

## Queering Crisis: Hope for an Alternative Academy

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Recently, I was helping some friends shop for new kitchen cabinets, countertops, and flooring, and after three-plus hours of looking at finishes, designs, textures, colors, and a seemingly endless assortment of possible pulls, knobs, and handles, we got in the car to drive away. The afternoon gone, we wondered, “So what do we want for dinner?” Not one of us could think of a possible meal option; we all sat there in a sort of stunned malaise, the victims of decision fatigue (Berg; Tierney).

Professionally and personally, I’ve also been experiencing what pop-psychologists have coined outrage fatigue (Begley; Ley), that particular exhaustion that comes from being constantly enraged or frustrated by social issues that seem both incredibly easy to fix at a personal level—just don’t be a jerk, folks!—and yet almost impossible at a structural level where faceless corporations and oligarchs collaborate with government leaders on all sides to enact policies and practices that disadvantage and disenfranchise those around them. Four years of the Trump regime, when every day involved waking up to a new crisis spurred on by temperamental Twitter rants from our then-President, left many of us fundamentally bereft: Where do we focus when everything everywhere is a crisis?

That particular sort of mental exhaustion and inaction has felt increasingly common both culturally, as we have endured a time- and life-altering pandemic, and professionally, as in writing studies and other areas of the modern academy as we find ourselves on a seemingly endless spiral of real and imagined crises. Sometimes, it is hard to know if we are in real peril, or simply gaslighting ourselves, or some combination of both that keeps us moving at such a pace we cannot sort out which is which.

But crisis is also a genuinely important rhetorical trope, at the heart of many of the stasis questions of ancient Western rhetorical practice, where rhetors consider the degree to which a problem merits attention. Crisis is baked into rhetoric, a point Ryan Skinnell makes more thoughtfully and cogently in his contribution to this *Where We Are*. Like George Jetson, however, I am sometimes desperate for someone to “get me off this crazy thing.”

Yet I also recognize that crisis can sometimes be the only way that some of us can render our lives and experiences meaningful enough that those in the (disciplinary) majority notice us at all. It leads me to wonder: When crisis will not be the necessary framework that writing studies requires of any minoritized groups in order to gain access, or be taken seriously?

Here, I'd like to suggest that we consider queering crisis. I suggest that we look to queer and cultural rhetorics for frameworks that can challenge crisis as a thing about which to be anxious. I suggest that we oriented ourselves differently. On some level, crisis emerges when the things we have collectively oriented ourselves toward—success, happiness, achievement, peace, freedom—have not materialized. The absence of the longed-for and desired object or experience creates a felt sense of absence—something that we feel we need in order to provide meaning or direction that is missing—and our immediate task becomes filling that absence. In this way, crisis becomes a salient rhetorical device for higher education, a way of directing our attention—our bodies and behaviors and emotions—toward an absent presence. As Sara Ahmed has noted in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, “Institutions . . . involve orientation devices that keep things in place” (134), but which also shape the places those things are held or kept: “This world, too, is ‘inherited’ as a dwelling: it is a world shaped by colonial histories, which affect not simply how maps are drawn, but the kinds of orientations we have toward objects and others” (126).

While Ahmed is not writing specifically about the academy as a world—though it is a world she addresses at length in her more recent *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*—it is not hard to extend her metaphor to our thinking about how crisis-as-orientation-device shapes the world of higher education and especially our discipline. What might it mean to always think about our work—our research, teaching, and service—as being endlessly in some sort of crisis? More pertinently, what might it mean as a worldmaking practice that our discipline seems to engage the Other primarily as a crisis in need of fixing? In “Cruising Composition Texts: Negotiating Sexual Difference in First-Year Readers,” Martha Marinara, Jonathan Alexander, Samantha Blackmon, and I noted that, at the time, the primary method composition readers used for including LGBTQ+ people or topics was the mode of argument, specifically through constructions of queerness as something about which reasonable people could (and should) argue and disagree. We asked the field to think about that carefully, to think about what meant that our field represented queer lives to college students as only ever contentious and open for debate. How does that invite queer people in? What world does that invite us into? And who would actually want to live in that world?

In writing this critique of crisis, I do not mean to suggest that there are not real problems in our world, nor that writing studies and higher education are wonderlands of possibility for every different body that comes to them. There are problems that need to be engaged and addressed, some of which Carmen Kynard tackles head on in her contribution to this *Where We Are*. Instead, I'm wondering how we might do tackle these problems without framing the problems and their contexts as spaces of crisis. I'm not sure I have the answer

to that question, but I take some comfort in the work that many in queer and cultural rhetorics have been doing around counterstorytelling as a worldmaking methodology. Counterstory, as Aja Y. Martinez has argued, “functions as a method for marginalized people to intervene in research methods that would form ‘master narratives’ based on ignorance and on assumptions about minoritized people” (“A Plea” 53). Elsewhere, Martinez notes that counterstory “functions as a method to empower the marginalized through the formation of stories with which to intervene in the erasures accomplished in ‘majoritarian’ stories or ‘master narratives.’” (“The Responsibility” 214). Crisis can too easily become a master narrative for minoritized peoples, one which shapes our experiences only or primarily in terms of conflicts between who we are and what we need in order to thrive. Or, perhaps, merely belong. And it often expresses what majoritized people think we need, deserve, or have earned. Too often, the crisis frameworks that shape disciplinary conversations render minoritized bodies agentless and shape our experience through a pathos that works to engage sympathy (for us as individuals) when it should incite others to challenge systems of oppression (for us collectively). Counterstories, however, do not need to function along a binary axis of conflict in order to build other worlds and other spaces in which to honor individuals and their needs.

Crisis-as-orientation becomes a project into which we easily fall and which then shapes us and our experiences of the academy in ways that do not nourish us or create habitable worlds for us to join. Ultimately, crisis is fatiguing, at least for those of us for whom the crisis is not merely theoretical; for many of us who have been working in writing studies for so many years, the fatigue is quite real. Immersed in endless crisis, it becomes hard to see ourselves or our work as enriching, as giving back in ways that can support others. In the years I have left before retirement, I’m wondering what I can do to engage my research, teaching, and service—and the broader field of writing studies, as well—in ways that will make a more habitable (academic) world for me and those I teach and mentor. I’m wondering if that’s possible, and if so, what it might look like. I’m too tired right now to have an answer, but perhaps an answer is just within reach, just to side of this crisis-go-round I keep forgetting to jump off of.

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