I began copy editing for Creative Nonfiction in 2005, with issue 26. At that time, the journal followed the AP Stylebook, which kicked my heiney at first, especially with its twisted rules regarding italics, which drove me to the edge of insanity. I had settled in by the time we hit #28, though, and I found myself enjoying the essays as an ordinary reader. Or maybe the essays were so powerful they simply made me forget my “track changes” function. I got lost along with Meredith Hall, wandering across Europe in “Without a Map,” an essay so visually epic that I’d have sworn it was written by a cinematographer. Then there was Gay Talese’s romp with Tina Brown and John and Lorena Bobbitt in the excerpt from A Writer’s Life. What he said about men, women, sexual politics, and how we ought to revere the penis chased me for years, until I finally wrote a response—maybe the best essay I’ve ever written. If someone’s work hops me up and gets me in the chair at my desk, stringing words together, it doesn’t much matter whether it pissed me off.

Five years after this issue was published, I started writing life...
narratives for death penalty defendants, and while trying to teach their attorneys how to write similarly, I suddenly remembered Megan Foss’s “Fourteen Years in the Making,” a memoir of addiction and prostitution. I hadn’t thought much about the essay at the time of production, but Megan’s story was suddenly a bright light in my head. Revisiting it, I understood my job as case storyteller better. Her tale reminds us that “criminals,” often, are simply victims whose traumas have led to making bad choices.

Finally, there’s Margaret Price’s skilled lyric essay, “Then You’ll Be Straight,” which haunts me every fall when I meet new faculty. It’s a lyric essay so skilled that when I reread it, I want to write my own lyric essay—and now—and I teach it in every graduate nonfiction workshop because it makes my students want to write lyric essays, too. Because it’s set in a seemingly innocuous environment—a late twentieth-century university campus where everyone is supposed to be so smart and open-minded—it provides disturbing evidence that prejudice never dies. White, black, gay, straight: we must keep telling stories and telling them well.

Just now, rereading issue 28 once again, all these years later, I feel near homesick for the essays contained therein. I even miss AP style.

—Jill Patterson

Jill Patterson was the production manager for issues 26–36 and is currently CNF’s copy editor. She is the editor of Iron Horse Literary Review and a professor in the Department of English at Texas Tech University.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT for the English department hands me the last of three keys and tells me, “Now you’re straight.”

*Straight* in this case means “set up,” “put right,” “squared away.” I am not straight. But during that first week, I hear it again and again:

“You’re straight.”

“Are you straight?”

“Then you’ll be straight.”

I hear it when I pick up my new I.D. card, when I learn the winding route to the library, when my computer is unboxed and set up with Lotus Notes and a password. Each time it jars me. I feel so queer.

I hear other words, too:

“That’s tight.”

“Where do you stay?”

“Crunk.”

I feel so white.

I’m a new assistant professor at Spelman College, a historically black women’s school in Atlanta. The school grounds replicate a private college in the Northeast: green quads, brick buildings, paved pathways. When classes change, the paths fill with rushing bodies. Nearly every face in view is a shade of brown. Students, professors, groundskeepers glance at me as I walk across campus.

MARGARET PRICE is an associate professor of writing at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Her book *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* won the Outstanding Book Award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication. She is now at work on a collaborative study focusing on the experiences of disabled professors.
I teach composition and argumentation, and have just finished writing my syllabi, which include tidy percentages for Participation (15 percent), Essays (55 percent), Short Exercises (10 percent), Final Project (20 percent). I wish I could do the same for the gazes I confront each time I venture from my office to buy a cup of coffee. How many heads turn because I am white? Because I’m queer? Because I’m new? From the North? Wearing red shoes? I want to apportion. I want to assign weight: Race (30 percent), Sexuality (40 percent), Outfit (5 percent), New (25 percent). I want to know.

IT WOULD BE EASY to describe my presence on this small campus as life in a fishbowl. But I am not in a fishbowl.

One of the best known uses of the fishbowl as rhetorical figure is that made by Toni Morrison in her book *Playing in the Dark*. In Morrison’s rendering, the bowl represents whiteness and its illusory imaginings—not only of “the Africanist other” in American literature but also of itself: “It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl,” she writes, “the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface—and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.” In other words, the contents of the bowl are, indeed, compelling, but we have been led to believe they are all that exist. Morrison encourages us to look instead at the bowl itself, that subtle structure that gives shape to all we see. Inside the bowl is the spectacle of the Africanist other at whom we are so accustomed to staring. The bowl itself—transparent, unremarked—is the dominant force of whiteness.

I am not in a fishbowl. I *am* the fishbowl.

And now I can be seen.

ORIENTATION FOR NEW FACULTY: a cold conference room in the student center, nineteen of us altogether, most of us black. We are asked to introduce ourselves, say something about our fields of study. The other white professors all seem to have some significant connection to the education of black students: the anthropologist did fieldwork in Kenya; the drama professor specializes in world theater. My own field is rhetoric and composition—that is, the teaching of writing. It would be nice to say that I study African American discourses or the rhetoric of black churches, but that would not be true. My specializations are disability studies, critical thinking, and gender studies.

Why did I come here? Some of my reasons have nothing to do with the school. I came in part for the city, which is reputed to be queer-friendly, and in part to teach women, to be a mentor and a role model, to work on a faculty that is primarily female. I didn’t forget that the school is historically black, but I underestimated the degree to which it would affect me once here.

Now my femaleness seems unremarkable—in fact, invisible. It’s my whiteness that stands out—or, more accurately, my pinkness, since I can feel an unfortunate flush spreading across my chest and up my neck.

It’s my turn. Grasping, I mention that I came here from a school in Detroit.

BEFORE I STARTED this job, my white friends and family asked, at first tentatively, then with pointed curiosity, “Are you worried about—” there would be a pause as they searched for a phrase to end the sentence, “—racial tensions?” or, “—the race issue?”

I was, although not in the way they meant. I was preoccupied mostly with racial politics. In particular, I wondered what might be involved for a white professor attempting to help a black student “demonstrate pride in her own culture” or “demonstrate knowledge of those issues that have particular significance to Black women.” These are two of the institutional goals set forth in my faculty handbook.

Well, possibly I am not here to promote those particular goals. Possibly I serve a different goal, also listed in the handbook: that students learn to “demonstrate an understanding of and sensitivity to the many cultures of the world.” It occurs to me—sitting
at this straight-edged table, queer as a three-dollar bill—that perhaps I am here in part so that students can learn to be sensitive to me.

**THERE’S ONE OTHER DYKE** at orientation. That is, there’s a person I read as a dyke. In the decorous context of this essay, I can remind myself not to assume, not to essentialize. But in that conference room, shivering in the air conditioning and nibbling a raspberry Danish, I observe no theoretical niceties: *Hey, there’s another dyke here!* She is also white.

For most of the two-day orientation, I refuse to meet her eyes. During breaks, I attach myself to Philmore (black; physical education) or Nami (Asian; philosophy and religious studies) or Mohammed (black; mathematics). I’m afraid of seeming too—what? Too queer? Too white? Anti-black? Anti-straight? As if I don’t play well with others?

Is it especially problematic that the other dyke and I are queer and white?

**TEN YEARS AGO,** I walked along the Ala Wai Canal in Honolulu with a black man named Caz, a friend from the mainland who’d flown to Hawaii for a visit. After about a half-hour, another black man—the first black person we’d encountered during his entire visit—approached us from the opposite direction.

“Hello,” the two men said as they passed.

“Do you know him?” I asked Caz. I was twenty-four years old.

He laughed. “No.”

I told him about the Hawaiian word for white person. It’s *haole,* pronounced “howlie.” Its everyday usage means “white.” Its literal translation is “outsider.”

Those years, when I lived in Hawaii, were the last time my race made me unusual. I remember my return to Michigan, to the town where I grew up. The mass of white faces looked strange for a week or two. Maybe three.

**I AM HANDED A FOLDER** full of paperwork. Shiny and heavy and light blue, it bears Spelman’s name and its motto: *Our Whole School for Christ.* I’ve never seen the motto before. I stare at the words as my hands go cold and my stomach turns over. This was not revealed to me during my campus visit.

I’m frightened by the motto because I assume it means the school is anti-queer.

The other white dyke is wearing a cross around her neck.

Finally, at the end of the second day, during cocktails at the president’s house, I introduce myself to the other dyke, whose name is Tammy. She smiles quizzically as we talk.

Her expression says, *What took you so long?*

**SPIELMAN’S PRESIDENT,** Beverly Daniel Tatum, is the author of the book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* In it, she writes: “We need to understand that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism. Joining with one’s peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy.” This point does not work both ways; in other words, since white people do not experience the stressor of racism, they are unlikely to feel any particular urge to group themselves together on the basis of race. In fact, during my first week of teaching, I find myself avoiding the other white professors. Especially the other queers.

I know of three professors, besides myself, who are queer and out. All are white. One is Tammy, who teaches psychology; another is Stephen, in my own department; and the last is Daryl, in anthropology/sociology. The four of us constitute approximately 2.5 percent of the faculty overall. I hear rumors that there are several gay black professors, but no one names names.

My neighbor Yvonne, who works in the Women’s Center and carpools with me on Tuesdays and Thursdays, tells me that black lesbians and white lesbians don’t usually socialize together. “They keep it to themselves,” she says. “They have their own thing going on.” She doesn’t mention which group is “they” in this case. I assume it’s both.

**MUCH HAS BEEN MADE** of the down-low, the tacit code of black gay silence, which some defend as a keystone of African American unity—a “don’t ask, don’t tell” com-
promise to mitigate the tension that would otherwise rend families—but which others
denounce as a covert destroyer of lives and loves. Essex Hemphill, a writer now dead of
AIDS-related illness, was in the latter category. In the essay “Loyalty,” he called gay black
men “the invisible brothers”: “Their ordinary kisses, stolen or shared behind facades of
heroic achievement, their kisses of sweet spit and loyalty are scrubbed away by the propa-
ganda makers of the race, the ‘Talented Tenth’ who would just as soon have us believe Black
people can fly rather than reveal that Black men have been longing to kiss one another,
and have done so, for centuries. . . . I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have
something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal.” I imagine that Hemphill deliberately
chose this word, ass-splitting, in order to denote the violence inherent in being forced to
dismember one’s identity.

Or maybe he just felt fucked.

My own experiences of homophobia, when violent, do not split me neatly. I think of
the man who tried to run my car off the road when I lived in Massachusetts. It happened
in a town with so little crime that the police blotter in the newspaper reported incidents
of barking dogs. At the time, I drove an Escort hatchback with two stickers, one that was
a queer-pride rainbow and one that said (cleverly, I thought), Your hate becomes you. The
man drove a gigantic pickup, the kind with the carriage jacked high above the wheels and
an extra door for the backseat. He pulled beside me on a narrow road lined with trees and
squeezed my car to the right. His face was thin and bright red; his hair, curly and sandy-
colored. His arm waved at me, and one of his thick fingers pointed toward the back of my
car as he shouted words I couldn’t catch.

I braked and accelerated, trying to get away, but he stayed close, edging me toward the
trees. My car shook with two tires on the pavement, two on the rutted shoulder. Trees
whipped past on my right, coming closer and closer. But I knew the road well, and when
a blind lane appeared on the right, I hit the brakes and slewed onto it. The truck roared on
along the main road, and I never saw it or its driver again.

Even in that heart-pounding moment, driving away as fast as my whirring four cylinders
would carry me, I wondered what had inflamed him so. Did he know what the rainbow
meant? Was he offended by the Your hate becomes you sticker? Was it my haircut? Or was it
something else altogether, something at which I couldn’t even guess?

White privilege, of course, permits me to omit the factor of race from this list of questions.

**WHEN I APPLIED** for this job, I asked the provost, during my campus interview, whether
the school offered domestic-partner benefits.

“Yes,” she replied. Fixing steady eyes on me, she added, “As of last year.”

I read several messages in her gaze, all possible, some conflicting:

*Don’t assume what we do and don’t have.*

*Our school is moving into a brave new era. You can be a part of it.*

*Watch your back.*

**I SET UP MY OFFICE** on a Sunday afternoon. Books on the shelves. Files in the drawers.
Printer plugged in. Surfaces dusted. A few pictures hung. All of my pictures are of white
people.

In the large envelope marked *Office Stuff*, with my dog-eared cartoons and pithy, printed-
out quotations, I find a round decal, pink and black, that bears two triangles and a procla-
mation: *LGBT Safe Space*. Last year, it hung on my office door. It is both an invitation and
an announcement. It doesn’t say I’m queer, but it does.

I affix curls of tape to its back and stick it to my door. I sit down in my chair.

I get up and remove the decal.

I tack it to the bulletin board inside my office instead.

I sit down again.

I get angry, untack the decal, put more tape on it, and replace it on my office door. I feel
like I’m in a badly written television movie about a lesbian professor.

I add a couple of cartoons to my office door. I may be a dyke, but I’m not a humorless dyke.

I notice that all the people in my cartoons are white.

I notice that I’ve never noticed that before.
ON THE FIRST DAY of class, I feel cocky about names. At the last place I taught—a large, public university in Detroit—more than half of my students were black. By the end of the year there, I tripped from Tamika to Tonesha, from Shaneequa to Shaquita, with ease. Today, I approach the roster with jolly confidence, certain that I’ll have no trouble reading almost every name on it. I may be white, but I’m down.

It doesn’t go as planned. The roster is printed in tiny letters, and I have to squint at each name. Every tiny variation throws me off. *Kenya* becomes “Keenya”; *Cherée* becomes “Cherry.” No more than five names along, the students begin to giggle. My face gets hot. I’m conscious that my neck is turning red.

At the beginning of my next section, I ask each student to tell me her name, and I locate it on the roster. I do this serenely, as if it never occurred to me to do it any other way.

For the rest of the semester, that first section is troublesome, unruly, sluggish during discussions, reluctant to follow directions. I assure myself that this probably has nothing to do with my mangling of their names on the first day.

“THE FIRST CLASS MEETING of any course is more important than many faculty realize,” I am reminded by the earnest article “Student Perspectives on the First Day of Class,” by Baron Perlman and Lee I. McCann. “It sets the tone for what is to follow and can greatly influence students’ opinions about the course and the instructor for the remainder of the semester.”

“AT SCHOOL,” MUSES Esperanza, the narrator of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, “they say my name funny, as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth.”

I CAME OUT DURING my campus visit, while teaching my demonstration class. The moment was not planned in advance. I was leading an exercise on language, which involved making a list of self-identifications and then naming and reflecting on synonyms for those terms. As usual, I was putting my own list on the board as an example: *White, Middle-class, Female.* And then I halted, with the dry-erase marker in my hand, because right around that point in my list, I always add *Lesbian.*

LESBIAN IS NOT THE TRUTH. Or rather, it’s not the best truth—that elusive notion which Socrates called “philosophy” and claimed for himself, placing it in contrast to the mere “knack” of rhetoric. At any rate, it’s not my usual truth. I choose *lesbian* when leading this exercise because it makes more sense to students than the more accurate *queer.* In doing so, I employ what S. Bear Bergman calls “strategic lesbianism,” that is, the willingness to allow one’s identity to become static, for a moment, in order to reach an audience which might otherwise be baffled. Strategic lesbianism chooses partial truth as the fullest possible communication.

But perhaps a deeper reason is that I don’t want them to know the identification closest to my heart. If I say, if I write, that I am a lesbian, perhaps I feel safer. Perhaps this allows me to believe that they can’t quite see me. Not quite.
AT THAT MOMENT, however, the question was not between queer and lesbian; it was between lesbian and nothing at all. For a second or two, I stood, dry-erase marker poised an inch from the board, while my face, already warm with nervousness, flushed even pinker. Then I touched the marker to the board and wrote the word. I continued in a show of unconcern: Midwestern, Feminist, Smart, Democrat. The English department faculty, arranged across the back of the room like Olympic skating judges, watched impassively.

I finished leading the students through the exercise. They chose words ranging from stuck-up to redbone; wrote beautiful pieces; read them with vigor; and supplied each other with low, muttered accompaniment during their readings:

“Mm-hmm.”
“I know that’s right.” When the class ended, they clapped, and a couple of them even cheered.

Take that, I thought.

FOR LEGAL REASONS, certain topics cannot be discussed by a search committee, even among themselves. Age. Gender. Race. Sexuality. Pregnancy. I wonder how they spoke to each other as they considered me, what synonyms came into play. Cultural studies approach. Social justice orientation. Activist. Perhaps none of these. Perhaps they simply held my queerness in their minds, one factor among many, along with my whiteness, and made their decision in legally sanctioned silence.

A senior professor in the English department tells me about the applications she’s been reading for a search. “We have some great prospects,” she says. “One in particular. But I’m not sure how happy he’ll be here. He’s a real activist on his campus.”

I laugh. “Send him to me!”

The professor laughs, too. Then she says, seriously, “But you know how to approach people so they aren’t uncomfortable. You don’t make an issue of it.”

I TEACH MY ARGUMENTATION class about audience and ethos. Ethos, loosely translated, means “character”; it’s a means of establishing credibility with a particular audience. Our textbook, Everything’s an Argument, explicates a number of ways to appeal to ethos, which include demonstrating knowledge, highlighting shared values, referring to common experiences, and building common ground.

Example time. I ask the students to divide into groups and respond to the following questions: How does a college student establish credibility in a classroom? How does a professor? They put their heads together, giggle, generate lists. I move among the groups in my gray skirt and red cardigan, my one-inch hair, my pale skin, my intermittently readable body.

DURING GRADUATE SCHOOL, I attended a conference presentation given by a white professor teaching at a historically black college (not mine). The professor reported that her students’ end-of-semester evaluations often described her as “hostile” and “abrasive.” She attributed this to their stereotypes about white people. As her presentation went on, I thought to myself that I, too, found her awfully hostile.
and abrasive. I whispered this to a colleague, who snickered and scribbled a note: I was just thinking that.

During the Q & A, nobody shared any observations about the professor’s manner. Instead, the room turned to a passionate discussion about the “problem” of students using Biblical quotations to support their academic arguments.

The professor announced that she “loved” it when her students used the Bible because she was raised as a Baptist and could “throw it right back at them.”

I thought about another means of establishing ethos: demonstrating respect.8

A white colleague tells me that it’s harder for white professors to get tenure. I ask a black colleague about it. She looks thoughtful. “It isn’t exactly harder if you’re white,” she says, “but I think it’s easier if you’re black.”

ONE PROFESSOR IN MY DEPARTMENT treats me with cold courtesy, extending herself just enough to be collegial, pulling back just enough so that she is never friendly. I don’t know the factors she is weighing, the configuration of variables in her mind: queer, white, new, Northern, perhaps others I’ve never considered. For all I know, she’s just shy.

From the end of a hallway, I see her laughing with two other professors—one black, one white, both straight. I’m jealous. I want to play.

ANOTHER NEW WORD for me: play.

“Girl, I’m not playing with you.” I’m serious. I’m not kidding around.

“She don’t play.” Said by one student to another as they leave the classroom, intently reading the comments and grades on their first essays. When I hear this, I feel proud, as if I’ve passed some test.

STEPHEN, THE OTHER QUEER English department professor, is on sabbatical. He stops by the building one Thursday afternoon and finds me in my office, in conversation with the department chair. “So how’s it going?” he asks.

Fifteen minutes later, when I’m alone, he pokes his head in again. “So,” he asks, “how’s it really going?”

ALL THE QUEERS I MEET agree that Atlanta is “great” and that anywhere outside Atlanta is, in various iterations, “dangerous,” “scary,” or “butt-fuck Egypt.” None of us comments on the latter phrase’s echo of homophobia. Or of racism.

My neighbor Noelle, a white dyke, tells me about the first softball team she joined here, which was called The Crackers. Cracker denotes a white Southerner, usually in a derogatory way, but sometimes—as in the case of Noelle’s team—it is reclaimed in a peculiar gesture of pride. Whatever the term’s etymology, the softball-playing Crackers were, in Noelle’s words, “bad news.” She quit the team when she heard someone call the umpire “that fucking nigger.”

The white people I meet, Southerners and Northerners alike, trade stories about having heard the word nigger used. At a softball game. At a restaurant. Tammy once left her family’s Thanksgiving dinner because her stepfather wouldn’t stop saying it.

I have not yet heard this word, except in the music that blasted across campus during the Homecoming concert.

Nigga, I am learning, is not the same word as nigger.

TAMMY AND I HAVE coffee one afternoon, and I mention that I’ve “jerry-rigged” the water heater in my rented house.

She stops, looks at me. “Do you know what that means?” she asks.

“No,” I say.

“It’s racist,” she says. “Don’t use that word at school.”

A dyke friend from Michigan and I are discussing the movie The Birdcage, specifically Hank Azaria’s character, whom I refer to as “the houseboy.”

“Do you use that word at your school?” she asks me.

“I don’t think I have,” I say. “Why?”

“That’s racist,” she says. “That’s a term from slavery.”

“It’s a queer word,” I say. “Queers use it all the time.”
“Yeah,” she says, “but it’s also racist.”
I’m used to acknowledging my role in a racist system. I’m used to reflecting upon white privilege, arguing that the issue is not whether one is part of a racist system (everyone is) but rather what one does with that knowledge.

These observations are not especially helpful when I hear it coming out of my own mouth. Racism sticks to my skin, glints in my blue eyes, lolls on my tongue.

Later, I realize that both conversations cautioned me against racist language at school, rather than at all times.

**MY FIRST SECTION** of composition, the troublesome one, is also the section in which more interesting events occur. In October, a student named Ranita gives a presentation based on her second essay. She’s taking a poll of the class and posting the results on the board.

“Now,” she says, “how many of you were raised by two African American parents?”

About half the hands go up. Ranita counts and looks puzzled. “That’s all?”

Victoria clarifies: “My parents are from Tobago.”

“Oh!” Ranita amends the terms of her poll. “How many were raised by two black parents?”

Sixteen.

“Now, how many were raised by one black parent and one parent of another race?”

Four.

By now, we all know what’s coming. “How many were raised by two white parents?”

My arm, alone, drifts into the air. There’s a beat of silence, and then the room bursts into a shout of laughter. Ceremoniously, Ranita places the number 1 in the third column on the board. Then she goes on with her presentation, which deals with the ways parents of different races discipline their children.

Her thesis is that parents of color use physical discipline more often than white parents do. When she questions us for the second part of her poll, I raise my hand with the group that was physically disciplined as children. I tell myself that I’m doing this to challenge Ranita’s thesis, the assumptions she’s making about race and culture. But I’m also doing it to challenge her assumptions about me.

I may be white, but you don’t know me.

Even when you do.

**IN THE OTHER COMPOSITION** class, I bring it up myself. Asked by a student to explain privilege, a word that appears in one of their essay assignments, I give a short speech about white privilege. Just as when I came out as queer, I make a point of seeming calm, even casual (a stance I assume for my own comfort, not my students’).

“White privilege,” I tell them, “isn’t something I earned. It isn’t something I tried for, like my doctorate, or figured out over time, like how to ride a bike.”

Faint smiles in the room now. This is the first time anyone has referred to my whiteness.

“I mean,” I say, a comedian stoking an audience, fanning the embers of their smiles, “it’s not like I’m going around saying, ‘Wow! That was a great idea, to be white! Glad I got that right!’”

Everyone smiles now; most are laughing.

“But,” I continue, “that doesn’t mean I don’t benefit from the privilege of being white, all the time.” Then I deliver a familiar sermon, about antiracism, about awareness and speaking out.

The laughter has flickered out, but the room feels warmer.

**BOTH TIMES THAT** I broke the silence around my whiteness, my students laughed. The first time, unscripted, the laughter was sudden and spontaneous; the second time, it was quieter but similarly full of relief. A release.

These are not the sounds I hear when I come out as queer. For the first composition section, it’s in a moment of casual chat about the upcoming holiday (“my partner … she …”), and for the second, it’s part of an exercise, the same one I did for my teaching demonstration. When I come out as queer, there’s no sound. A silent widening of eyes, a quick suspension of twenty breaths. The sound of judgments made, caught, stifled, kept for later.

I draw this conclusion about the two types of coming-out experiences: coming out as white releases tension; coming out as queer increases it.
If I were to put this in rhetorical terms for my argumentation class, I would say that talking about my race strengthens *ethos* by increasing the sense of common ground while talking about my sexuality weakens it by decreasing the sense of common ground. I cannot think of a logical reason for this.

Perhaps it’s because they can see I’m white. In terms of race, perhaps my students and I begin from a presumption of difference, which is then mitigated by talking about it. But in terms of sexuality, perhaps we begin from a presumption of sameness, which is shattered when we talk about it.

But am I really as invisible as all that? Can’t they see I’m queer? My hair and nails are short, I don’t use makeup, I drive a Subaru, my bookbag bears a rainbow pin, all my shoes are sensible. I’m a walking dyke cliché, easily readable by most queers I encounter.

This is the garish transparency of queer: its hazardous tendency to dematerialize—or materialize—without warning.

**WHAT IF I EXPLAINED privilege**, I wonder later, by centering it upon sexuality rather than race? What if I handed out “The Heterosexual Questionnaire,” Martin Rochlin’s tables-turning instrument that’s been used by queer educators since 1977? How might my students react to questions like these:

*What do you think caused your heterosexuality?*
*When and how did you first decide you were a heterosexual?*
*Is it possible your heterosexuality is just a phase you may grow out of?*
*Isn’t it possible that all you need is a good gay lover?*
*If you’ve never slept with a person of the same sex, how do you know you wouldn’t prefer that?*
*To whom have you disclosed your heterosexual tendencies? How did they react?*

So perhaps my coming out as queer makes my students uncomfortable not merely because it’s a surprise—if it even is. Perhaps it’s because they, as black women, have their own privileges to confront.

Of course, not all of them possess heterosexual privilege; it’s just that I don’t know the queer ones. I teach sixty students each semester. Statistically, this means that a few of them are likely to be lesbians. So far, no one’s come out.

But a student who isn’t in any of my classes has. Her method has been atmospheric. She drops by my office periodically, lingers and chats, wanders among my books, and talks about the queer authors shelved there. Finally, one day, she mentions the student organization for lesbians at our school.

“There’s about three people in it,” she says. “But I’m not.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“My ex is the president,” she explains. “And her new girlfriend is the vice president.”

**THE PHRASE COMING OUT** implies that the event is sudden and recognizable—a flinging open of the door, a step over the threshold. But, in fact, coming out is more like moving through a hall of mirrors at a carnival. Your image follows you relentlessly, variously monstrous and beautiful, single and multiple. You bump into glass. You lose your way.

That image, too, is inadequate. A person can leave a hall of mirrors.

Perhaps coming out is more like camouflage than emergence. A hat, a shirt, a suit of words. “In the absence of recognized nonverbal signs,” Ellen Samuels argues in "My Body, My Closet," “we often resort to the ‘less dignified’ response of claiming identity through speech.” In other words, we don language like an outfit. We put it on.

I think of the other meaning of *put on*: “to falsify” or “to pretend.” Are you putting me on?

**MY ARGUMENTATION CLASS** gets into a discussion of T-shirts we’ve seen this semester. The Sean Combs *Vote or Die* T-shirt. The Apology T-shirt, which offers a long list of “apologies” to women at other schools, including “I’m sorry you gotta watch your man, ’cause your man keeps watching me.” The shirt (which I think of, but don’t mention) that my friend Sara suggested I have made for the first day of classes: *Professor Honky*.

The T-shirt described in an essay written by one of my students: yellow, baby-doll style, and imprinted with the Gap brand name. Her friends made fun of her, called her an Oreo. Black on the outside, white on the inside. Acting white.
I ASK MY STUDENT if there’s an opposite of an Oreo.
Her face draws up in puzzlement. Finally, she says, “I don’t think so.”
“Wigga,” someone else supplies. The class laughs. They fall into discussion of the movie Barbershop.
I should be urging them back to their peer reviews, but I’m distracted by a thought. Do queers have a word for Oreo, the donning of the trappings of privilege, the attempt to disappear against the wall of the fishbowl? All I can think of is the overly enunciated straight-acting. And that’s not a word. It merely marks a gap. It’s the outer boundary of a word that fails to exist.

I REMEMBER STANDING at the copier with a white teacher at my last school, the Detroit one. She’d been teaching there for fifteen years.
“Oh,” she said, “I just don’t notice what race any of my students are.”
Bullshit, I thought but didn’t say. Now I realize that I might have been too quick to dismiss her remark. To claim color-blindness, of course, is racist and foolish. But there’s more to the question of noticing or not noticing than yes and no. Than black and white. Identities trump one another, scatter like cards in a game of euchre, the suits changing before our eyes: gender, race, sexuality. Age. Color. Region. Nationality. I assumed that teacher perceived less than I, but it’s also possible that she perceived more. Race, like sexuality, is apparitional.

BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM writes, “We need to continually break the silence about racism whenever we can. We need to talk about it at home, at school, in our houses of worship, in our workplaces, in our community groups. But talk does not mean idle chatter. It means meaningful, productive dialogue to raise consciousness and lead to effective action and social change.”
I believe in this assertion, for sexuality as well as race. I believe in open and direct conversations, mutual respect, and speaking across differences. But I also know about everyday life. Survival involves cowardice as well as courage. In the grittiness of a moment, I don’t always speak up. The classroom can be an ugly place. In it, I sidestep, I stutter, my neck turns red, I compromise. I don’t glide a gleaming edge of self-awareness and theoretical virtue. I grasp at language for redemption, but the words themselves turn transparent, fade with me against the impassive glass of the fishbowl. I can exhort my students and myself to be reflective, to be aware, but that doesn’t take away the pain.

THE PAIN. That’s something we should remember, even as we strive, full of good intentions, toward our “meaningful, productive dialogue,” our “effective action and social change.” The pain that language cannot even render, let alone mitigate. The pain, and the pleasure, too. What I, as a rhetorician, might call “somatic discourse,” might call “affect.” What my students, wiser than I, would call “feeling.”
My colleague Stephen has written that at Spelman “the phrase Un huh, I feel ya is a familiar affirmation. When responding to a fellow sister’s or my comments in class, students declare not only their understanding but also their empathy as part of that understanding. ‘To feel someone’ (not ‘with’ or ‘for’) is to have a connection that is more than intellectual.”
One more new word for me. Not a word, in fact. An expression. I feel you.

LANGUAGE IS MY PROFESSION, my medium, and my faith. But sometimes my best hope resides beyond it.
I remember a day last year, back in Detroit, when I asked a class to call out stereotypes for white people as I listed them on the board. Without hesitation, a black student shouted, “Alcoholics.”
Again, the explosive laughter, all of us unable to speak for a minute. I laughed so hard that I dropped my chalk and had to sit down. It was February, a night class, a basement classroom with sleet ticking the windows. I found a tissue and wiped my eyes.
I am a professor of English, yet I know that sometimes laughter says more than words can. Certainly it is true in this case, because I cannot explain what that moment taught me nor why it did me so much good.