shows, talks and workshops together. We are still working out exactly how the camps work but our aim is to consider with the feral campers:

How we learn (from each other) about what makes performance queer; how we talk about queer performance; how we make and develop performance; how we might queer reviewing and funding; and, above all, how we might develop a network of queer thinkers who can talk amongst ourselves and to others about queer performance. (Campbell and Farrier, 2018-20)

Ideally this will lead to capacity-building in the community for how we, as artists and audiences, talk and write about queer performance because, as we know all too painfully, there is a gap in knowledge in the mainstream system for reviewing independent queer work, which damages queer artists either by exclusion or misunderstanding. Our modes aim to stay un-institutionalised, with gatherings including potluck dinners and 'midnight snacks' in the bar after performances, where we can chew over what we are seeing and thinking, draw out our experience and develop critical languages around queer performance beyond the academy.

## **Conclusion**

The emerging artists at VCA articulated the desire to be part of ‘enacting the change we want to see’ and as teachers, queer or not, that must surely be part of our drive. The Feral Queer Camps are a utopian vision of queer school, where learning is driven by the learners – and that is all of us there. In a sense it takes the materials one would find in traditional academic subjects, such as Contemporary Performance Analysis, Gender in Performance, Theatre and Society, etc., and places them alongside participant-driven, hands-on engagement with the art and artists. It is early days with the camps but we will keep seeking ways to gather queer artists, audiences, programmers and funders together, with a focus on building strength in how we talk about our own work – for each other and beyond queer circles.

José Muñoz writes that ‘the need to produce minoritarian knowledge is a mode of utopian performativity, a certain striving that is both an ideality and a necessity’ (120). It is not necessarily easy to do either of these inside/outside sets of strategies, but I argue that it is vital to try, if we are to imagine new ways for queer and trans folk to access ideas and theories that can open up liberating ways for each of us to understand our lives and make queer sense of our embodied experiences. In my own case, at least, I know that my late arrival at queer theory was like all my birthdays come at once: a fireworks display of words and ideas going off in my head and unleashing thoughts that had been stuck, aimless and stranded for most of my life. Spreading this feeling-knowledge wherever I can is perhaps my scyborg mission.

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### **Bio**

Alyson's work as a theatre director spans a broad range of venues in Australia, the UK and the US. Her research focuses on gender and sexuality, particularly queer dramaturgies and HIV and AIDS in performance. She now likes to write about feral pedagogies and is passionate about Feral Queer Camping.