Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You: Self-Disclosure and Lesbian and Gay Identity in the ESL Writing Classroom

Martha Clark Cummings

ABSTRACT: A lesbian teacher, recently returned from four years in Japan and teaching an intermediate ESL class in a public community college in New York City, struggles with addressing the issue of her own sexual orientation while using a novel with a protagonist who is questioning his sexual identity. The evolution of gay/lesbian and/or queer theory mirrors the progress of the writer's life as she confronts her own internalized homophobia and the heteronormativity of her culture.

KEYWORDS: community college; ESL; the teaching of writing; collaborative learning; gay/lesbian; queer theory; identity; sexual orientation; the closet

> *"Every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects a new closet whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure. Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not; it is equally difficult to guess for any given interlocutor whether, if they did know, the knowledge would seem very important."*
>
> —Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*

> *"The important question, then, is not whether sociosexual aspects of cultural practices ought to be addressed but how this might be done."*
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> —Cynthia Nelson, *Sexual Identities in English Language Education*

Not too long ago, I returned to New York City from four years in Japan, expecting to feel liberated, let out the closet, free again to do as I pleased in

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the ESL classroom. In Japan, when I informed the director of my program of my sexual orientation, she suggested that I keep it "a secret forever." I grew to understand her perspective over the years. In the small city where I worked, such a revelation would have brought the local television, radio, and newspaper reporters to the campus, and I would quickly have become the most famous foreigner in town. And not in a good way. Being a lesbian in Japan is associated with pornography. In addition, as Jean Valentine explains:

> [C]onceptualizing self in terms of sexuality is considered alien in Japan, as this makes doing into being, practice into essence, in that what you do defines what you are. In Japan, what you are, your self, tends to be defined through interaction, where you belong with others, your socially recognized networks of relationships. (107)

When my partner and I told our Japanese colleagues that we had left New York together in 1992, moving to California, then Wyoming, then, in 2002, to Japan, only one person remarked, "You must be very good friends." The rest commented on the fact that Japanese people did not usually move that much.

Back in New York, my partner and I went to City Hall in Brooklyn to become Domestic Partners, to claim our rights, and I began to think about what rights I had in the ESL classroom and what I might do with them. I felt fortunate to be starting a new teaching position at a large, urban community college, in a program that describes its overall educational philosophy as "based on the principles of whole language, which assumes that learning is a social activity," a program that "rel[ies] heavily on . . . three learning approaches: cooperative learning, the language experience approach, and fluency first" (Babbitt and Mlynarczyk 40-41). My interpretation of this was that I would have considerable autonomy in the classroom concerning what I might share with students, how I might creatively construct the basis for meaning-making in the classroom.

As part of fluency first (MacGowan-Gilhooly), teachers are required to have students read a full length work of fiction. I have since learned that choosing an appropriate text for these students is particularly challenging. I was therefore delighted when, prior to my third semester, when I was to teach a class that included five "multiple repeaters" of the course—that is, students who had taken and failed the course more than once—Peter Cameron published his very accessible and compelling young adult novel, *Someday This*

Pain Will Be Useful to You. I have been a fan of Peter Cameron's work since he first started publishing short stories in *The New Yorker* in 1983. He is an author I trust and respect. In this particular novel, an 18-year-old young man who characterizes himself as "disturbed" considers a variety of issues, including his highly dysfunctional family, who live in New York City; whether or not he should go to college as planned; why his peers seem so distasteful to him; his love for his grandmother; and the correct use of the English language. He is also questioning his sexual orientation. In choosing this text, I was taking a step toward my further uncloseting. Or so I thought.

A Context for Teaching and Disclosure

It seems to me that over the last forty years, gay and lesbian academics have come full circle. We started out strictly closeted and thereby authoritative, that is, not problematizing identity and thereby not problematizing our classroom authority in the classroom. Then we came out and allowed ourselves to be vulnerable. Today some of us are postmodernly performing our position moment by moment and thereby remaining ambiguous. Some queer theorists even advocate intentionally playing the role of the authority again.

I began teaching ESL in 1973, in the era of Lesbian Separatism (Levy), as well as the beginning of the recognition of "homophobia" (Weinberg). NCTE and other organizations writing resolutions opposing discrimination against lesbians and gays (Crew and Keener) soon followed. I continued teaching ESL through the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, when coming out, in the classroom and elsewhere, became a matter of life and death, and through the establishment of Act Up!, with their slogan of "Silence=Death." The mood of the era was summarized by writer and activist, Michelangelo Signorile:

> Everyone must come out of the closet, no matter how difficult, no matter how painful.
>
> We must all tell our parents.
>
> We must all tell our families.
>
> We must all tell our friends.
>
> We must all tell our coworkers.
>
> These people vote. If they don't know that we're queer—if they think that only the most horrible people are queer—they will vote against us. (364)

Advocating that teachers present themselves with a gay/lesbian identity in the composition classroom, Harriet Malinowitz reminds us of the old adage, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem" (264). In her discussion of the place of sexuality in the composition class, she states, "What all of my students . . . [had] in common was the awareness that they lived in a homophobic world, and that homophobia affected them in some way" (22). In addition, she suggests, nondisclosure directly impacts the dynamics by which the construction of meaning may operate. "Because lesbians and gay men must constantly assess the consequences of being out and negotiate the terms of disclosure, often necessitating elaborate monitoring of what is said and even thought ('internalized homophobia'), a particular complication is woven into their processes of construing and constructing knowledge" (24). The dilemma that arises is a composition class that advocates self-disclosure and exploration of personal themes for some but not all of its participants. The antidote, according to Malinowitz, is to treat sexual identity as another "negotiation of meaning" in the composition classroom. This includes a gay or lesbian teacher coming out in the classroom in order to further empower her gay or lesbian students.

In the field of TESOL, Cynthia Nelson describes the changes that took place in the 1990s in terms of "the groundswell of discussions that language teachers began to have in professional forums" at the time. She recounts, "teachers began to advocate for, and exchange practical advice about, such things as considering the educational needs of learners who themselves identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transgender; including gay themes in curricula and teaching resources; addressing heterosexist discrimination and homophobic attitudes among teachers, students, and administrators; and creating open working environments so that no teachers have to hide their sexual identities" (14).

Gay, bisexual, transgendered, and lesbian teachers started groups of political and social support as well. Nelson's groundbreaking presentation, "We Are Your Colleagues" with Jim Ward and Lisa Carscadden at the 1991 TESOL convention in Vancouver was followed by a surge of activism that culminated in the formation of a GBTL task force whose mandate was to make recommendations to TESOL's executive board regarding the inclusion of GBTL people and issues at every level of the organization (Cummings and Nelson). In this context of change and possibility toward greater inclusion of gay identity issues in the classroom, I explored what it meant for me to bring my authentic self to teaching.

According to Paula Cooper and Cheri Simonds, the act of coming out is an act of self-disclosure, and "[a] major characteristic of effective self-disclosure is appropriateness. To be effective communicators we consider the timing of our disclosure" (34). No longer dealing with a formal and implicit protocol of secrecy, I considered that appropriateness might thereby help me decide whether or not to come out to my students. However, the more I considered coming out to my students, the more hesitant I became. Mary Elliot extends the point: "Self-disclosure implies the personal, the unacceptable or difficult, and the uncomfortable; self-disclosure of sexual orientation surely packages all three. Self-disclosure in the congruent or 'golden' moment rather than the incongruent moment can mitigate fear by removing much of the artificiality and sense of 'wrongness' from the disclosing moment, a sense that can be confused with the value of the disclosed content itself" (704). What this meant to me was that I would not start the course by announcing that I was a lesbian and had chosen a novel with a protagonist who seemed to be questioning his sexual orientation because it was a topic I couldn't get enough of. Instead, I would wait until the students recognized the issue as an important one in the novel and possibly in their own lives. I would wait, then, for the "golden" moment before disclosing my sexual identity to my students.

I decided this despite what I knew from the literature on disclosure in the English language classroom, namely that the matter is not that simple. As Judith Butler states, self-disclosure may conceal more than it reveals:

> In the act which would disclose the true and full content of that 'I,' a certain radical *concealment* is thereby produced. For it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier, since its signification is always to some degree out of one's control, but also because its *specificity* can only be demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its claim to coherence. . . . If I claim to be a lesbian, I 'come out' only to produce a new and different 'closet.' The 'you' to whom I come out now has access to a different region of opacity. (18)

As Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell observe of their experience teaching a lesbian studies course: "We found that we could not . . . represent ourselves 'as lesbian' within institutional contexts (such as our respective faculties of education) without instantiating profoundly unproductive es-

sentialist notions of fixed, stable, and marginal 'lesbian identities'" (297). In other words, if I come out as a lesbian in my classroom, I am not only giving up heterosexual privilege and authority, but I am inviting my students to apply to me all of the labels and stereotypes they have in their minds about what a lesbian is, what a lesbian looks like, what a lesbian does, and finally, to attribute anything I do that offends or frightens them to the fact of my being a lesbian. When one of my students who feels wronged says to me, "You're only doing this to me because I'm a man," I assume he means because I am a lesbian. The space in which I can maneuver may grow smaller, not bigger, when I come out.

Disclosure as a Critique of Culture, or Coming Out Is Not Like It Used to Be

Ultimately, Elliot reminds us that the act itself involves crossing an "abyss" (704), which includes the experience of "dread, panic, confusion, and uncertainty of the actual moment of disclosure" (694), and yet revealing [one's sexual identity as a] "public 'identity,' because it is predicated upon private taboo sexual practices, can never achieve full status as an identity in the heterosexist mind. Coming out will almost always, therefore, feel more like the confession of a secret than we who live within the consciousness of a complex gay and lesbian culture would wish" (704).

In the one other ESL classroom in which I had come out, back in the early 1990s, the students, once they had recovered from their initial surprise and the fact that they did not have the language to adequately express the feelings they were having about my revelation, responded by telling me their secrets. They seemed to think I was inviting them to share a secret, too. And they did. A Japanese woman wrote an essay about her attraction to African American men, and a Chinese woman confessed that the only reason she was in New York was that she had had an affair with a married surgeon at the hospital in China where she had been a doctor. Somehow, if I did come out to my ESL students again, I had to do it in a way that would allow them to see that I was not confessing a dirty secret, but naming my place in a homophobic culture that was oppressing all of us.

Sarah Benesch, for me, represents the embodiment of a critical approach to teaching ESL composition that includes sociocultural critique. Describing her teaching of a lesson about the death of Matthew Shepard, she writes: "I focus on one assumption that emerged and was treated dialogically: that heterosexual men are justified in responding to the presence

of homosexual men with anger or violence to assert a traditional notion of masculinity" (577). And by the end of the class discussion, her students realize that their violent reaction is based on fear. Nelson, too, suggests that "exploring, rather than shunning, homophobic attitudes . . . can lead to insights . . . about the ways in which language and culture operate" (86). Her suggestion makes a great deal of sense to me. As a sociolinguist, the exploration of language and culture through expressions of homophobia seems particularly enticing.

In order to engage in this kind of discourse, Karen Kopelson suggests that the instructor appear neutral. Such a stance is performative, "a deliberate, reflective, self-conscious masquerade that serves an overarching and more insurgent political agenda than does humanist individualism. It is never a stance that believes in or celebrates its own legitimacy but, rather, feigns itself, *perverts* itself, in the service of other—disturbing and disruptive—goals" (123). My problem with this approach is that my students know I have a passionate position on every issue that comes up in our discussions. How could I possibly be neutral? For example, much to my students' surprise I think watching television is such a waste of time that I don't have one. I care passionately about reading and writing and the movies, and I love to look at art. How could I be neutral about whether or not the protagonist of the novel we are reading is gay?

Other researchers suggest, dishearteningly, that it doesn't matter what we do, that no matter how diverse gay and lesbian people might be, in our homophobic culture, there is a lens through which gay and lesbian people are viewed that snaps into place at the first moment the word is mentioned and which cannot be altered. And yet, another approach, Queer Theory, suggests a difference could be made by moving the focus from "the repression or expression of a homosexual minority" toward developing "an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviors, and social institutions, and social relations—in a word, the constitution of the self and society" (Seidman 128). In other words, if an instructor were able to remain neutral, or at least ambiguous, she might be able to engage students in a discussion about why it seems so important for society to maintain the gay/straight binary and what, exactly, is at stake.

And so I viewed the option of neutrality as supportive of my decision to wait for a "golden moment" of self-disclosure, if one arose. Otherwise, I would refrain from bringing up my own sexual identity in the conversation. I would try to do the right thing. In other words, I would help my students

develop as writers and critical thinkers in the context of the novel we were discussing.

Reading and Writing about *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You*

With the long, varied history of thought and action around disclosure of sexual orientation in the classroom in mind, I expected the discussion of this novel to be an emotionally fraught experience. It was a small class. Only fifteen had registered, and after the first three weeks, three had dropped out. We met for two 60-minute periods four days a week. The students also had tutoring for two periods on Fridays from a very experienced tutor.

Convenient for forming small groups that could speak English together, the twelve students included groups of four from each of three parts of the world. They were: Anastasia, a Ukrainian woman in her fifties with two grown children; Sophie, a Russian woman in her mid-thirties, the single mother of two young daughters; and a 19-year-old Romanian named Andre, whose stated goal after college was "to transfer to other college and keep performing myself." Rounding out the Eastern European group was Nila, from Uzbekistan, the young mother of two children, who said, "I hope to get from this course more English, because when I came to United State I started learn English at the beginning, even I didn't knew what it means he or she."

There were four Chinese students under 25: Tang, from Mainland China, who, when asked on a first-day questionnaire what he hoped to do after graduation, wrote, "I have no idea but I am sure I have to work"; Stacy, also from Mainland China, whose best essay was about being her parents' second, hence "secret" child and growing up with her grandparents; Sunny, a Cantonese speaker; and Rebecca, from Macao, also a native speaker of Cantonese, who asked, "If I live here more than 5 years, My English will be better than now, wonna it?"

The other four students were Haitians: Henri, a man in his twenties who worked all night and had a very hard time staying awake in this 12:40-2:50 class on no sleep; Charles, a security guard at the Department of Homeland Security, who often told us "Never hesitate to call 911"; Monique, a troubled woman in her thirties who was unable to manage her life at home with two small children and a husband who was not anxious to help her become educated; and Paul, a 19-year-old who asked, "How hard I need to work to get an A+ in this class."

In teaching the course, I tried to follow the advice of *Changes*, a textbook I co-authored, wherein "the role of the instructor is often implied ... setting up groups or pairs; answering questions about the activities, the readings, and the instructions for writing; structuring and facilitating class discussion and sharing, helping to make sense and order out of the sometimes conflicting and disordered group reports; adding the interpretations of the larger community" (Withrow, Brookes, and Cummings xiv-xv).

As for discussion of the novel, I kept to Kenneth Bruffee's notion of collaborative learning, and depended in large part on the students. In their groups, students decide what issues are important and relevant to them and write statements or questions about them that could be argued about. The students define the important issues as "sharable concern[s], . . . topic[s] that people talk, read, and write about. Issues grow out of concrete experience and connect several similar or related experiences" (31). Students then go on to write discussion questions about these issues. The concept of the discussion question is also derived from Bruffee's *generalization*, "an observation or judgment that says something about more than one person, object, or experience. It says something about many similar people, objects, or experiences" (32). Generalizations generated by these ESL students included: "Divorce hurts children as well as parents"; "Second and third marriages should be banned"; and "Rich people have more choices than poor people." The students decided together they could discuss or write essays about any of these issues.

What they noticed first was the vast social class difference between James, the 18-year-old protagonist of the novel, and themselves.

"This is a book about rich people," Paul, one of the young Haitian men, said after reading the first chapter. Others nodded in agreement. From the moment they opened the book and started reading, James' dysfunctional wealthy family was a source of constant fascination for them.

"How do you know?" I asked all of them, getting up to write their responses on the board.

They had not heard of Brown University, where James was supposed to go in September, but his sister attended Barnard, a famously expensive college. They knew because the family lived in Manhattan, in a neighborhood where the two teenage children could forget to lock the door, and not in Brooklyn, where we all lived, along with other recent immigrants and their teachers, bumped out of Manhattan by the soaring price of real estate. Moreover, the family had a dishwasher, they said. And they were offended by

James' employment in his mother's art gallery. What bothered them about such employment? I asked, and they cited a passage in which James' mother explains, "You do not go there because you are needed. You go there because I pay you to go there so you will have a summer job and learn the value of the dollar and know what responsibility is all about" (8). As a group, these students were not in need of any lessons about the value of a dollar.

My students did not know what a standard poodle was, but they said that if this family had a big dog, they must have a big apartment to keep it in. The parents were divorced, also a luxury, and James' father lived in a building built by Donald Trump, on the Upper East Side, a notoriously rich neighborhood.

Washington Square Park and the dominant presence of New York University in Greenwich Village were also unfamiliar, but again, if this family lived in a neighborhood close to a park with a dog run, they were rich.

We came to their first serious issue in the novel, the fact that "Mr. Rogers," the mother's third husband had, as James describes it, "stolen [his] mother's ATM and credit cards, or at least 'borrowed' them while she lay dozing in her nuptial bed, and somehow used them to get $3,000, all of which he gambled away in the wee small hours of the morning" (15).We discussed this issue for some time. On the following day, I made it a freewriting topic, "What would you do if your loved one stole your credit card and spent $3,000?" Many of their responses were indignant.

"It's like I tell my children," Monique, a Haitian mother of two, said, reading aloud from her writing. "'Sorry' is not what I want to hear you say! Don't say 'sorry!' Don't do it! Then you don't have to say 'sorry!'" She became agitated enough that the rest of the class began to laugh nervously.

Tang, a heavyset Chinese boy, had a more magnanimous attitude. He wrote, "If my loved one stole my credit card and spent $3,000, I would be so disturbed, thinking why she wants to stole my card and spent that much money. I would ask her did something happened on her or any others. Why you can't talk to me or tell me need help."

The others were less generous. Mr. Rogers' stealing made the divorce justifiable, in many of their eyes.

The differences between James' family and their own was an issue that came up often in the freewriting these students did in class. Some of the answers were obvious. The parents were divorced. James and his sister treat each other badly. James could only have lunch with his father if he made an appointment.

As Charles, another Haitian student, described it in his freewriting, "I keep thinking about James family; it like a crasy family. The family is a rich family but money can not buy happiness. I was thinking of not having family relationship like this family and that's really holds my mind, a father told his son that; 'it's OK for me, if you gay.' That is really bad."

When he talked about it in class, after each group had asked some version of "Do you think James and his father have a disrespectful relationship? Why or why not?" Paul leaned forward, covering the left half of his face with one hand, and said, as if deeply ashamed, "When his father asked him if he was *gay*, that was *bad*."

"Bad in what sense?" I asked, wondering if this was my golden moment. My heart was pounding, my palms sweating.

"How could he ask him that?" Paul wanted to know.

"This is America. New York. Parents want to know exactly what's going on with their children. We talk about everything," I said.

"But . . ."

Paul could not express his indignation on behalf of the young protagonist in the novel. I waited for him to go on.

"The pasta . . ." Paul finally said, and at this point his classmates chimed in.

The scene was disturbing to all of us. First, at their lunch appointment, James' father told him never to get married. Then, after James ordered penne for lunch, his father said to him, "You should have ordered steak or something. . . .You should never order pasta as a main course. It's not manly."

A discussion of food in their cultures ensued. We talked about whether certain foods were eaten primarily by men and others by women. They giggled and explained to me that there were foods "that made you horny," that only men should eat. I could have circled back and asked, "What do you think provoked James' father to ask if he was gay?" But my students had not asked. The key issues in the book were theirs to choose. Whether or not James was gay was not one of them yet.

Later that day, in my teaching journal, I wrote:

> Is my coming out even relevant? How much do I, a 60-year-old lesbian, have in common with an 18 year-old gay boy who is just discovering his sexuality? Do I tell them I have been through a similar struggle? As an 18-year-old, alienated in the affluent suburbs of New York City, I fell in love with my best friend, we slept together, I discovered myself, she wanted to die, tried to kill herself, and was

> institutionalized? Wouldn't that be going too far? Where do I stop once I've started?

But I had let the moment pass. There would be another.

During the course of the semester, while reading and discussing the book, other issues continued to preoccupy my students, always leading us away from the issue of the protagonist's sexual orientation. They were alarmed that James was considering not going to college because he thought it was a waste of time. They were confused by his dislike of people his own age, puzzled by his sister's snide comments when James visited his grandmother—in their cultures, loving your grandmother and wanting to be with her was not only acceptable but the norm—and baffled that James spent hours on the Internet looking at houses for sale in Nebraska, Kansas, and Indiana.

It wasn't that they didn't write about James' struggle with his sexual orientation, particularly after reading Chapter 11, in which James reads his co-worker, John's, profile online in "Gent4Gent" and impersonates exactly the kind of person John is looking for. John invites James, in the persona he has created, to a party at the Frick Museum. The students puzzled over James' motivation in their reading journals. Rebecca, a very serious young woman, from China, said:

> The meeting of John and James seem to be interesting. We learn that John is gay and James kind of loves him. They both work at the gallery why wouldn't James just tell John that he is interested in him. Maybe James is not completely gay or maybe he is turning into gay and don't know how to accept he is gay. He tell us that he does not care what people think of him but we are living in a society where there is a lot of interaction I think he must care about what other think of him. The thing that confuse me the most is the part where James meet John on the internet and did not let him know he real identity but yet James decided to go and meet John in person. Other than the name there is really no description or personally about John. I would like to know more about John. He seems like a real interesting character. James has mention several time that he wish to buy a house in the middle state and live there but he never mention about who he wish to live with. I was wondering why James did not include John in any plan if he love John.

When we talked about this scene in the novel, again it was not the issue of sexual orientation that troubled the students, but the fact that James had deceived a person he seemed to care for.

We talked about self-deception, an issue that comes up again and again in the novel. Their ideas and opinions about James and his family took shape, grew stronger, as they practiced expressing themselves in writing. Andre, from Romania, wrote, "He is not interested in nothing. Instade to go to college to have fun and learn he want to buy a house in Nebraska or Kansas and to stay on a porch and read books like an old men, I think he is the boring one."

Stacy, from China, pointed out the ways in which James' mother deceived herself by going to Las Vegas for her honeymoon, a place she had previously disdained: "Problem is not in the place. Is they both didn't have love. So whatever, where was the honey place?"

Paul wrote, "James deceive himself because he doesn't want nobody to know that is not happy even his self."

When we finished the book, students expressed surprise in their reading journals that James had known all along that he was gay. Paul said:

> I was surprised by the end of the chapter 14th when James said that he knew he was gay, and when he said that being gay was perfect. That's really surprised me. I thought he had a little problem with his father when his father asked him if he's gay, I don't know why because he knew he was gay, may because the way his father asked him. I would like to know how his mother and his sister will feel when they know that and what they will say about that. I remember his father told him he could help him if he gay I would like to know how?

During our discussion of the end of the novel, Charles suggested, quietly, that perhaps we had all had feelings like James did sometimes. Andre said it was all right for women, but for men it was sick. Here, finally, was a moment where I felt I must intervene.

"I think it's fine," I told him, "for men or for women. It may not be fine for you, personally, but it's fine." The students smiled at me benignly. Did they know? Should I tell them? Instead I told them something my dissertation advisor had said to me 20 years earlier.

"Do you know what a continuum is?" I asked, and Nila, the young woman from Uzbekistan, who seemed to have studied everything, said, "Yes. Connected. In chemistry. Like rainbow."

"Exactly," I said. "Maybe we are all somewhere on the continuum," I continued, drawing a semicircle on the board, "between 100% heterosexual and 100% homosexual," writing these words at opposite ends of my continuum. "Maybe that's OK."

"I am over there," Andre said, laughing, pointing to the 100% heterosexual.

"That's fine," I said. "But maybe we are not all over there with you. Not every minute of every day. And maybe that's OK."

No one said anything. But perhaps a point had been made, if briefly, about the fluidity and diversity of sexual identities. And as Malinowitz reminds us, "I believe that the long intermediate moment—which may, certainly, last forever—of being involved in the act or project of overcoming [one's internalized homophobia] is the real moment of pride" (267). Perhaps I had something to feel proud of.

For the final exam, I gave the students a choice of three questions that evolved from the work we had done together over the course of the semester (see Appendix). Ten of them chose Question One and two chose Question Two. No one chose to answer Question Three. Of the ones who chose to explain and illustrate why James was sad, Andre blamed James' family, as did Henri, "he don't enjoy it talking to his mom and his dad"; and Charles, "James . . . feels disconnected emotionally to his family where love, respect, and attention seems unexist." Rebecca suggested that "Deep inside of his heart he suffer because he can't act or live like others," but she did not elaborate. Paul explained that James' way of thinking made him sad. "James got fascinated from anything and this thing can make him sad. I remember one day, he was taking a walk with Miro (the dog), he saw a man and a woman were walking together. He thought that they were having fun, they seem they were in love. Just went to a restaurant or movie and he thought they will never have a wonderful time like that again and he's sad. James is the kind of man who got sad of his thought."

Nila, too, attributed James' unhappiness to his family life, noting that "They talked with the dog Miro then with each others."

Rebecca wrote about James' life, beginning by saying that she, like James, hadn't wanted to attend college and then describing how she was different from James. Only Stacy, a Chinese young woman who didn't say much in class, addressed the issue of James' being gay, writing:

> James was gay in the book. Although he in a free country, James was freedome to choose his lover sex, but his case is limited in people. I am regualar girl, I like guy, I can't accept a same sex be my boyfriend. I believe, my family member can not accept too. It's different like James. James' father agree his son was gay, he didn't reject his son was gay. One day, James told his father he was gay in their dinner. James father didn't angry with him and said: "well, women may make you think about get marry more time than a man." And James' father look like nothing. If I told my parents I be with a girl, they should be crazy. They can't accept their daughter be with same sex person. They will lock my at home, didn't let me outside, and bother me everyday until I changed. They would think this is not a normal thing, they can't cool down themselves and talk to me. But James father not, he felt nothing, James also. I think the reason is they both disappoint of women. Because James' father was a suffer marriage and James was a bad memory, So they disappoint the marriage and women. James saw his mother thinking about himself, it may make him be gay.

This essay made me smile, not only for the unusual language—"accept a same sex be my boyfriend"—but because she was addressing the issue I cared about in an open and honest manner, telling me what she really thought without worrying about my judgment of her ideas. What more could I ask?

Conclusion

Did reading the book have an impact on the sociosexual attitudes of these ESL students? Certainly. They also had a chance to express themselves and exchange ideas about other issues that were important to them: love, money, respect, family, and higher education. In addition, they saw an example of a gay young man who could not openly discuss his sexual orientation even though he was encouraged by everyone around him to do so. Through reading this novel, they experienced the ways in which homophobia affects everyone.

As for me—in future classes—I will continue to be alert to "golden" moments. Furthermore, I learned from this experience that being pedagogically prepared to deal with issues of sexual orientation and homophobia, through the creation of lessons that critically engage students might make the ex-

perience of teaching this particular novel more relaxing for me and more enlightening for my students. As Nelson points out about "[t]his gargantuan task" of disclosure, it is "nothing less than intimidating. After all, determining where to begin keeps many of us from ever getting started" (299).

I have, at least, begun. Whether or not I choose to keep my sexual identity "a secret forever" in the ESL classroom, I concur with Nelson that "The key issue is not so much whether teachers come out . . . in the classroom but the extent to which their own insights and quandaries about sexual-identity negotiations are informing their . . . teaching practices by shedding light on questions of identity and representation generally" (119). The continuing development of the perspectives I embrace for dealing with sexual orientation and homophobia, then, could very well lead to new understandings of identity, for me and my students.

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Appendix
Final Writing Examination

Choose one question. Plan what you write. You may consult *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* and a print dictionary. Be sure to refer to the book in your answer.

1) In Chapter 7, on page 87, Dr. Adler, James' psychiatrist, asks him, "How are you feeling today?" And when he answers, "I feel sad," she wants to know for how long. "Years," he says. Write an essay describing James' sadness. In your opinion, in what ways is he sad? Why is he sad? If you were his friend, what advice would you give him to help him cope with his sadness? Use examples from the novel to support your argument

2) Compare your life with James' life. In what ways is your life similar to James' life? In what ways is it different from James' life? Use examples from the novel to support your argument.

3) James spends most of his time alone. At one point in the novel he says that there are only two people he likes, his grandmother, Nanette, and his co-worker at the gallery, John. Describe James' relationship with John. Why does James connect with John? Use examples from the novel to support your argument.