

# Teach Me Today

## Finding the Censors in Your Head and in Your Classroom

Erica Rand

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In the past few years, I've had various professional encounters with censorship. I've spoken and written against censorship. I've been advised by the lawyer at Bates College, where I teach, to protect myself from harassment charges based on retroactive censorship ("you shouldn't have shown us that") by warning students in advance on my syllabi that courses include sexually explicit material. I've been described on Maine Public Radio, in an angry letter from someone who heard an interview with me, as a reason to discontinue government funding for public broadcasting. I was even censored in San Francisco.

That's how I most like to think of myself in relation to censorship: as an anticensorship person whom others want to censor. But this self-flattering picture of a bad girl in good company omits a few details. For instance, I got censored in San Francisco merely for trying to use the word *fucking* in a lecture title at City College there—not even to designate sex, but in the phrase "fucking with culture." This sorry example of censored street vernacular is bad enough, and worth mention as a reminder of the levels at which public speech is controlled. It's hardly a sign, however, of any daring bad-girl move on my part. Despite the much-touted increased queer visibility—and within this visibility, of dykes as sexual beings who don't just hug and process—censorship and its advocates are at work all the time.

More importantly, perhaps, my censorship résumé also omits a series of items that I didn't originally realize belonged there. Besides being censored, I've also been a censor, particularly in syllabus and class preparation. The catalyst for this essay was the realization that I needed to put that word to some of my deeds.

This essay concerns censorship in the anticensorship classroom by way of a course I taught in 1995: "Doing It, Getting It, Seeing It, Reading It," a writing-intensive seminar for first-year students on representations of sex and sexuality, in which I discovered both my students and myself to be acting as censors and self-censors. I offer this narrative with limited expectations about what readers can extrapolate. Censorship issues, as I will argue, vary among institutions, from course to course within institutions, and from

one version of a course to the next. I did, however, encounter some problems that seem far from unique, and suggest directions of thinking that can be brought to bear in many contexts as we try to make courses that are both pro-sex and against the perpetuation of privileges and prejudices based on class, skin, gender, and sexual orientation.

When I discuss my own role as a censor, I have in mind actions (or nonactions) to which others might not apply that label. I refer, not to attempts to prevent someone from producing or circulating material, but to decisions I have made to withhold certain work from my students. Of course, every teacher decides to omit materials, and for reasons that might not seem to deserve the odious term *censorship*. For instance, in planning "Doing It," I tried to avoid perpetuating certain stereotypes. I deliberately assigned nothing to imply that women really do mean "yes" when we say "no" or that teacher-student sex is a good idea. I tried to mix straight and queer material so that the kinkier material wasn't all queer or the queer material all kinky. I designed the syllabus so that both dominant and minority cultural producers addressed all the subjects. Instead of seeing "sex in general" as being produced by white heterosexuals and "minority perspectives" as being produced by others, students, I hoped, would view the work of minority producers as integral rather than tangential to the study of sex. Thus, for instance, the section on sex and money included both the mainstream film *American Gigolo* and an article from the 'zine *Brat Attack* in which working-class SM dykes discuss class issues. I also tried to avoid perpetuating stereotypes that certain people were more sexual or more defined by sexuality than others, which might happen if, say, the syllabus had white people portraying only "sex in the context of a meaningful relationship" and black people portraying what might be taken for "just sex." I tried to set the stage against such views by beginning with a novel, Benoîte Groult's *Desire*, that, on the one hand, portrayed a primarily sexual relationship between white heterosexuals and, on the other hand, revealed quite clear stereotypes that could be readily deconstructed about racial primitivism and working-class sexual rawness.

Starting with a straight text had another rationale. The course had a lot of material with queer content and/or by queer cultural producers. In fact, it had more than I had originally envisioned. However, when I sat down to plan the course, I discovered that a large percentage of people whose work thought sex, as well as portrayed sex, were queer. This is hardly surprising, since queers are called to examine, second-guess, and explain our sexuality a lot, while heterosexually identified people are rarely asked to consider how they got that way. But I didn't want to lose students early on by wrenching many of them out of their comfort zone immediately, or by generating the suspicion—which takes little doing—that I was trying either to recruit or to ram homosexuality down their throats. I wanted to generate some good will and benefit of the doubt, and also to defer certain dilemmas or declarations: having queer students struggle over whether to come out; having straight students self-protectively announce “I'm heterosexual”; having students who were questioning their own sexuality think that the course was going to be too much to handle.

Issues of comfort, which affected many other decisions I made, are difficult ones. Pulling students out of their comfort zone, disrupting their assumptions, can be a catalyst, and sometimes a prerequisite, for important learning. Many Bates students profess that they accept, to borrow a phrase I heard often during “Doing It,” “whatever floats your boat.” Having to confront some explicit and/or nonmainstream boat-floating will often induce students (and faculty) to rethink some easy assumptions that it is other people who are hung up, and to address material on a more personal, engaged level. Yet crucial issues concerning power, harassment, and consent must be considered. As I discuss more later, I don't think students should be excused from engaging anything that causes them discomfort. However, teachers cannot evade our power over our students. The students watching our slide shows, being graded on class participation, and fulfilling our assignments are, to some extent, a captive audience. When I plan courses and class sessions, I try to take this into account, along with the right to privacy and self-protection (theirs and mine).

One example. With an eye to both disruption and protection, I assigned *Her Tongue on My Theory*, by the Kiss and Tell collective, which addresses sex, censorship, porn, lesbianism, and art in three formats mixed together. Dialogic essays run across the top two-thirds of the page. Porn stories run across the bottom third, included to combat the distinct unjuiciness of many texts that include analyzing and theorizing about sex. As the authors write, the book “[refuses] the separation of sexual representations and its analysis; mingling lust, intellect, and personal history.” Pictures from Kiss and Tell's video and performance piece entitled TRUE INVERSIONS appear interspersed in both text regions.<sup>1</sup> Besides its other great features, the text's for-

mat offered me a wonderful opportunity to put porn in front of students without forcing them to read it, since they could easily cover the bottom of each page. I emphasized that this was their choice, and that if students chose to discuss the porn in class, participation on this topic would be fully optional. When, not surprisingly, they chose to discuss it, I talked to them about some questions that I would never pose, particularly a central question one might logically ask of porn: “Did it work, that is, did it turn you on?” One student responded, “You mean we can't talk about that?” to which I replied, “You can raise it, but I won't ask it.” I then brought up issues about power and pedagogy, about why asking such a question would be invasive and an abuse of power, and about the consequent limits of sex talk in the classroom context. For instance, I said, I suspected that if people could talk freely, in numerous contexts, about what turned them on, we'd find that many people are turned on by depictions of acts, partners, and scenarios that they don't necessarily identify with or want to copy—a dyke might get turned on by ostensibly straight porn without wanting to do men, etc. If so, what would this mean for censorship arguments that are based on the idea that porn generates copycat behavior? By talking about what I wouldn't ask, I could raise the questions I wanted them to think about, and also, I hoped, get them to think about sexual silences in general.

So far, so good, it might seem. In many ways, it seems good to me, too. I'm comfortable with many of the decisions I described above, the values and goals they reflect, and the strategies I've developed to get students to “go there” without pushing them down that road in a grossly anticonsensual way. Why, then, use the term *censorship*? I do so in order to highlight one feature of my planning that aligns me with censors I don't like: I sometimes made decisions based on presumptions about what other people over whom I had power could handle, people whom I presumed more likely than I to be harmed by certain material.

Now, I don't think that my presumptions were as misguided as those held by some of the censors I've studied: the Meese Commission, which spent six months devouring porn in order to demonstrate why other people couldn't handle it; the eighteenth-century critic Denis Diderot, who published material that was sexually explicit enough by contemporary standards to get him incarcerated, but also approved of destroying sexual art that might pass in front of women or children on the theory that it would inevitably lead them to imitation, immorality, and decay; would-be Barbie censors who remembered distinctly resistant interpretations of their own, but didn't trust other girls to have them.<sup>2</sup> I didn't envision my students' minds as weak and uncomplicated, nor my own as objective or impermeable to any effects that I chose not to let in. Besides, it was hardly mere condescension to judge my own culture bank and conceptual tool box fuller than those of my students; I did

have nearly two more decades of experience, both personal and professional, with culture, power, sex, and the circulation of representations.

Yet where does thoughtful class preparation end and condescension begin? The line between them is hard to draw, which became increasingly clear during “Doing It” for two reasons. First, I saw dubious facets of my own course preparation echoed in my students’ attitude toward people whom they deemed less prepared than they to resist the ills of certain cultural material. Many, for instance, thought Madonna viewing would harm children today, although they considered themselves to have emerged unscathed. When I pointed out that they had themselves been predicted, apparently wrongly, to be damaged by youthful Madonna viewing, they suggested that today’s videos were raunchier—the same argument used ten years earlier about Madonna versus her predecessors. (Something similar usually happens whenever I teach pop culture; students often hypothesize a public without their own critical ability to resist dire effects of sexy ads, too much TV, dominant stereotypes, etc.)

Second, I realized how often I had misimagined the minds of my students. My unit on sex and consent exemplified this problem. I considered the unit especially relevant given the amount of nonconsensual sex on campus (as elsewhere), and assigned the college handbook on rape and sexual violence that, besides providing resources for rape survivors, was supposed to aid Bates students in understanding what constitutes consent. I also included Pat Califia’s 1980 essay “Feminism and Sadomasochism” because I wanted to include a model for insisting that “no” or another designated word means “no” absolutely, while also allowing for the erotics of power play—a topic conspicuously absent from official college discourse but clearly present in campus confusion about how to recognize consent. I expected our discussion to be dominated by heated arguments about whether SM was, basically, sick: Could/should a person really consent to be dominated? How could a feminist want to do that? It turned out, however, that students, at least those who talked, seemed little disturbed by these issues. Several expressed an interest in reading Califia’s porn (another emphasized, though, when I agreed to put a story from *Macho Sluts* on reserve, that it should be optional). They’d actually gotten stuck on something else. What, one woman asked, is feminism? Many seemed interested when I pointed them to Califia’s own explanation in the text of why she calls herself a feminist:

*I believe that the society in which I live is a patriarchy with power concentrated in the hands of men, and that this patriarchy actively prevents women from becoming complete and independent human beings. Women are oppressed by being denied access to economic resources, political power, and control over their own reproduction. This oppression is man-*

*aged by several institutions, chiefly the family, religion, and the state. An essential part of the oppression of women is control over sexual ideology, mythology, and behavior.*<sup>3</sup>

To me, this passage represented a useful, familiar restating of common feminist principles; to some of my students it was relatively new information.

In addition, while I expected passions to flare over Califia, it was the handbook that really grabbed them. Many remained outraged over a session on sexual violence during first-year orientation. The video shown then, I was told, trivialized the issue by using egregiously unconvincing student vernacular in a dramatization of a dorm-room discussion about whether a recent experience of one participant should be considered date rape. The Bates handbook, too, they said, was inadequate. The section with legal language was off-putting, while the “Mike and Jen” story, which used two opposing narratives of a date to illustrate the importance of verifying consent, was too ambiguous to make the point that Mike misconstrued himself to have consent when he didn’t.

What happened in the unit on consent happened frequently: students were not quite whom I expected them to be. I expect, too, to make wrong presumptions again, since predicting student response is an inevitable part of course design. I can’t get my students together before I write my syllabus; even if I could, I couldn’t learn all I’d want to know. I have, however, learned some better presumptions that I will try to bring to future teaching as I try to recognize the censors lurking in class, to resist censorship impulses, and to work against a censorship model based on presumption and condescension. I indicate five below.

1. No amount of experience and thoughtful class preparation can enable me to predict exactly how my students will react to material, especially when my goal is to be productively disturbing—to go beyond the comfort zone enough to shake up received thoughts but not enough to make students merely walk away, refusing to deal. (Material sometimes looks different to me in class than it did during class preparation. If I can’t always predict my own response, how can I predict that of others?)

2. A presumption model can often be traded in for a consent model. This means strategies like putting *Macho Sluts* on reserve as optional reading instead of deciding that students can’t handle it. It also means, conversely, being attuned to students’ signals that certain material is too much for them, and respecting their need to walk away. For instance, twice during the past four years, a woman student approached me to say that a recent experience of sexual assault made certain course material virtually impossible for her to confront. One case involved a paper assignment to assess Picasso’s *Demaiselles d’Avignon* in light of articles addressing issues of sexism and colonialism; thinking about his violent figural distortions in the

context of social violence was too much. This example underscores point one, since such a reaction would have been hard to predict and happened, as far as I know, to one student only. It illustrates, too, why a consent model is necessary. Sometimes, students need to be able to walk away, and teachers need a conceptual framework that makes it possible for students to make that choice without negative repercussions.

3. However, using a consent model does *not* mean letting students off the hook every time they feel uncomfortable with material. In fact, I want to challenge the notion, present among some students and faculty, that they have the right to be comfortable wherever they go. This sense usually comes from privilege, from people who might actually know what it is like to have comfort as a default position, and is attended by the presumption that it is the job of other people to provide that comfort. At Bates, for instance, it's primarily white people who say that talking about race makes them uncomfortable, with the implication that this is enough reason not to engage. And feelings of discomfort, or impending danger, are often based on dubious presumptions that should be a class topic.

A series of discussions in my 1994 course "Women and Modern Art" will illustrate this point. As always happens when course material hits a personal nerve, this course had always included moments of great tension, expressed either in open conflict or in those big silences when the air is thick with comments that no one will speak. But in 1994 things got so bad that after a class on lesbian culture of the 1920s during which no one would say much, and a class on Gauguin when no one would talk about skin color, I abandoned the syllabus for two days to discuss with students why they had stopped talking. Besides naming some usual sources of tension, many students cited a demonstration that had occurred during the previous year, when a group of students called the Multi-ethnic Empowerment Initiative (MEI) had taken over the admissions office and demanded that Bates more actively recruit students of color and deal with campus racism. As a result, I learned, many white students—the vast majority at Bates—were afraid to speak when race came up, out of fear of dire consequences. Students of color, meanwhile, had been met with hostility for airing their concerns in class. Many of them were sick of it, and of being tokenized—by being expected to be the educators and the talkers if race was the subject.

The white students' fear of dire consequences, also a concern of some faculty, had, I think, a racist component. It has other sources, too, including the very real problem that what you say in class at a small school follows you from class to the food line, and from one year to the next. Many white students expressed concern about being marked "for life" by an ignorant comment. But where did the fear of unbearable retribution come from? It wasn't as if

the MEI demonstrators had burned down the building or even burned campus authorities in effigy. To the contrary, in a gesture of solidarity with the maintenance staff, they actually vacuumed the building before they left. The occasion hardly suggested impending violence; that sense came, I think, partly from prejudice. (Think here of the television coverage right before the O. J. verdict, which was filled with speculation about whether a guilty verdict would generate violent black protest without a matching concern about whether the opposite verdict would generate violent white retaliation.)

In this course, I certainly didn't take race off the syllabus because students were uncomfortable. Instead, I pushed them to deal with it. Since some white students had said that they felt unauthorized to discuss race because it wasn't their topic—as if white people do not have race and ethnicity, another sign of privilege seen in that sense of being unmarked—I devoted more class time to the construction of whiteness. This is a crucial topic in any case, but here it had an extra implicit goal: to take away the excuse that "it's not about me." In addition, I used the occasional strategy of having people talk in small groups first and then reporting to the class as a whole. Students were forced to talk, but could speak for a threesome. This worked well; it was easier to say "*we* think that this Lorna Simpson piece concerns lynching" than "I think. . ." For some students, this ice breaker enabled them to advance "*I* think" comments later—perhaps partly because the dire consequences didn't happen—and, I think, made a dent in tendencies to self-censor on other topics. (On the topic of race, however, my results were far from what I had hoped. Despite some visible progress, many white students commented in their final papers that their final projects "hadn't dealt with race because there were no black people in them." I intend to work much more in the future on making race everyone's issue.)

As with censorship/thoughtfulness, the line between respecting the right not to consent and letting students off the hook is hard to draw. There's a big difference between a student who needs to be excused from a class on sexual assault because the personal experience of it is too fresh and a student who cuts class whenever a queer topic is on the syllabus. Yet I find myself repeatedly stuck on questions about when material may be so potentially disturbing that students might reasonably decide to refuse—back again to the question of when thoughtful class preparation turns to censorship. I am trying, as often as possible, to refocus those questions so that instead of falling back on a fragile-mind censorship model about what students can handle, I'm thinking about strategies for getting students to engage difficult material.

4. Of the causes for censorship and self-censorship, by me and my students, some transcend the given situation, like white skin privilege and homophobia, while oth-

ers are specific to the situation—the particular people, place, and time. What happened in “Women and Modern Art” in 1994 reflected some features common to small residential colleges in general, as opposed to schools with more people or a predominance of commuters. But the 1994 course was particular not just to the type of institution, but also to the specific school and year.

5. One of the best ways to avoid censorship and self-censorship practices that are condescending, evasive, or otherwise dubious is to trade in presumption for talking as much as possible, especially for talking with students. When my “Women and Modern Art” course was veering toward disaster, my first move was to consult other teachers. It’s a good move, and we could use more venues for teacher talk about pedagogy. But I realized, too, that when it came to censorship issues about what to show or hide, I spent too much time talking with other teachers or staging debates in my head instead of talking with the students involved, and that I would have done better to work from models of youth activism and youth advocacy. Over the past decade, at political meetings, conferences, and events, youth activists (by which I mean here activists of the age group that they self-define to be “youth” who organize around youth issues) have been criticizing older self-defined youth advocates for trying, parentally, to set the agenda for them instead of finding out from them what advocacy from older people they need and want. ACT UP/Portland, Maine’s F.A.T.E. project (Fight AIDS—Transform Education), in which teens organized teens to advocate through direct action and other means for latex availability and antihomophobic AIDS and sex education, was, at its best, a good example of putting a better model into practice. The older people (by which I mean here people over high-school age) set the groundwork for this project by distributing latex in ’zines at high schools, with a contact number for students interested in organizing. Students at individual schools then formed groups, decided what to demand and how. The older people worked as advisors, sharing resources, skills, and information on matters such as working the press, making ’zines and fact sheets, marshaling support, and avoiding committing felonies if one doesn’t want to do so. After a year students had most of the resources to act on their own, and often came up with plans and actions that generated better results than top-down organizing would have done. For instance, at one school in Saco, Maine, a list of demands presented to administrators included tampon machines in the women’s bathrooms. The students saw the absence of these machines as an effect and symbol of the administrators’ refusal to acknowledge that students have adult bodies. This may seem a small demand, far less crucial than latex. But by adding that demand to their list, students brought in more support and simultaneously articulated the other issues in a broader context meaningful to their peers.

(They also got the machines, since it was, to administrators, harmless in comparison to what else students were demanding.)

A central principle that underlies nonpaternalistic youth advocacy is well expressed in “Working with Queer Young People on Oppression Issues and Alliance Building” by Donna Keiko Ozawa. Listing working assumptions for alliance-building projects, she writes, “Most of all, if given the opportunity, young people can see that they are the experts on their own lives, and that they have the power to change the system.”<sup>4</sup> This principle, too, needs to underly teaching, although it must be adapted to the classroom context, which, of course, is far different than projects like the one I described above. In classrooms, teachers ultimately call the shots and have power over students in terms of grade giving and reference writing. It’s also different because many students are older than the youth category defined by youth activists (which generally has a terminal point ranging from 22 to 26), although, unfortunately, many older students are still subject to infantilization by teachers. My point here is not that we should conceptualize older students as “youth” but that we must stop conceptualizing any college students, young or otherwise, as children. Too often within the censorship move, I have argued, lurks a condescending, parental mindset (“you have the fragile mind available for molding,” “I know what’s good for you better than you do,” etc.). Such an approach, besides being dubious, is doomed to fail because teachers simply can’t predict the heads of their students by talking to ourselves or each other. This doesn’t mean that we should therefore skimp on course preparation. We need, even when we are reduced to guesswork, to plan courses carefully with an eye to challenging prejudice and with sensitivity about power relations in the classroom that can make the showing of certain material play out as coercion. But we also need to keep in focus that students are the experts on their own lives and to design strategies to marshal that expertise.

#### Notes

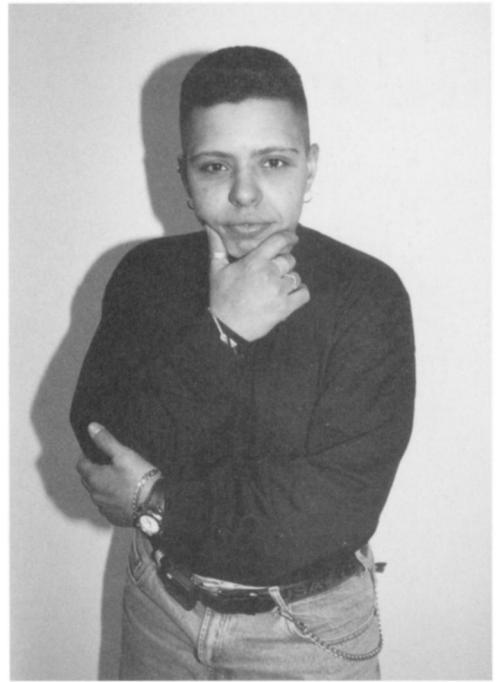
1. Kiss and Tell (Persimmon Blackbridge, Lizard Jones, Susan Stewart), *Her Tongue on My Theory* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1994), 3.
2. I discuss these censorship cases in “Diderot and Girl-Group Erotics,” in *Art History: New Voices/New Visions*, ed. Mary Sheriff, special issue, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25 (Summer 1992): 495–516; and *Barbie’s Queer Accessories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).
3. Pat Califa, “Feminism and Sadomasochism,” in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1994), 166.
4. In Linda Garber, *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians, Teaching, Queer Subjects* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 152.

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ALMA "MARITZA" CORTES



MINDA RODRIGUEZ



LINDA ELLIS



JACQUELINE BARNES