

# Topographies of Disruption

## Queer(ed) Literacy Pedagogies Beyond the Binary

L. HELTON

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

### Whose Closet Is It, Anyway? Pedagogies of Silence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Classroom

The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence.

Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990, p. 68)

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse...than an element that functions alongside the things said.... There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1978, p. 27)

“**B**ULLARD, I GOT A QUESTION FOR YOU.”

The flattening of my married name, long split from its title, pelted me from behind like it did a thousand times a day in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade classroom where I spent my days (and many evenings). *Bullard*. The only of their female teachers they addressed without a title, as they did with their male teachers—Hartman, Selznick. I’d always written my name with *Ms.* in front, dodging their questions of “Why no Mrs.?” and “Aren’t you married?” with the answer that I simply didn’t like the sound of “Mrs.” I should have known then, shouldn’t I? I was never at home as a “Mrs.”

“What’s up?” I turned my face to Grace Plott<sup>1</sup> while I continued to pick up the papers that had missed the bin, erase the board, dab at the coffee stain on my shirt sleeve, keep an eye on the kid who’d slumped into class and closed his eyes at his desk—the between-class teacher dance. You may know it well.

“So some of us been wonderin,” Grace began, the Tennessee country in her voice and a smirk playing at her lips, which I knew meant nothing good could follow. At five feet, nine inches tall, 13-year-old Grace stood nearly at eye level with me, and as I turned to look at her directly, she shoved her wildly gesticulating hands into the front pocket of the same oversized hoodie she wore every day. Grace was the sort of girl who got embarrassed in makeup, who hated wearing her hair down as her mother demanded she do for church and performances at school. One time, a friend of hers had snuck a picture of Grace, in makeup and a boxy dress with her hair neatly combed, at a school event and put it on Snapchat. Grace found her the next day at school before the first bell had even rung, easily wrested her phone out of her hands, and crunched it under her sneaker on the linoleum floor. I was glad to be on Grace’s good side; she shut out other teachers and intimidated her peers, but even when I got onto her, there remained a lightness and trust in our relationship. She played a tough front and had begged me not to tell anyone she cried when I confronted her privately for cheating. But now, as students leaked into the classroom, she was uncharacteristically awkward. She smiled at her friends who stood perched at the door, watching.

“As much as I’m enjoying whatever this is, Plott, I’ve got to...” I began.

“Bullard, are you, like, *gay* or somethin’?” she spat, her face reddening from her neck up to the hairline of her disheveled ponytail. Her nerves spilled out in too-breathy laughter, and I joined her, turning away toward my desk so she didn’t see the mirrored flush in my own cheeks. The increasingly familiar rush of cold spread across my limbs as I pantomimed fetching papers from my desk, taking a sip of now-freezing coffee. *Quick, Liz.*

“What is it, the pants?” I asked, carefully playing our roles with one another—snarky student, snarky teacher. She laughed, glancing nervously back at her friends at the door who had assigned her this quest.

“Well I mean, like, yeah, why don’t you ever wear a dress or nothin’?” She coughed through laughter while she watched me with serious eyes.

“I could ask you the same thing, Plott. You wear the same hoodie every day, and you don’t hear me critiquing *your* fashion choices.”

“*Ohhh!*” the girls at the door betrayed their friend with their own laughter now as Plott rolled her eyes, the bell rang, and I finally looked at her again, levelly: “You’re late.”

---

I spoke about the between-class teacher dance, the paper collecting, the classroom reset, the haphazard attempt to assert control over the chaos—but what about this one? What about this dance, on this Tuesday, between Grace and me? Grace and I were playing a game that I now see all over the blueprint of my four years at this school—looking at one another slant, a queerness in between us, a question that’s not allowed. A question that seems to ask: *Do you see what’s here? In the in between of what I’m saying? In between the question I’m asking and the answer you’re allowed to give?* The game was there with every student who shuffled their way to my desk, asking for a book recommendation, looking anywhere but at me, knowing what I would include in the stack. The game was there every time I said, “This book is about a girl who’s figuring out who she is and how she feels about people,” as the church girl in the back of the room sat up almost

imperceptibly taller to catch the title. The game was there in the grade level meeting when our principal told us a boy, who I knew to have been hiding a relationship with another boy at school, had been pulled out of school and sent to “a center for faith-building and recovery” that his parents felt he needed for “behavioral issues.” We all knew the words we weren’t saying and what we were saying by not saying them.

The absence of language did not mean, of course, the absence of queer discourse(s), queer existence(s), queer creative acts, and even literacies of queerness, surviving, and, occasionally, flourishing in the margins of this thing we call “school.” bell hooks (1989) told us that the margin is

the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance...a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (p. 149-50)

Where are the margins within our school buildings where possibility glimmers out at us, if looked at slant? Where are the queer moments in school where a marginalized but (*and?*) nevertheless potent radical possibility disrupts the “givens” of school life? Can classrooms be marginal spaces? How might we teach queer(ly) in order to intentionally utilize the marginal as the “site of radical possibility” that hooks describes?

When Grace Plott challenged me that day on a dare from her friends, she saw her teacher—an adult, one hopefully with answers, in control, and in command. And perhaps I’d felt that way a moment prior to her question, maybe sometime during my lesson on comma usage that morning, but as I revisit this memory, I see myself as a still astonishingly young person, raised a girl, raised Catholic in the Bible Belt South, who, for the first time, was seeing all the invisible lines that had directed her life beginning to materialize in the air around her. Grace had begun to sense the restricting lines, too, much younger than I had, and it was along these lines that we knew instinctively to dance, never letting ourselves fully question what lay outside them, never wondering why we followed them, never actually answering the silent “What if?” in both of our eyes. But what if the classroom became the site of *what if?* What happens when we linger on the *what if?* What happens—to school, to language—when we begin to make visible the grid lines of ideology within which we all inevitably rest? What does it mean to notice pedagogies of silence—those hardened, inflexible, repeated routes—so that something else might begin to rupture forth instead?

### **“What If?” as Rupture Pedagogies of Disruption**

To give a problem a name can change not only how we register an event but whether we register an event.... When we give problems names, we can become a problem for those who do not want to talk about a problem even though they know there is a problem. You can cause a problem by not letting things recede.

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (2017, p. 34)

Confrontation was never my strong suit. I’ll blame it on the Catholicism or the being raised girl or the carefully measured and narrow acceptable forms of “Southern professional woman” or

any other social machination that taught me being a good girl meant keeping my mouth shut. As a little girl, I felt indebtedness to God, and as a 27 year old teacher, I felt indebtedness to a social order that I was only beginning to understand as being very like that thing I was taught to call “God” as a child in Bible school. Like generations of women before me, I’d learned all the other ways to say “No” without actually saying it, so as to preserve the happiness of others. And as a young teacher in my mid-twenties, I began to learn all the ways to resist without declaring much of anything at all but by asking questions instead, by *holding* a moment—by not letting things recede. And in the recess of memory comes another that, importantly, won’t recede.

Andrew Hackworth sat across from me, his giggles echoing in the clinical, sparse room occupied by the school’s Gifted coordinator who apparently found wall décor to be a disruption (pause for irony) to learning. Andrew had just finished telling me a story from his lunch table conversation that day, wherein Patel, an otherwise shy, quiet, and brilliant fellow 7<sup>th</sup> grader, had schooled the popular girl (remember Grace Plott?) who’d come over to insult his “gross-smelling Chinese lunch” (Patel is Indian). There were bright pink splotches high in Andrew’s cheeks as he told the story, his shoulders loose and shaking as we laughed and as I hurriedly ate the remnants of my own cold lunch. As he told me the story, Andrew’s nail-bitten hands danced in large gestures, and the staple yellow and grey flannel he wore flowed behind his large movements. “I don’t know what she was thinking, coming up to you boys’ table in the first place,” I said, shaking my head. “She should’ve known she was out of her league.” Andrew’s eyes were sparkling as the doorknob to the classroom turned and everything changed.

The Gifted coordinator entered the room, mid-conversation, with a man I’d never met, who I assumed to be Andrew’s father. As I stood to shake Mr. Hackworth’s hand, Andrew seemed to move in the opposite direction from me; his shoulders caved as he curled in upon himself, growing immediately smaller. He wedged his hands tightly between his knees and glued his eyes to the floor, where they would remain for the following 20 painful minutes.

“Mrs. Bullard, this is Dirk Hackworth—Dirk, Mrs. Bullard is our 7<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher.” Mr. Hackworth’s hand was rough and calloused in mine, and I was immediately reminded of my then-husband’s grandfather, a gruff man from Iowa who called me “little lady.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” Mr. Hackworth’s eyes, crinkled with deep creases at the corners, were brilliantly blue, and his sun-weathered face split into a wide smile that I couldn’t help but return.

“And you, Mr. Hackworth,” I began, as Andrew’s father made his way over to him, putting his wide hands squarely on Andrew’s diminished shoulders.

“Abigail sure does love your class,” he said, slapping Andrew’s shoulder. “Can’t get her to put the books down.”

“Who?”

It was out of my mouth before I’d thought, and in the time that single word hung in the air, my eyes darted from Andrew’s shining brow and white hands to Mr. Hackworth and the now flattening line of his mouth, to Mrs. Raymond, the Gifted teacher, and back again. Here was a child with close-cropped short hair he’d cut himself (“forgive the hack job, Bullard, I’m obviously not meant for beauty school,” he’d said bashfully one day on his way into class), a low, husky voice, baggy cargo pants, and dragons artfully drawn in the corners of his class notes.

“Andrew? Andrew is—he’s a great student.” I thought I saw Andrew’s eyes close just as Mr. Hackworth’s flickered, the blue in them dimming as he said tersely, “Don’t call her that. Some stupid act she’s puttin’ on for attention. No need to indulge her, Miss.”

I looked at Mrs. Raymond, whose eyes were locked onto Andrew's IEP document, the gold cross around her neck refracting light onto the table around which we sat. I looked at Andrew, or this ghost of Andrew, the boy I knew to be bubbly, bright, intensely curious, and playful. The boy who, upon my calling for an "Abigail Hackworth" on the first day of school, politely corrected me as a few students shifted awkwardly in their seats, looking away, as Mrs. Raymond now looked away, waiting for the moment to pass. Looking away: a pedagogy of silence.

"I'm sorry, I—" I looked again at Andrew, waiting for him to transform back into the boy I knew, but Andrew remained completely still, crushed in on himself, his eyes unreadable. He was far away. He was playing a part he knew well.

"I know him as Andrew, that's all. I've gotten used to calling him Andrew."

Mr. Hackworth cleared his throat and turned to Mrs. Raymond, asking her logistical questions about the upcoming state tests, at which point she happily, finally, came back to life, chirping about percentiles and preparations, her petite, pink-cardiganed frame seemingly grateful for the opportunity to hustle over paperwork, paperwork, paperwork. I wasn't addressed or looked at again, and as Mrs. Raymond and Mr. Hackworth closed their two-person meeting, I pulled a book out of my bag and slid it across the table to Andrew, tapping the cover. His eyes flicked toward it slightly, and I said, looking steadily at him: "New dragon book. Thought of you." He smiled almost imperceptibly as the bell rang, keeping us both in line and on schedule, bringing this conversation (and the possibility of so many others) to a close.

Sara Ahmed (2017) wrote,

if a world can be what we learn not to notice, noticing becomes a form of political labor. What do we learn not to notice?... If we have been taught to turn away, we have to learn to turn toward...even if this turning can at times feel like we are making life more difficult for ourselves. (p. 32)

Though Mr. Hackworth chose to turn away from me for the remainder of that IEP meeting (its own sort of discomfort for a teacher who prided herself on cultivating positive relationships with students' families), his disapproval at my choice to refrain from calling Andrew "Abigail" did not end there. Mr. Hackworth left that IEP meeting after a much more terse and cursory handshake and marched directly down to the principal's office, where he filed a complaint about my inappropriate and unprofessional intervention at "calling his daughter *Andrew*," a mistake for which he made clear I should be reprimanded immediately. I had barely begun my third period class before the office secretary's scratchy voice came across the intercom, ordering me to the principal's office, my students *ooing* and playfully asking me which kid's head I'd stuffed in a toilet.

This chain of command, from Mr. Hackworth to my principal to the office secretary's voice audible to my entire third block class (who would, of course, tell my other students in the next passing time between class blocks), is one that exists in many schools, and it served to reinstate the school's hegemony and approved power structure that I had, however unknowingly, *troubled* in that moment in the Gifted room. The moment had been fleeting—a turning toward Andrew where I might have quickly apologized and turned away a few years prior—but it represented a form of pedagogical disruption that was immediately noticed and reprimanded in an attempt to *straighten* behavior (Ahmed, 2006), both Andrew's and mine, back to what was considered "appropriate" and "professional."

I sat in my principal's overcrowded office, my eyes lodged somewhere just above her shoulder on a binder labelled "protocols" while she stared down the end of her long, shiny, hot-pink painted index finger nail at me. "This isn't your place, Liz," she said to me, her pitch high and warning, the charms on her bracelet trembling as she spoke. "This was not the appropriate place to push your political agenda." I nodded, assented, considered the meaning of "protocols" and wondered if anyone cared what the "protocol" was for ensuring the survival of a child like Andrew.

How do these words—"appropriate," "professional," "protocols"—become the convenient disguises for "straightening devices" in schools? In her 2006 book, *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed investigates the etymology of the word "direction" in her examination of what it means to be orientated—in life or, more particularly, in a certain space, like school:

A direction is thus produced over time; a direction is what we are asked to follow. The etymology of "direct" relates to "being straight."... To go directly is to follow a line without a detour, without mediation. Within the concept of direction is a concept of "straightness." To follow a line might be a way of becoming straight, by not deviating at any point. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 16)

Implicit in the notion of direction is a need for continuity, smoothness, repetition—a path at once well-worn and undisturbed. To threaten the "professionalism" or "appropriateness" of a teacher is a mode by which systems of education might smooth, or straighten, out the problematic and disruptive nature of anything that questions, however minutely, the aims of that system—and the social norms it so effectively and regularly reproduces. Political, oppressive systems of society, public education included, function and rely upon the unmediated and unexamined (ideally unconscious) following of given lines by its participants. Later in the same passage, Ahmed (2006) wrote,

Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of repetition. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 16)

The "given" lines—of school, of society, of family—depend largely on the followers of those lines not being conscious of the fact that they're following any directed line at all. Much in this way, employee code of conduct manuals, distributed to terrified and impressionable young new teachers at the start of each school year, work to ensure that terms like "professional responsibilities," "appropriate behavior," and "standard measures" ring out with an unquestionable and irrefutable moral authority, single in definition, and acting as impermeable walls to the "given" paths of sanctioned pedagogies. But what might it mean to pause in the well-worn path of "given" schooling and teaching—to hover in a moment, looking up at the steep and formidable rise of these walls on either side of one's teaching life, and refuse to continue forward? In what way might a politics of refusal mark the beginning of a queer(ed) pedagogy—to notice, name, question, and refuse the given lines provided by words like "professional" and "appropriate"?

The trip to the principal's office to talk about Andrew was far from my first. But something *turned* that day; in the days following my meeting with Andrew, his father, and the stern finger of my principal, other visits to the office came leaking back to me, cast in new light. There had been

so many moments wherein, as a young teacher, I'd hurriedly changed my behavior and curriculum so as not to suffer the stain of being labelled "unprofessional" or "inappropriate," the worst words I could imagine being called as an educator new to the game. I remembered an attempt in my first year to screen *Dead Poet's Society* at the end of our poetry unit, and my principal told me it was entirely inappropriate filmic material for my students—that they didn't need to be "getting any ideas" about the "dramatic" measures taken by students in the film in the name of poetry, creative expression, and the critical necessity of art (she delivered this message to me as the principal of a fine arts-focused public school). I remembered my instructional coach pulling me out of class in the autumn of my third year (again, in front of my students so they could see the punishment that befalls wayward behavior, even to their teachers) to ask why in the world I was teaching a mini-unit on Ferguson and the shooting of Michael Brown. When I responded by telling her that it was a critical news literacy unit that met any number of Tennessee State ELA standards, she waved it off, saying that the school had plenty of nonfiction materials that were far more "appropriate" and "in line" with the parameters of English class, a space that, in her mind, ought to maintain that proper (and mythical) *apolitical* state.

The following spring, my 7<sup>th</sup> graders were excitedly preparing for the performance of our recently completed class text: Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The room was buzzing with thoughts of glitter for the fairies and real foliage for the enchanted forest when I assigned the reading of Robin Goodfellow, or Puck, to children of all genders in class, noting that Puck was historically seen and played as a sort of genderfluid character in the history of the play's critical readings, performances, and cinematic depictions. This choice resulted in another mid-class intercom call and another well-publicized visit to the principal's desk, where she shared her concerns that I was encouraging gender "confusion" by straying from the established path of roles for "boys" and "girls." Hearing these words, I tilted my head, furrowed my brow, and opened my mouth, at which point she hurriedly rushed to her more general concern at why we were reading Shakespeare in the first place, seeing as how the state test was the following week and my primary "professional" responsibility was to be preparing my students for that, not "playing dress up" and reading material that "they can't understand anyway." A concern at my "encouragement" of non-normative gender play was quickly folded into a larger, much more sinister (and legitimately punishable) offense of my having shirked my "professional responsibilities" to my students. In this way, straying from gender norms was linked to my effectiveness as a teacher, an offense that might very well have resulted (and often does, for many teachers) in district-sanctioned, policy-protected punishment, ranging from a strike on one's record to a Personal Improvement Plan, a withholding of advancement, a delay or threat to one's tenure, or termination of employment altogether.

Sara Ahmed (2012, 2017) wrote about the "brick walls" of institutional life—the ones very like those path barriers I described earlier as keeping one "straight," "in line," and "on course." Brick walls, as she contended in her writing on diversity work (Ahmed, 2012, 2017), remind us of "our place," much as my principal reminded me of mine that day in her office. While these "brick walls" are often metaphorical, encoded into perhaps seemingly progressive policies and initiatives, they are also physical walls—the more porous walls of a classroom, say, or the decidedly less porous ones of an administrator's office, where coded threats make their clandestine cuts on the skin of students and young teachers alike, behind closed doors, unbeknownst to the world outside.

“All around you,” Ahmed (2017) wrote,

there is a partial sighting of walls...and those who know it is wrong even when they try to persuade themselves otherwise, even when they try to minimize a mountain of abuse, can feel all the more wrong, can feel the full force of it, when the wall finally does come into view: she is not okay; I am not okay; this is not okay. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 141)

As I sat in my principal’s office following the meeting with Andrew’s father, the walls were beginning to come into focus for me, and things were becomingly increasingly and resoundingly *not okay*. Whereas before my struggles with those irascible notions of “appropriate” had seemed merely personal to me, or particular to my relationship with an individual literacy coach or administrator, I was beginning to sense a trend to these disciplinary proceedings—a well-worn path, perhaps. Who, I began to wonder, is being protected within these walls of institutional life—within the walls of a public secondary school? And who is being wounded? How might the sighting of these institutional walls be, in the first place, a *queer* critical practice and the beginning of a queer(ed) politic and pedagogy?

What I began to wonder in my final year of teaching at this school, as I found myself covered in a fine dust of the disrupted path I’d only just begun to kick at, was something I wish I’d begun to question earlier. What if each instance of “professional” and “appropriate” being used, in particular to keep teachers “in line,” became an opportunity for disruption? In what ways did these words stand in as signifiers, not as markers of teachers’ ethical quality and commitments to their students’ learning, but as measures of invisible, silent pedagogies of school administrations and district offices writ large? What were words like “appropriate” and “professional” doing to ensure the perpetuation of the status quo and erasure of queerness, acting as what Ahmed (2006) called “straightening devices,” those administrative and institutional “moves” made to silence important racial, class-based, gendered, and sexuality-based “deviations” from the normative (read: white supremacist, classist, and hetero-/cis-normative) “givens” of school? How might we begin to envision pedagogies of disruption that serve as *noticings* of these perhaps previously “invisible” straightening devices? And what happens when we act upon these noticings? To notice, after all, is to both highlight gaps in the system of school and create gaps; what might it mean, then, to productively mind *and* mine these gaps?

### **Min(d)ing the Gap Queer(ed) Pedagogies as Marginal Possibilities**

The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalising rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.

José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*  
(2009, p. 1)

In his introduction to, *Queer Theory in Education*, the first publication of its kind to make an explicit attempt to examine the theoretical cross-sections of queer theory and curricular theory,

editor William Pinar (1998/2009) wrote about the interdisciplinary product/project of queer pedagogy: “we work toward a future that is not visible, not even a lavender glimmer on the horizon...perhaps for now it is enough to assert difference, to theorize queer curriculum and pedagogy, and to watch the horizon” (p. 43-44). Critiquing regimented ways of knowing and doing, by way of investigating lives in the margins, and making visible the grid lines of oppression that position certain lives as marginal in the first place marks the project of much of poststructuralist critical pedagogy in its many forms: feminist pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy (borne from Critical Race Theory), what Freire (1968) calls the “pedagogy of the oppressed” among them. Critical pedagogy, itself resting more broadly at the intersection of critical theory and pedagogical theory, seeks to disrupt hegemonic modes of schooling that reproduce social norms predicated on the continuation of oppression. What might queer pedagogy make possible within this larger political and pedagogical project? In what ways might queer pedagogy serve as a framework by which we (re)see what has been routinized into supposed invisibility— institutional and intellectual walls and the lives of the students they invisibilize? How might queer pedagogy work as both a noticing and radicalizing of the margins?

Like the other arms of critical pedagogy, queer pedagogy makes up the interdisciplinary aims of two perhaps seemingly disparate fields: queer theory and pedagogical/curricular theory. Pinar’s (1998/2009) anthology, now over two decades old, remains crucially relevant in the questions its authors, pioneers in the field of queer pedagogy, ask. In the intervening two decades since this anthology’s publishing, several of the collection’s contributing theorists, foundational to the field of queer pedagogy, have gone on to ask new questions about queer pedagogy as our understanding of “queerness” itself has continued to shift, change, and evolve. Appropriately for the two elastic, dynamic terms that make up its title, queer pedagogy is a field that resists easy definition or categorization, and theorists who find themselves at the center of this intellectual domain puzzle over the paradox of doing and writing about queer pedagogical work when “queer” itself is a critical practice that, by its very nature, eludes schematization. Pinar (1998/2009) recalls hooks (1989) in his writing that queer pedagogy might produce an “open mesh of possibilities,” but what is queer pedagogy actually *doing*? And who is doing it?

Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell (1993), in their piece, “Queer Pedagogy: Praxis Makes Im/Perfect,” defined queer pedagogy as “a radical form of educative praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of ‘normalcy’ in schooled subjects” (p. 285). Bryson and Castell, both queer-identifying teacher educators, insisted on the importance of named difference, and on the associated importance of openly queer-identifying theorists addressing their sexual positionalities within their research. Susanne Luhmann (1995/1998), extended Bryson and Castell’s pseudo-definition by noting that queer pedagogy possesses destabilizing power in its ability to force both teachers and students to critically examine the grounds on which their identities have been constructed. Anticipating much of what has come to populate the conversation around queerness and pedagogy—assimilationist conversations about queer “inclusivity” in curricula—Luhmann (1995/1998) wrote of the larger epistemological project that queer pedagogy demands. “If subversiveness is not a new form of knowledge,” she wrote, “but lies in the capacity to raise questions about the detours of coming to know and making sense, then what does this mean for a pedagogy that imagines itself as queer?” (Luhmann, 1995/1998, p. 147). Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis (1999), in their article, “Interrupting Heteronormativity: Toward a Queer Curriculum Theory,” likened the work of queer pedagogy to that of anti-racist pedagogy in its capacity to visibilize oppressive regimes and structures that have accrued the mythical unnamed status of hegemony; the critical pedagogical move, Sumara and

Davis argued, is to *interrupt*. This practice of disruption seems central to the work of queer pedagogy, but what does it look like beyond isolated disruptive moments like, for example, the one between my student Andrew, his father, and me in the Gifted classroom that day? And, both within and outside of the English class, what might it mean to (re)imagine literacy curricula and its practices as being implicitly disruptive—and to habitually commit to and teach into this invariably *queer* aspect of literacy pedagogy? Contemporary queer literacy pedagogues (Lin, 2017; Miller, 2015; Walsh, 2007) have written of queer literacy *frameworks* that might disrupt hetero- and cis-normativity in schools, and in hopes of continuing and extending their work, I wonder: What (if any) are specific practices that undergird a queer literacy curriculum theory?

In the final publication of his career, *Cruising Utopia*, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2009) gestured toward what would become not only a trademark component of his work, but of queer politics more largely: that of utopia or those imagined new worlds to which he pointed in the epigraph to this section. Earlier in this paper, I recalled the words of bell hooks (1989) on the marginal (and the classroom) as being the site of radical possibility—a space in which we might collectively imagine *new worlds*. It seems obvious to me that young people are quite ready to engage in this work of an/other world-making, whether through drawing dragons on the corners of their notes or mobilizing through social media with students who, a generation prior, might have remained strangers to them. This capacity for world-making—for imagining both within and against the dominant norms of schooling and society—is where I believe the work of queer literacy pedagogy(ies) begins. In his earlier text, now central to studies of queer theory and performance, Muñoz (1999) wrote in *Disidentifications* of how it is that marginalized and minoritized performers of color interact and forge resistant subjectivity/-ties within dominant ideologies and regimes of representation. Muñoz posited that, rather than simply accepting or outrightly denying the dominant culture, queer and marginalized thinkers and performers often practice a process of “disidentification” wherein they queerly repurpose dominant modes of representation to offer both a slant reading of society’s lockstep norms as well as a glimmering glimpse of queerer future possibilities (Muñoz, 1999). Disidentification, then, is neither an abject surrender of queer personhood, a fantastical escape from the realities of our world, nor a bland assimilation, but rather a powerful assertion of one’s queer subjectivity that requires a deep and critical reading of, and engagement with, normative modes of representation, including “approved” forms of literacy and literate representation. It’s a practice that, appropriately, sits at the nexus of Muñoz’s academic positioning as a queer theorist/queer performance studies scholar and the work of queer pedagogy.

Deborah Britzman (1995), one of the first to employ and explore the label of queer pedagogy, in her article, “Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight!,” wondered at the limits of both pedagogy and queer identification. In studying the ways in which the AIDS crisis bears important implications for pedagogy, Britzman (1995) wrote:

Pedagogical thought must begin to acknowledge that receiving knowledge is a problem for the learner and the teacher, particularly when the knowledge one already possesses or is possessed by works as an entitlement to one’s ignorance or when the knowledge encountered cannot be incorporated because it disrupts how the self might imagine itself and others. These dynamics, quite familiar in contexts where multiculturalism is constituted as a special interest, are not resistance to knowledge. Rather, they are knowledge as a form of resistance. (p. 220)

Throughout her article, Britzman determinedly maintained that queer pedagogy does not and cannot offer any prescriptive rules—that it cannot even hope to be implemented with the expressed goal of ending homophobia and transphobia. Rather, its aims should be to perpetually exercise “knowledge as a form of resistance.” In much of the mainstream conversation in education today around LGBTQ+ students in school, the focus tends to fall into the construction of queer students and lives as the “special interest” group that Britzman described—the proliferation of unit plans, guides for inclusion of queer literature, and professional development to “support” the needs of queer-identifying students. This endeavor, though admirable and important in its overall aims to improve school safety and experience for students (and teachers) who identify as LGBTQ+, often risks running the course of the assimilation politics that have marked much of the mainstream LGB rights’ movement; that is, by holding “inclusion” as the guiding focus for work with queer students (and by assuming that this “queer-inclusive” work is the same thing as the critical intellectual project of queer pedagogy at large), there is the potent risk for the reification of binaried difference and allowing “inclusion” to simply serve as a mask for “assimilation” in a way that is non-threatening to the heteronormative, racist, cisnormative schooling structures at large. Instead, we might consider what it means to, as Suzanne Luhmann (1995/1998) following Foucault wrote, “risk one’s self” in undertaking queer pedagogy. “Can queer teaching,” Luhmann (1995/1998) asked, “rather than assuming and affirming identities, take on the problem of how identifications are made and refused in the process of learning?” (p. 153). This practice, of constantly interrogating the ways in which identities are constructed—how some are normalized and legitimized and others are subjugated—is the very art of disidentification that Muñoz describes.

Students in our public schools are practicing disidentification(s) whether we give them permission to or not; it’s there in the Black student, reading Dostoevsky in class, who rewrites the characters into the fabric of his life, with recognizably Black characters and Black literacies flowing. It’s there in the fan fiction writing that reimagines romantic possibilities between Draco and Harry, Darcy and Bingley, Nick and Gatsby. It’s there in the feminist critical readings of Hester Prynne, Jane Eyre, and Lady Macbeth. In the face of what can feel to some a rigid literary canon, our students very often forge space “between the lines” of the text and of the text’s presentation in school, offering back the same rhetorical tools in a different package; they take what is recognizable to others and rupture space for their own identification(s) with/in an otherwise foreign, perhaps inaccessible, text. This practice of the disidentificatory literary act requires a critical reading of the texts and worlds around them—worlds wherein students might lack any discernible sense of representation—in order to then rupture and mine possibilities for their own localized experiences to be represented. They are endlessly creative, creating, and desperately grasping for queer(ed) futures—for future(s) of their own. What a queer(ed) literacy pedagogy might more thoroughly and visibly endorse, I believe, is this/these practice(s) of disidentification; what might it mean for English teachers to explicitly, visibly, and audibly embody a resistance to “given” lines of reading, literacy, literary study, and school itself—to, as Britzman writes, practice “knowledge as resistance”?

To enter into the ELA classroom today is to enter into an essentially straight(ened) space; everything from the posters on the walls to the texts on a standard high school English syllabus endorses a specific brand of literacy, and any deviations from this are typically noted in the tones of careful sanctions (i.e., slight literary departures from “the real stuff” being briefly made in the name of “African-American History Month,” “Women’s History Month,” post-state testing time, etc.). In her spatial theorizing of normative space, or these “givens” by which I’ve contended we operate in school, Ahmed (2006) wrote, “spaces and bodies become straight as an effect of

repetition. That is, the repetition of actions, which tends toward some objects, shapes the ‘surface’ of spaces. Spaces become straight, which allow straight bodies to extend into them” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 92). To queer literacy is, then, to literally and figuratively rupture these spaces of whiteness, classism, racism, and hetero-/cishnormativity in order to disrupt the unquestioned repetitions of school. Though queerness itself eludes any instinct toward categorization, there are, I believe, some formative principles of what a queer literacy pedagogy might do, be, or seek to imagine in the *un-straightened* classroom space—principles that I hope generatively expand upon those offered by aforementioned queer pedagogues, and specifically queer literacy pedagogues, before me. To grapple with these principles is to more intentionally construct spaces that disrupt the given lines and straightening devices of “school” and to not only encourage, but explicitly model and teach, disidentificatory practices as modes of powerful self-actualization, self-ownership, literary and creative expression, and radical social change.

### **Extending Queer Literacy Frameworks What Might Be the Aims of Queer(ed) Literacy Pedagog(ies)?**

#### **A Queer(ed) Literacy Pedagogy is Intersectional**

A queer(ed) literacy pedagogy recognizes that, as Audre Lorde (1984) wrote, “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (p. 138). We know that queer students of color and trans/gender nonconforming youth represent the most targeted groups in schools (and outside of them) and are the most underrepresented in their school curricula (Tuttle, 2017); we know this, even if we haven’t read the data or the latest survey, because we’ve seen them. Maybe you, like I, have watched anger build inside the Black lesbian child who fears home and who fears school—whose experience isn’t reflected by either her white queer-identifying peers nor her Black heteronormative family, who can’t explain to her teachers *why* she acts out, who can’t control a shred of the narrative that’s been typecast to her body as a *troublemaker* since the day she started schooling. Maybe, like me, you had no clue what to do with this girl’s rage that felt so big it both filled the room and silenced both of us—me in my useless White guilt and her in the layers of seemingly insurmountable pain separating her from others; it was easier for teachers and fellow students to call her “one of those kids” than to seek out the multiple ways in which her Black, queer body was being actively, daily denigrated and dehumanized. Just as oppressions can be and are multiple, so should our pedagogies encourage multiplicity—in form, in representation, in identifications. In our construction of our syllabi, we should seek to privilege no one form/type of literacy, text, or author over another, but should instead quilt a queer literacy framework by which *all* our students might see angles of themselves reflected—in which there is curricular room for both powerful *disidentification* and affirming *identification*.

#### **A Queer(ed) Literacy Pedagogy is Future-Oriented**

Muñoz (2009) wrote, “queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (p. 1). Through studying the disidentificatory practices of elders,

scholars, activists, writers, and artists before them, students might begin to see their work in the world as both a continuation of a storied legacy (of people who actually look, live, and love in similar ways that they do) and an imaginative world-making—a sculpting of queer(er), freer future lives for themselves and for others. So many of our students learn early to see their future in tunnel vision: that is, to only see the future that has been so readily scripted for them, if to see it at all. For education to be a healing, liberatory practice, we must be not only willing but adamant to reimagine futurity with our students, particularly those for whom fate seems predetermined in the form of a school to prison pipeline or an unwanted, lockstep following in the footsteps of one’s father and grandfather. We must be willing to engage, at all times, in the (re)construction of *possibility*. In situating ourselves as future-oriented educators and mentors in the lives of our students, we commit to constantly interrogating the status quo, both in and out of the classroom, and asking ourselves and our students: Whose voices are still not being heard? Who is not being represented? What might representation look like? How might things be different than what we’ve been taught to expect? In short: What *might* be?

### **A Queer(ed) Literacy Pedagogy is Embodied**

A queer(ed) literacy pedagogy does not require as one of its stipulations that students check their bodies at the door, but rather acknowledges the powerfully embodied life that each of us might hope to live. A queer pedagogue teaches with/in and from the body, refusing the academy’s imperative to pretend as though our value lies strictly and solely in the cerebral, advocating instead for the legitimacy of bodily knowledge. Just as we offer mentor texts for literacy learning, so must we offer the text of ourselves and our language to not only tolerate but actively encourage gender play, physical presence, and attentiveness to the physical being. Our students have been trained to view school as a place where the body does not exist—where teachers are robotic, disembodied, desexualized deliverers of content and they, the often unwilling, unmoving receptacles. I’ll never forget the surprise on my students’ faces when, after a long day of sitting as a proctor during state testing, I began to stretch while I taught. I should have been more alarmed that *they* were so alarmed—to witness a teacher’s physicality is a rare sight for our students. What does that teach them? That the body is a site of shame, that to explore, care for, and exist openly in one’s body is embarrassing and subordinate to the “real work” of school. A queer pedagogue resists this norm by inviting the body *in*: the body as canvas, the body as text, the body as expressive site and vehicle of healing—expressive of one’s oppression(s), pain, joy, and love. A queer literacy pedagogy celebrates the fluid and expressive literacies of the body, privileging no one bodily manifestation over the other, naming, celebrating, and forging solidarity across the bodily differences that create invariably different life experiences among us. A queer pedagogue embraces gender play, creativity, fluidity, and disidentification, both in his/her/their own presentation and in the presentation of his/her/their students.

### **A Queer(ed) Literacy Pedagogy is Expansive**

A queer(ed) literacy pedagogy continuously seeks to (re)imagine language beyond the tired binaries of our past: boy vs. girl, good student vs. bad student, “at risk” vs. “advanced,” literate vs. illiterate. Instead, the queer literacy pedagogue models linguistic innovation and truth-seeking in

a determination to push beyond the dangerously shallow, restrictive language of school. This determination manifests in a cautious unwillingness to categorize or jump to labelling as a way of sorting students (without knowing them more thoroughly); it manifests in a deep commitment to understanding human experience and expression as existing on a nuanced, expansive, and ever-shifting spectrum. It also means to remain constantly observant and reflexive of one's language use; as a new teacher, I was handed the language of schooling and teaching, language I knew well from my own student days: "good reader," "good student," "bad kid," "those kids." I took the mantle, and I wore it, carrying on the legacy of white supremacy and the myriad other oppressions that these labels veiled.

I remember sitting down with a mentor teacher, a few days before I began my first year of teaching and would meet my first group of students, to receive a "run down" on the rising 7<sup>th</sup> grade students that he had taught the year prior in their 6<sup>th</sup> grade. As we arrived at one of the names on the list, he said to me, "Oh, this one's a flat-liner." When I asked what he meant by that, he said, "You know, like when the heart monitor goes flat on someone—there's nothing going on in there with this kid. He just doesn't care. Don't expect much out of him." The teacher—a man I knew to be otherwise kind, caring, and attentive, proceeded to point out a number of other "flat-liners" on my rosters, many of them Black and Latinx children who had arrived at our magnet school with no general support or resources for transitioning into a very different school environment. He, a white man, pointed out "flat-liners," and I, a white person, took notes. I was new and young—what did I know? This must be the way of school. And sure enough, the first time one of my new "flat-liners" (a *child*) didn't turn in the first reading log of the year, my assessment was verified and complete: don't expect anything from him. I was complicit in this violent language of schooling and in the invisibility perpetuation of the violence of whiteness—the man who had used the term was not a monster, and neither was I; we had simply inherited the monstrous language of school, of white supremacy, and it was in our lack of disruption of this language that two good people and committed teachers perpetuated something horrible. *These* are the daily stories and choices that constitute the continuation of racism, oppression, and violence in our schools, much more so than the outrageous headlines about Betsy DeVos that fill our news feeds and make us feel comfortably separate from the toxicity of schooling. To disavow dehumanizing labels and stereotyping in educator talk is to realign and recommit oneself to the multitude of students whose lush, fluid identities are left not only wanting but wounded by the language of normative education. It's to realize that the "flat-liners" are only seen as "flat" through the angled and pernicious eyes of schooling and the predominantly white folks who administer it—that they, like their well-regarded peers, have beating hearts, too. I later discovered that the "flat-liner" who didn't turn in his reading log was the eldest child of a family of five children who were living in houselessness, moving from place to place each night to seek safety and shelter for themselves. My 12-year-old student was the primary caretaker in his family of younger siblings and his mother; his heart beat for those he kept alive each day.

### **A Queer(ed) Literacy Pedagogy Can Be a Silent One, Too**

Like the dangerous silent pedagogies to which I referred in the beginning of this paper, queer(ed) literacy pedagogies can be, perhaps paradoxically, powerfully silent, too; they're communicated in the layout and design of one's classroom, in the dress, style, and presentation of one's body, and woven into the text selections of one's syllabus and classroom library. They're

visible in gestures: maintaining eye contact, sitting or shifting to decenter one's physical authority in the room, opening one's arms and hands to the room and the ideas in it. We teach our students what's important less by the lessons we teach than in the way in which we live our lives. For years, I taught my students the importance of remaining in the closet by inhabiting it myself. I taught shame and apology by living it. When I am hiding, I teach my students that they must hide. What might I have taught them by openly resisting the binaries and constructs in which *I* felt trapped? If I had allowed my own gender expansiveness to come through in the clothing I wanted to wear, the stories I wanted to tell about my own valid life and loves, but felt I shouldn't—the kinds of stories that my straight colleagues often told without hesitation—the ones that bring life and warmth and humanity to the room? We teach our students what's allowed by what we say, but perhaps even more powerfully by what we don't.

I often wish that I could go back in time to that sterile Gifted classroom, to the boy born in the female's body, with eyes the color of longing, and tell him that there is space for people like him and me—that life is not even a little bit as black and white as people (my younger self included) make it out to be—that in between “boy” and “girl” and “good” and “bad” is a beautifully expansive horizon—an expanse wherein I believe most of us reside. I wish I'd had the right words, the true ones, ready for Grace Plott and for Andrew and for my principal and for the children who wrote me furtive, unsigned notes about their loneliness or their mom never coming home or their dreams they'd already long ago learned to defer. But then, it was only in my own disidentifying—in my own slow recognition that the available modes weren't sufficient—that I came to understand the importance of all the work that's to be done ahead and of how longing is very often a powerful form of hope (and pedagogy). Ahmed (2006) wrote, “queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world ‘slantwise’ allow other objects to come into view” (p. 107). My students looked at me slant, and in that sliver of a space, the light got in, bringing myself, my students, and the possibilities of our future(s) into view, lighting our way together into a queer(er), brighter future.

### Notes

1. All names included herein, other than the author's, are pseudonyms.

### References

- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Britzman, D. (1995). Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight! *Educational Theory*, 45(2), 151-165. doi:10.1111/J. 1741-5446.1995.00151.x.
- Bryson, M., & Castell, S. (1993). Queer pedagogy: Praxis makes im/perfect. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 18(3), 285-305. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1495388>.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Freire, P. (1968). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Seabury Press.

- hooks, b. (1989). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 36, 15-23.
- Lin, C. K. (2017). Changing the shape of the landscape: Sexual diversity frameworks and the promise of queer literacy pedagogy in the elementary classroom. *Bank Street Occasional Paper Series*, 37, Article 3. Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2017/iss37/3>
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches by Audre Lorde*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Luhmann, S. (1998). Queering/querying pedagogy? Or, pedagogy is a pretty queer thing. In W. Pinar, *Queer theory in education* (pp. 120-132). New York, NY: Routledge. (Original work published 1995)
- Miller, s. (2015). A queer literacy framework promoting (a)gender and (a)sexuality self-determination and justice. *English Journal*, 104(5), 37-44. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24484578>.
- Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Pinar, W. F. (2009). *Queer theory in education*. New York, NY: Routledge. (Original work published 1998)
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sumara, D., & Davis, B. (1999). Interrupting heteronormativity: Toward a queer curriculum theory. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 29(2), 191-208. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3185891>.
- Tuttle, C. (2018, October 15). National school climate survey released. *GLSEN*. Retrieved November 17, 2018, from <https://www.glsen.org/article/glsen-releases-new-national-school-climate-survey-report>
- Walsh, C. S. (2008). Unfixing knowledges: Queering the literacy curriculum. In P. Jeffrey (Ed.), *Research impacts: Proving or improving? AARE conference papers – 2007* (pp. 1-24). Melbourne, Australia: AARE.

