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READING QUEERLY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM: EXPLORING A GAY AND LESBIAN LITERATURE COURSE

A Dissertation Presented

By

KIRSTEN HELMER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2015

College of Education

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Reading Queerly in the High School Classroom:
Exploring a Gay and Lesbian Literature Course

A Dissertation Presented

By

KIRSTEN HELMER

Approved as to style and content by:

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Maria José Botelho, Chairperson

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College of Education

DEDICATION

To the women who made this work possible:

Wendy, my wonderful, loving and supportive wife and soulmate.

Sara, my inspiration, who opened her classroom and her work to me.

Linda, my dear friend, without whom I would not even be in the United States.

My Mutti, Ingetraud, who taught me about the strength of women, who gave me a love of learning, and showed me the value of being a teacher.

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This dissertation presents a story of a curriculum. It also presents my continuing journey of becoming a critically engaged education scholar. This dissertation story became only possible through the social and intellectual engagement with and support of the many people who accompanied me on this journey and contributed to the story. I would like to extend special acknowledgments and my deepest gratitude to the following people:

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To Florian, my wonderful son, who has inspired me to look not only to the needs and struggles of LGBTQ-identifying children and youth but also to those who are othered because they have LGBTQ parents. This dissertation is for you, as a COLAGER (People with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer parents) and as a straight ally, who is committed to social justice change. Thank you, for showing me that LGBTQ issues are important for everyone!

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To Wendy, my wonderful loving wife and soulmate, who changed my life and without whom I would not be who I am today and who did not just accompany me on this dissertation journey but was a huge part of it. I cannot count the hours that we spent together talking about all the things that make up this dissertation story. Many of the thoughts expressed in this narrative are really our thoughts. Always asking me, "What's your point?" and reminding me that this dissertation wants to inform the praxis of educators, challenged me to write in ways that are hopefully accessible. You read, edited and provided feedback on the complete dissertation in

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And lastly, to Kira, my kitty, for fueling me and being my constant companion during the lonely hours of writing.

ABSTRACT

READING QUEERLY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOM:
EXPLORING A GAY AND LESBIAN LITERATURE COURSE

MAY 2015

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The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how teaching an English literature curriculum centered on the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex) people constitutes a meaningful site for teaching and learning in a high school classroom. The dissertation offers insights on how the teaching of LGBTQI-themed texts in English language arts classes can be reframed by bridging the goals, practices and conceptual tools of queer theory to critical literacies teaching. The project follows principles of critical qualitative research and employs an ethnographic case study approach with the purpose of transforming educational praxis. The study was conducted in an elective English literature class titled Gay and Lesbian Literature available to juniors and seniors at a public high school in Western New England. During the spring trimester of the 2012-2013 School Year, I observed the class, conducted interviews with the teacher and the students, asked the students to complete two questionnaires, and collected material artifacts. Analysis followed a modified grounded theory approach as I coded the empirical materials using the software program MAXQDA and then generated themes and deeper understandings through the process of analytical writing. Drawing upon principles of critical education, queer pedagogy, and critical literacies, and the findings from the classroom study, I propose a theoretical framework and pedagogical approach for creating, implementing, and analyzing LGBTQI-expansive curricula

that provide students with opportunities to critically and queerly engage with LGBTQI-themed texts. I conceptualize queer literacies as a process of critical reading practices that include six interconnecting dimensions. I demonstrate how the dimensions of queer literacies were enacted through queer moments in the Gay and Lesbian Literature class by analyzing and featuring examples from the curriculum, classroom micro-interactions, and student projects. In the process, I show how the dimensions of queer literacies can promote pedagogical shifts that allow teachers and students to engage with norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes in new and productive ways, opening up spaces for new imaginaries for teaching issues around identity and social justice in schools. These research findings provide insights about queer praxis for high school classrooms.

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CHAPTER 1

SETTING OUT ON THE JOURNEY: WHAT'S QUEER GOT TO DO WITH IT?

> *This curriculum model exists for me and my school district and also for those who could make use of it. It will not remedy the dire situations of teachers and students who will continue to struggle and suffer in the face of harassment, discrimination, and fear. But it might offer hope to them, might pave the way for similar curricular reform.*[1]
>
> - Sara in the introduction to her curriculum (Barber-Just, p. 5)

This dissertation is about a Gay and Lesbian Literature class that has been created and implemented at one public high school in Western New England. But, how do I begin to write about Sara's important curriculum, a curriculum that has been taught for more than a decade and has had a tremendous impact on so many people, and yet, is still so unique? Does my journey into exploring this class begin when I first learned about the Gay and Lesbian Literature course through my son who gained access through a choice program to the high school at which Sara is teaching and has taught the class for more than 10 years? Or, does it begin much earlier? As I am writing this introduction nearing the completion of my dissertation, I realize that my journey began in fact much earlier, at a moment when I had my first encounter with a course that made the exploration of LGBT issues in education an official part of the curriculum. I still remember the moment vividly. It was during the first week of my first semester at UMass when I had just started my master's program in Bilingual/ESL/Multicultural Education. As we were reading the syllabus in my Introduction to Multicultural Education class, taught by Professor Stacie Tate, my eyes stopped when I noticed that the final project was a student-choice research project for which several options were provided, one of which was examining LGBT issues in education. My heart

---

[1] The decision to italicize the words of my participants as well as my personal critical narrative is deliberate. For me, the italicized font connotes more of a human presence. It also allows for the words of the research participants, including myself, to stick out vis-à-vis the interpretative narrative and the words of scholars cited.

began to beat faster. Here was a topic that was of such huge personal and professional interest to me – as a student, teacher-to-be and mother who identified as lesbian. It had not even occurred to me that something related so closely to my own identities would be considered part of multicultural education. Coming from Germany, I was used to complete silence around LGBT issues within schooling contexts. Not one of my teachers or classmates throughout my many years of schooling had ever openly identified as lesbian or gay. I don't remember reading a single text in schools that openly or even through subtext touched upon lesbian and gay experiences. And, the concept of institutionalized support for lesbian or gay students, for example, in the form of Gay-Straight Alliances or similar support groups at schools is something that is still unheard of in Germany. Yet, here in the United States where I was also for the first time openly confronted with hate directed at "people like me," educators were actively working to improve the schooling conditions for lesbian and gay students and they were teaching future teachers like me through the official curriculum within a teacher education program how to do that. I was blown away! What began that day when I as the student encountered an LGBT-inclusive curriculum in my teacher education class changed the educational path that I took and eventually led me to asking Sara if I could observe her class and make it part of my dissertation. It powerfully shows how incredibly impactful it is when students can deeply relate to the curriculum.

The same semester when I was introduced to a theory of multicultural education that encourages educators to move LGBT students and students with LGBT parent(s)/guardians out of the margins, I was strongly reminded that this is a task that is fraught with challenges, risks, and pushbacks. One day my older son Florian came home from school, visibly distraught, and told us that some controversy had erupted at his school – a small public school in a rural community in Western New England only minutes away from the school in which Sara's teaching takes place. The school nurse who also taught the Health and Sex Education classes had planned a role play for her class through which they were asked to explore how they could respond in supportive ways if a friend came out to them as lesbian or gay. One of the students felt uncomfortable with

this task and when she told her parents about it her father, who was also a member of the school board, contacted the principal and the superintendent and demanded that the activity be cancelled. His demand was granted! When Florian told me about this, I was livid. How could it be that one family could impose their beliefs on the curriculum? How could it be that because of one student's discomfort a whole group of students were deprived of an important learning opportunity? I decided to not remain silent. After consulting with the teacher, I contacted the principal and the superintendent, spent hours on the telephone trying to get them to allow the role play. To no avail. Again in accord with the teacher, I wrote a guest column for the local newspaper, titled "A Lesson Outside the Comfort Zone" reminding the readers that "Moving students out of their comfort zones is a very powerful approach to stimulating their critical thinking and moving them beyond what they have internalized all their lives" and that "Standing up and supporting the activity would have shown that tolerance and respect for diversity are not empty words, but ideas that are encouraged and taught"[2] *The power of one homophobic family prevailed. And worse, the following school year the school nurse was relieved of her teaching duties – I will never know if it was because of my raising public attention to what had occurred at my son's school.*

This critical episode is forever etched in my mind and it reminds me that the work Sara does at her school is still extraordinary. Even in the year 2014 and being located in a corner of the United States that proclaims to be progressive, this type of curriculum is the exception and not the rule. It is because the silence related to issues of sexuality and gender diversity is still incredibly pervasive in schooling that I am writing this dissertation, hoping that this project will provide an incentive and vision for other teachers and administrators to design and implement

---

[2] Originally published http://www.dailyhampshiregazette.com on Thursday, December 28, 2006, Opinion Column

similar curricula through which students encounter and engage with the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQI[3] *people.*

Statement of the Problem

Despite the dramatic socio-political shifts in the United States during the first decade of the 21st century which significantly increased the visibility and the legal rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, the pervasive and seemingly impenetrable silence concerning LGBT topics in most schools continues to persist (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; DePalma & Atkinson, 2008, 2009a-c). Even though many scholars and educators advocate for curriculum changes to make classrooms more inclusive of LGBT students and their concerns (e.g., Allan, 1999; Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Killoran & Pendleton Jiménez, 2007; Laskey & Beavis, 1996; Nieto & Bode, 2012), research shows that most students still do not have access to LGBT-related resources in their schools (Whelan, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012) and only a small percentage have ever been taught positive representations about LGBT people, history, or events in their schools (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Kosciw et al., 2012). However, students are exposed to media representations and discussions of LGBTQ issues outside of the schooling contexts all the time since these topics are front and center within the current social and political context. In addition, schools as micro-social environments are sites where social identities around gender and sexuality are developed, and normative notions of masculinity and femininity are practiced and actively produced or contested (Tharinger, 2008). Particularly, high schools are places where young people experience "the meanings of various social locations and non/dominant social positioning by class, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, gender, and race" (Bertram, Crowley, & Massey, 2009, p. 3). The silencing of the stories and

[3] LGBTQI stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual. My use of terminology related to sexuality, gender and sex will be further explored in a later part of this chapter.

experiences of LGBTQ people reinforces the homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and cissexism that are already routinely and performatively constituted in the everyday life of schools (Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013). In order to challenge and disrupt oppressive practices related to sexuality and gender, students should have opportunities to engage with LGBTQI topics in meaningful ways as part of their official school curriculum.

Research has also shown that teachers tend to shy away from addressing controversial topics in their classrooms with LGBT issues being among the most controversially discussed contemporary topics (Conoley, 2008). There is a pervasive thinking that children cannot understand complex social issues that adults are uncomfortable discussing and that these topics are inappropriate for classrooms (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). Many teachers cite parental surveillance grounded in the "cultural, religious and moral values of the parent community" as reasons for cautiousness and self-monitoring related to the use of LGBT-themed literary resources (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011, p. 487). Furthermore, research on teacher education has shown that many preservice teachers struggle when thinking about making teaching inclusive of LGBTQ people and issues (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Clark, 2010; Kissen, 2002; North, 2010). This cannot be a surprise, considering that teacher preparation programs rarely include content related to sexualities and gender diversity in their curriculums (Gorski et al., 2013; Jennings, 2014), and that the treatment of LGBTQ topics in multicultural education textbooks (Jennings & Macgillivray, 2011), in educational foundations textbooks (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008), or in multicultural texts used in education classes (Young & Middleton, 2002) lacks breadth, depth and complexity. Few teachers, therefore, can imagine or feel confident to design and implement a comprehensive curriculum around LGBTQ topics (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009a, 2009b; Gorski et al., 2013). For teachers who want to engage in anti-homophobia and counter-heteronormative work few resources or narratives exist to reference and this work is often seen as subversive, risky and

controversial within local school communities (Atkinson, DePalma, & No Outsiders Project, 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2008, 2009a-c).

Moreover, when teachers address LGBTQ topics in classrooms or use LGBTQ-themed texts and literature, they frequently frame such teaching in problematic terms which limits the possibilities for how students can engage with these topics and texts (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). Oftentimes, school-based readings of LGBT-themed texts are shaped by homophobia and heteronormativity (Epstein, 2000) because of the way teachers position their student readers and the texts in the classroom (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). For example, many teachers presume their students "to be straight and often aggressively homophobic," frequently allowing their students "to maintain a homophobic position in [the] classroom" (Clark & Blackburn, 2009, p. 27) while at the same time trying to "provoke empathy, understanding, and a sense of commonality across differences" for LGBTQ people instead of positioning their students as LGBTQ people or straight allies (p. 28). Moreover, the LGBTQ-themed texts chosen for readings in classrooms frequently present limited, or even troubling, representations of LGBTQ people, foregrounding their negative experiences (e.g., as they encounter bullying or battle AIDS). In other cases, the readings of LGBTQ-themed texts emphasize homophobia by embedding such readings within thematic units that focus on topics like fear or survival (see Clark & Blackburn, 2009 for a more detailed discussion of classroom studies). In other words, when including LGBTQ-themed texts and literature in the curriculum it not only matters what texts students read but also how students are positioned for reading these texts and what reading practices are employed.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

It matters how we think about and enact a curriculum that centers on norm-disruptive sexualities and genders. The teaching of sexualities and gender diversity in schools can be conceptualized through various theoretical frameworks and approaches that have different underlying practices, goals and conceptual tools, such as multicultural education, critical pedagogy, social justice education, queer pedagogy and antioppressive education. Particularly

connected to the teaching of sexualities and gender diversity in schools, it is recognized that "Queer theory offers educators a lens through which educators can transform their praxis" (Meyer, 2007, p. 15). But, how do we move from queer theory with all its complexities and inherent ambiguities to classroom practices? Or in other words, how do we develop queer praxis, particularly in K-12 classrooms? This problem has engaged a number of educational scholars and tensions around what it means to 'queer' curriculum and pedagogy around identity, sexuality, gender and social justice permeate the work of educational theorists and practitioners.

Drawing upon principles of critical theory concerned with the social construction of experience and the positive transformation of conditions of human oppression (Kincheloe, 2004) and feminist queer poststructuralist thinking which emphasizes the discursive, relational and performative production of identifications (Butler, 1990/2006, 2008; Meyer, 2010; Talburt, 2000; Youdell, 2005, 2006, 2009), it is my intention to open up spaces for new imaginaries for teaching issues around identity, norm-disruptive sexualities and genders, as well as social justice in schools (Atkinson et al., 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2008, 2009a-c).

More specifically, with this dissertation I hope to offer insights on how the teaching of LGBTQI topics in English language arts classes can be reframed by bridging the goals, practices and conceptual tools of queer theory to literacy teaching. Drawing on an ethnographic classroom study, this project explores how teaching an English literature curriculum centered on the voices and stories of LGBTQ people constitutes a meaningful site for learning and teaching in a high school English literature classroom. In the process, I investigate how the conceptual tools that queer theory offers can promote pedagogical shifts that have the potential to expand how teachers and students engage with sexualities and gender diversity in new and productive ways, opening up new lines of thinking and understanding.

Drawing on critical educational theories and poststructuralist queer theorizing as well as the empirical study that grounds this dissertation project, I propose a theoretical framework and pedagogical approach for creating, implementing and analyzing curricula that provide students

with opportunities to critically and queerly engage with LGBTQI-themed texts. I conceptualize *queer literacies* as a process of critical reading practices that include multiple and interconnecting dimensions for: (1) recognizing as legitimate bodies of knowledge and making the focus of inquiry the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQI people; (2) developing an understanding of the dynamics of oppression related to normative systems of regulation of sexuality, gender and sex (i.e., homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, cissexism, genderism, transphobia); (3) troubling knowledges in the form of commonsense, partial and distorted understandings of sexuality, sex and gender; (4) using the critical method of deconstruction for the literary and social analysis of discourse and text; (5) engaging with and producing counternarratives that open spaces for new imaginings about sexuality, gender and sex; and (6) entering and working through feelings of discomfort and crisis. Based on this framework, I explore how Sara and her students engaged with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum, highlighting how various dimensions of queer literacies surfaced, often unplanned and unintentionally, in the form of *queer moments* (Jackson, 2010; Sedgwick, 1993).

Framed by these purposes, there were two key questions that guided my project: (1) What emerges from a high school teacher's and her students' engagement with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum? (2) How were dimensions of a queer literacies approach discernible or not in this classroom? Connected to these questions are the following questions:

1. How do the teacher and her students read and make meaning of the LGBTQ-themed texts with which they engage as part of this English literature course?
2. How are issues around norm-disruptive sexualities and genders conceptualized, addressed, struggled with, and interpreted in this class?
3. How do the stories, histories and experiences of LGBTQ people provide opportunities to construct alternatives knowledges around norm-disruptive sexualities and genders?
4. How does the curriculum destabilize and denaturalize heteronormativity?

5. How does teaching LGBT-themed literature play out in a classroom where the majority of the students do not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer?

Setting the Context

The research for this project took place at a public regional high school in Western New England that offers the course Gay and Lesbian Literature as an elective English literature course for juniors and seniors. Sara[4], whose classroom I observed, is not only the main teacher for this course but she also designed the curriculum and has taught the course since its first implementation in 2002. As an 'out'[5] lesbian teacher and long-term advisor of the school's Gay-Straight Alliance, Sara performs important anti-homophobia and anti-heterosexism work at her school.

During the spring trimester of the 2012-2013 School Year, I observed three to four class sessions per week, conducted interviews with the teacher and the students, asked students to complete two questionnaires, and collected numerous artifacts, such as the teacher's master's thesis which serves as the curriculum guide, class handouts, readings and the work students produced in class as well as out of class.

Methodology

Since this study addresses social issues that are implicated within systems of oppression, such as heterosexism, cissexism and transphobia, the project follows some of the principles of critical qualitative research (Carspecken, 1996, 2001). As a critically positioned researcher, I purposefully adopt a research agenda with the purpose of transforming political and social realities (Creswell, 2007), viewing my dissertation study as a form of social activism (Carspecken, 1996).

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[4] Sara decided to have her real name used in publications. The names of the students mentioned in this dissertation are however pseudonyms to protect their identities.
[5] I define being "out" as having publicly disclosed one's sexual orientation/identification.

More specifically, for this study I employed an ethnographic case study approach (Creswell, 2007) that uses multiple and flexible techniques, such as observation, interviews, collection and analysis of material artifacts, and questionnaires to explore one particular classroom over the course of a school trimester. Such an approach enables particularity, providing for a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the classroom discourse and interactions and encouraging depth of analysis. In addition, I employed reflexivity as a methodological tool (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Pillow, 2003) in the form of a critical personal narrative (French, 2008) that is interwoven into the fabric of the larger dissertation narrative.

In this project, I further draw on a modified grounded theory approach to data analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This means that I used inductive processes that draw from the data to derive themes (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as well as deductive processes through which I considered the manifestations of dimensions of the theoretical framework of queer literacies – a framework that I developed in response to existing theories – in Sara's classroom. Viewing data analysis as ongoing and part of a cyclical or recursive research process, I used an emergent design which recognizes that processes of data analysis begin during data collection in the field (Emerson et al., 1995). Following St. Pierre (2011), I believe that "writing is analysis" and while I fully coded the transcripts of recorded classroom conversations and interviews, I acknowledge that much of my analysis developed from my writing.

Significance of the Study

Much of the literature on the teaching of norm-disruptive sexualities and genders in K-12 classrooms represents general calls by scholars and educators for curriculum changes or offers strategies that seek to make classrooms more inclusive of LGBTQ students and their concerns and needs (e.g., Allan, 1999; Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Killoran & Pendleton Jiménez, 2007; Spurlin, 2000). Additional lines of research have addressed a queering of curriculum and pedagogy from a highly theoretical perspective without providing clear examples of queer praxis

from actual classrooms that can inform the praxis of other educators (e.g., Kumashiro, 2000, 2002; Meiners & Quinn, 2012; Pinar, 1998; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007). Other scholars who have explored the queering of reading practices as pedagogical interventions against heteronormativity in schools and beyond have examined the queering of literacy practices mainly in out-of-school contexts (e.g., Blackburn, 2012; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Blackburn & Smith, 2010), focused on the elementary school level (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2008, 2009a-c), or explored a queering of literacy practices particularly through the use of children's literature (e.g., Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2014; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Threlkeld, 2014). However, there is a dearth of research that actually examines the implementation and practices of a literature curriculum focused on sexualities and gender diversity in secondary school contexts. This project builds on and extends the existing work of critical, and sometimes queer, education scholars through an exploration of how queer praxis was enacted in a high school literature class and illustrating how queer moments surfaced as students engaged with queer texts.

Furthermore, most of the research that looks at classroom practices around the teaching of LGBTQ topics are descriptive self-reports by the teachers carrying out this work and they describe classrooms where queer-themed texts and materials were used with only a single text or for a few class periods (e.g., Athanases, 1996; Hamilton, 1998; Hoffman, 1993; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003) or where teachers touched on gay/lesbian topics by addressing these tangentially when reading and discussing such writers as Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams or J. D. Salinger (Comment, 2009; Greenbaum, 1994). Even fewer reports exist that explore classrooms in which students engaged with lesbian/gay-themed texts or topics in a more sustained fashion over a longer time period (Blazar, 2009; Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009; Young, 2009, 2010). This project, on the other hand, presents the findings from an empirical study that examines a comprehensive trimester-long high school literature class that made the focus an inquiry of the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBT

people. To my knowledge, the Gay and Lesbian Literature course that is the focus of this project is the only course of its kind that is taught at a public high school in the United States.[6]

Moreover, this dissertation provides a theoretical framework in the form of a multidimensional *queer literacies* approach that can be used to reconceptualize and enhance the teaching of LGBTQI-themed literature in schools. It is my hope that educators interested in creating LGBTQI-inclusive curricula for social change will be able to draw on this queer literacies framework to engage their students in critical and transformative ways with such a curriculum. As such, I view the queer literacies approach as a tool to transform education praxis with the goal of challenging and disrupting oppressive practices related to homophobia, heterosexism, cissexism, and transphobia in schools and beyond.

Finally, within the K-12 educational context that is still overwhelmingly characterized by silence and marginalization related to positive representations of norm-disruptive sexualities and genders, a course like Gay and Lesbian Literature can perform important disruptive work that not only challenges the homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and cissexism so pervasive of schooling contexts but that also creates a counternarrative to those who construct such work as impossible within public school classrooms. This curriculum is an example of how queer praxis can be enacted in a high school classroom in which the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQ people become the focus of inquiry.

Conclusions

I believe in the transformational possibilities of education. Following critical education scholars, I believe that schools and teachers have an ethical responsibility to work actively against oppressive practices in schools and beyond. In addition, schools are places where societal

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[6] This claim is based on my research of the literature as well as conversations with colleagues in the field, for example, at professional conferences. In addition, a Google search of "Gay and Lesbian Literature course high school" only brings up Sara's course. All other similar courses are offered at the college level.

changes have a direct impact because they are in a unique social location: at the intersection of the public and private sphere where they can create a bridge between changes in the public sphere (e.g., expansion of LGBT rights and protections) and the necessary changes in the private sphere (e.g., personal beliefs and assumptions related to norm-disruptive sexualities and genders). I also believe in the power of literature and, therefore, in the power of literacy teaching to contribute to such transformation. The question then is how can forms of official knowledge that marginalize certain groups while privileging others be challenged and disrupted through alternative forms of knowledge that prioritize the stories, experiences, cultures and histories of the marginalized and silenced within a teaching framework that promotes critical consciousness, social justice, and equity?

Based on the notion that teaching is a political act (Freire, 2000/1970), critical education scholars acknowledge that teachers have the potential to function as agents for social change in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Oftentimes it is individual teachers who courageously take on controversial issues and engage with their students in what some consider dangerous conversations that inspire a movement against oppressive practices in schools and beyond. Teachers who practice critical multicultural and antioppressive education grounded in a commitment to social justice and envision their classrooms as sites of struggle and transformative action play a significant role in the movement towards a more just and equitable society. The development of innovative antioppressive[7] curricula is a form of teacher activism that contributes significantly to changes in the larger political landscape of education and to changes within local school cultures. This dissertation project tells the story of such a teacher – a teacher who took action through curriculum development as she created and implemented a pioneering English literature curriculum focused on the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

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[7] I am following Kevin Kumashiro (2002) in spelling antioppressive without a hyphen.

Explanation of Terminology

The use of language and terminology related to LGBTQ issues is greatly debated, always contested, rejected, expanded and therefore in flux and so certain terminology needs defining and my use of terminology needs clarification. In the following section, I highlight some of the key concepts and terminology that I use in writing about my project. First, I provide a discussion of the term *queer* and its roots to contextualize my use of it. Next, I explain my use of the term queer and phrases such as LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQI, and norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes. Finally, I define homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, cissexism, transgender phobia, and genderism as critical concepts that inform this project.

Queer/queer/to queer?

Any discussion of a queering of curriculum and pedagogy must begin by considering what we mean by queer. Indeed, queer is one of those "quite indefinable" words (Morrish & O'Mara, 2011, p. 982) that pushes new thinking and challenges commonsense understandings while retaining the echoes of old meanings. Linguistically speaking, the roots of the word "queer" stem from the Indo-European root 'twerkw' connected to the German quer (traverse), Latin torquere (to twist), and English athwart (Sedgwick, 1993, p. xii, cited by Carlin, 2011). Such crossing and twisting suggests a going against the grain. In the German language, for example, quer has been combined with other words to produce verbs such as querlegen, querstellen or querschießen to mean to resist something or to produce difficulties; a Querdenker is person who troubles dominant understandings or thinks outside of the box. Historically speaking, the word comes with an injurious history of having been used as a derogative to mean "strange," "not normal," "deviant," in particular, gay/lesbian/homosexual/not heterosexual. Politically speaking, the word was re-appropriated by radical gay activist groups like Queer Nation, ACT UP or Outrage through acts of empowerment and resignification (Butler, 1990/2006) in the wake of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. These groups practiced a "politics of provocation, one in which the limits of liberal tolerance [were] constantly pushed" (Epstein, 1994, p. 195) and asserted "in-

your-face difference, with an edge of defiant separatism" as they defied assimilation (Gamson, 1995, p. 395). Theoretically speaking, queer has political dimensions beyond the personal that arise out of the tension between the identity categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, and the concept of queer, which finds its expression in competing definitions and/or functions for queer.

Patrick Dilley[8] (1999), for example, in his article "Queer Theory: Under Construction" examines multiple definitions of queer, stating how "*queer* can be an adjective, a noun, or a verb" (p. 457). As a noun, it has become an identity category unto itself, signaling membership in a marginalized group. As an adjective, it has been increasingly used as a substitute term for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender to signal inclusive categorization of all whose sexuality and/or gender places them outside of society's idea of 'normal'. In this sense queer functions as a useful umbrella term for the sexually and gender norm-disruptive, signifying the connection between lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgender people. Others have criticized the taking-up of queer as "a new 'catch-all' name for LGBTQI subjects" (Youdell, 2010), emphasizing how it is queer's function to avoid "identity boundaries that expressions such as LGBTIQ otherwise impose" (Reece-Miller & Endo, 2010, p. 3). Consider the following quotation that exemplifies the dilemma that *queer/queerness* presents:

> I want to construct 'queer' as something other than 'lesbian,' 'gay,' or 'bisexual'; but I can't say that 'lesbian,' 'gay,' or 'bisexual' aren't also 'queer.' I would like to maintain the integrity of 'lesbian,' 'gay,' or 'bisexual' as concepts that have specific historical, cultural, and personal meanings; but I would also like 'lesbian,' 'gay,' or 'bisexual'

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[8] Following Maria José Botelho, I will cite the full name of the scholar(s) and artist(s) of each source in-text as they initially appear to convey a fuller identity of each author. In addition, in so doing, I hope to disrupt cultural expectations that assume an author is male if only referenced by the last name.

culture, history, theory, and politics to have some bearing on the articulation of queerness. (Doty, 1993, p. xvii, as cited by Morris, 1998, p. 275).

Yet others emphasize the productive tension of "the more expansive term queer" (Honeychurch, 1996), seeing queer both as an identity marker *and* a way of exposing and disrupting the reified binary identity categories of heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman or male/female as queer points to the fluidity, multiplicity and intersections of differences within sexuality and gender diversities (Honeychurch, 1996; Meiners, 1998).

As a verb, it has been adopted, particularly within academic circles, to stand for a particular theoretical and analytical position — an "interrogative and, frequently, interventionist position" (Holmes, 1994, as cited in Carlin, 2011, p. 56) that takes as its point of departure troubling supposedly 'natural' identity categories and binaries (Carlin, 2011). For Carlin (2011) the term *queer* "is frequently misunderstood to function as either a noun or as an identity category; however, it should more accurately be deployed as a verb (to queer), one that signifies action rather than individuals" (p. 56). To queer something then requires "an ontological shift comprehensively resistant in its exceptions to dominant normativity" (Honeychurch, 1996, p. 342) through the analysis of "the relationship between sexuality, power, gender, and conceptions of normal and deviant, insider and outsider" (Dilley, 1999, p. 458). Morris (1998), similarly, emphasizes the dynamic dimension of queer, understanding queer as "a constant becoming, a constant transformation" (p. 279). Morris notes, "I become queer in relation to my desires, fantasies, readings, reactings, writings, experiences" (p. 279). Becoming queer then is a political move that signifies the refusal to be normalized, categorized, and labeled and a process of constant transformation, questioning and troubling.

Queer, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQI, Norm-Disruptive Sexualities and Genders

In this dissertation, I use the term and concept of queer in multiple ways. First, I use queer in conjunction with LGBTQ to signal a relation of queer to LGBT that, on the one hand, connects all whose sexuality and/or gender places them outside of society's idea of 'normal'

(Dilley, 1999) but that is also, on the other hand, distinct since not all people who identify as LGBT also identify as queer and some adopt the identification of queer in deliberate resistance to binary categories. Consequently, I generally do not use queer as a stand-alone term to signal inclusive categorization of all norm-disruptive sexualities and genders. In other words, I prefer the term LGBTQ (as in LGBTQ students or LGBTQ-themed texts) instead of saying queer students or queer texts. In other instances, I employ queer to signal a particular theoretical and analytical position that troubles and redeploys key concepts such as identity and difference, normalcy, discourse, power, and knowledge that are central to exploring a curriculum focused on LGBTQI-themed texts. Here, I take queer as a point of departure for troubling that what is assumed to be normal, natural or commonsense, such as supposedly 'natural' identity categories and binaries, the concept of normal, or the notion of knowledge as truth. In that sense, queer signifies action rather than individuals (Carlin, 2011) in the form of processes of constant transformation, questioning and troubling.

Throughout this dissertation I variously use the acronyms LGBT, LGBTQ or LGBTQI. The acronym LGBT is frequently used as an umbrella term in discourses concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to signify a common experience of oppression among all people with non-heterosexual identities as well as gender-transgressive identities. Subsuming all these identities under one name has been critiqued for its failure to address the differences in experience among these social groups and for being essentializing and assimilationist. However, the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender continue to represent significant markers of self-identification through which many people express their diverse sexualities and genders (Griffin, Hahn D'Errico, Harro, & Schiff, 2007), and it is sometimes useful to emphasize the commonalities among these categories. However, at other times it may be more useful to emphasize the particularities of certain experiences or identifications (see my explanation above for my use of LGBTQ).

Generally, I use the acronym, term, or word used by the source in existing scholarship on which I am relying. However, I also use these acronyms to signal the movement from a focus on some specific identities (LGBT) to one that expands the terminology to those who resist classifications such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBTQ) to one that expands it further to those who are placed outside the norm related to sex differences (LGBTQI) where the 'I' stands for intersex. I do so because queering our understandings means to look at sexuality, gender and sex as constructs that are closely related, often conflated, and yet, very distinct from each other.

In addition, I employ the phrase *norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes* when wanting to emphasize how some sexualities, genders and sexes disrupt that what is constructed as the norm – heterosexual, female/male, feminine/masculine, girl/boy, woman/man – and I do not want to use the label of a category (LGBTQI). In other words, the term "norm-disruptive" represents a function and a relationship that is imbued with power rather than the identities or identifications that people adopt. By avoiding the mention of categories of identities/identifications this phrase also acknowledges the impossibility of an exhaustive representation of all diverse sexualities, genders and sexes, which we can see in the proliferation of letters added to the acronym (e.g., LGBPTTQQIIAA+[9]). The phrase further uses the plurals "sexualities, genders and sexes" to emphasize the multiplicity of identities and identifications, troubling the notion of binary thinking. The term "sexualities" refers to the multiplicity of ways in which individual's express their preferences and desires with respect to romantic partners and intimate relationships (sexual orientation) which impacts a person's sense of self (sexual identity) and how a person interacts with others (sexual behavior) (see Meyer, 2010, p.48). The term

[9] Any combination of letters attempting to represent all the identities in the queer community, this one represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, intergender, asexual, ally.

"sexes" recognizes the multiplicity of types of bodies beyond the dichotomy of ascribing one of two legal sex categories (female or male) upon birth. The term "genders" marks the multiplicity of complex relationships between our bodies and the social and cultural norms that shape our understandings and expressions of our selves.

Concepts Describing Institutionalized Privilege and Oppression Related to Sexuality, Gender and Sex

Homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, genderism, transphobia, and cissexism/cisgenderism are other terms that are central to this study because they seek to explain how sexuality, gender and sex are regulated and disciplined, and how systems of privilege and oppression work in relation to sexuality, gender and sex. I group the definitions of these concepts into two groups. Heterosexism, heteronormativity and homophobia, while intersecting with issues of gender, emphasize the systems that regulate sexuality whereas genderism, transphobia, and cissexism/cisgenderism more specifically address the regulation of gender, while also intersecting with issues of sexuality.

Heterosexism, heteronormativity, homophobia

Heterosexism describes "the system of advantage or privilege afforded to heterosexuals in institutional practices and policies and cultural norms" (Griffin et al., 2007, p. 196). Heterosexism is based on the notion of heteronormativity, which "refers to the normalization, naturalization, and universalization of practices of heterosexuality" (Filax, 2003, p. 148), while rendering all other sexual practices as nonexistent or deviant, unnatural, and abnormal. Demands of gender conformity contribute to heteronormativity in that it further privileges cisgender people who perform their gender adhering to social rules and regulations ascribed to their sex assigned at birth.

Homophobia is the irrational fear, hatred, or discomfort of lesbian and gay people or those who do not conform to dominant heterosexist norms "caused by internalizing negative societal perspectives on homosexuality" (Griffin et al, 2007, p. 196). Heterosexism and

homophobia are routinely and performatively constituted in the everyday life of schools and are strong instruments in the formation of dominant and acceptable cultural norms in regard to gender and sexuality. While homophobia emphasizes individual attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs, heterosexism and heteronormativity underscore societal structures and power inequities.

Genderism, transphobia, cissexism/cisgenderism

Genderism is a term that is rarely used in existing literature on LGBTQ topics in education; however, that I find important in including here because it emphasizes oppression based on the relation between sex and gender. Extending Darryl Hill's (2002) framework which describes genderism as "an ideology that reinforces the negative evaluation of gender non-conformity or an incongruence between sex and gender" in the form of transphobia and gender-bashing (p. 534), Liz Airton (2009) suggests that genderism is "the fearful anticipation of gender which structures gender binary socialization processes" and "a socially stratifying system of privilege and oppression ... based on one's adherence to highly localized rules of signification" (pp. 239/240). In other words, "genderism privileges the gender-normative" (p. 240), whereas those who do, practice and perform their gender in ways that are not congruent with their sex assigned at birth and the rules of gender considered the norm at a particular place and time experience marginalization and discrimination.

As these definitions show, genderism is the ideology that underlies transphobia and transgender oppression, which more explicitly refers to the oppression of "individuals who transgress the gender norms of the dominant culture and/or their specific culture, in ways that significantly impact their everyday life and/or are central to their understanding of themselves" (Catalano, McCarthy, & Shlasko, 2007, p. 219) with transphobia referring to the "fear or hatred of atypical gender expression or identity, or of people embodying or expressing an atypical gender identity" (Catalano et al., 2007, p. 221).

Cissexism, also sometimes referred to as cisgenderism, is a relatively new concept, closely related to genderism, that refers to the system of privilege and oppression which affords

advantages to cisgender people, or in other words, those whose "gender identity and expression aligns with social expectations for the sex assigned at birth" (Meyer, 2010, p. 141). In other words, for a cisgender person their internal sense of sex and gender match up with their assigned at birth sex and gender, or there is congruence between assigned sex and gender, the bodies that signify a particular sex and gender, and the individual's internal sense/identity related to sex and gender (a female-assigned and identified woman, or male-assigned and identified man). Cissexism/cisgenderism, then, are the "behaviors, policies, and social structures that disadvantage those who identify and/or express as transgender, while privileging those who identify and/or express as cisgender," while cisnormativity refers to "the assumption that cisgender is the only desirable and normal form of gender identity and expression" (Jennings, 2014, p. 401).

I include these concepts in this brief discussion of terminology because they point to the intersections of sexuality, gender and sex. When thinking about curricular reforms that address sexualities and gender diversity in schools, it is important to connect this work not only to homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity as regulatory systems of oppression related to norm-disruptive sexualities but also to genderism, transphobia and cissexism as regulatory systems of oppression related to gender.

Chapter Summary and Organization of Following Chapters

Chapter 1, "Setting out on the Journey: What's Queer Got to Do with It," was introduced by the beginning of my critical personal narrative through which I situate this project. It provided an introduction to my project, outlining the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, including the research questions that guided my inquiry, thoughts on the significance of the study, and a discussion of some of the key terms and terminology that inform this study.

The following chapters are organized as follows: In Chapter 2, "Exploring What's Out There," I provide a review of literature on LGBT topics in education to situate this dissertation study. In Chapter 3, "Conceptualizing the Teaching of Sexualities and Gender Diversity: Prevalent Frameworks," I consider multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and social justice

education as prevalent critical education theories that frame LGBTQ-inclusive work in schools, offering also a critique of some of the discourses attached to these frameworks. In Chapter 4, "Reconceptualizing the Teaching of LGBTQ Topics Through Queer Theoretical Perspectives," I examine queer pedagogy and Kevin Kumashiro's theory of antioppressive education as theoretical frameworks that complicate and extend critical education theories by offering conceptual and pedagogical tools that move the teaching of sexualities and gender diversity from an identity-based focus to one that troubles notions of identity, difference and normalcy. In Chapter 5, "Teaching LGBTQI-Expansive Literature: Towards Queer Literacies," I theorize what I term *queer literacies* as a multidimensional framework for designing, implementing and analyzing curricula through which students explore and critically engage with LGBTQI-expansive literature. In Chapter 6, "Contextualizing the Study," I outline the methodology for this project, providing information about the research design, the context of the study, the study participants and the employed procedures for the collection and analysis of the empirical materials of this study. Chapter 7, "Bursting Open The Hours: A Gay and Lesbian Literature Course," describes the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, outlining how the course was developed and implemented, what theoretical framework informed the course design, and providing an overview of the course content.

Chapters 8-11 examine Sara and her students' engagement with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum and provide illustrations from the classroom through which I explore manifestations of a queer literacies approach in this classroom in the form of queer moments. Chapter 8, "Deconstructing Subtext: Beginning to Read Queerly," looks at deconstructions of queer subtext in the novel *A Lost Lady*, the documentary *The Celluloid Closet*, and the students' media awareness project *Gay Notions*. Chapter 9, "Pushing the Boundaries: Explicit Encounters and Counternarratives," discusses several queer moments in the Gay and Lesbian Literature class as students learned about key concepts, confronted their own bias, and created their own counternarratives in the form of creative projects that took up aspects from the novel *Giovanni's*

Room. Chapter 10, “Troubling Normal: The Subversion of Female Sexuality and Gender,” explores how the reading of a queer, counter-hegemonic and irreverent text, such as the novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*, has the potential to disrupt usual reader expectations and to trouble established gender and sexuality norms and expectations, a potential that was not fully realized. Chapter 11, “Not Noticing Queerness: The Normalization of LGB Experiences,” examines how queerness disappeared in the reading of the novel *The Hours* with queer moments rarely surfacing in the classroom.

In Chapter 12, “Reflecting on the Class: Beyond a Literature Class,” I focus on students’ voices and how they reflected on the class, their learning in this class, and Sara’s teaching of the class. The final Chapter 13, “Queering the Curriculum: Reflecting on the Im/Possibilities,“ provides my final reflection on this project, considers pedagogical implications, and suggests areas for further research.

CHAPTER 2

EXPLORING WHAT'S OUT THERE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON LGBT TOPICS IN EDUCATION

A growing body of scholarly literature explores LGBT topics in education through different lenses and from different perspectives. In this chapter, I provide a broad overview of this literature, beginning with research that examines the experiences of LGBTQ students, followed by research that focuses on the perspectives and experiences of teachers in regards to LGBT topics in education. I then outline scholarly literature that focuses on K-12 classrooms, coming mostly from the field of literacy education, which includes non-empirical work and a few empirical studies that examine K-12 classrooms in which LGBT topics were integrated into the curriculum. I view this dissertation project as expanding the existing literature in three important ways. First, most of the classroom studies that explore LGBTQ-inclusive curricula are self-reports written by teachers about their own classrooms. This dissertation, on the other hand, presents an empirical approach to studying the curriculum content and the classroom interactions around a high school literature course focused on LGBT-themed literature. Second, with few exceptions, literature about LGBTQ-inclusive curricula represent add-on approaches in which teachers addressed such topics only with one text or only for a brief unit. This dissertation presents the findings from a full trimester course focused exclusively on teaching LGBT topics. Third, a lot of the literature that presents classroom studies focuses on lesbian and gay issues to the exclusion of bisexual and transgender issues. While the course studied for this dissertation is titled Gay and Lesbian Literature, my findings illustrate that issues concerning bisexuality and transgender lives were in fact part of the curriculum.

Experiences of LGBTQ Students

In order to understand the importance of integrating LGBTQ topics into school curricula, one must understand the experiences of students who identify themselves or are perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQQ) as well as of those students

who have LGBTQ-identifying parents or guardians. Numerous empirical studies shed light on the issue of anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment in schools with research establishing strong links between bullying and homophobia (e.g., Espelage & Swearer, 2008; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Poteat & Espelage, 2005). This research documents that students who either identify as or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning as well as students who have LGBTQ parents or guardians are at an especially high risk for bullying, harassment, and marginalization (Conoley, 2008; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2012; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009; Poteat, 2008; Reis, 1999; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). For example, the report *Hatred in the Hallways* (Bochenek, Brown, & Human Rights Watch, 2001) documents the extent and severity of anti-gay violence in schools. According to their research, "for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth, relentless verbal abuse and other forms of harassment are all part of the normal daily routine" (p. 33).

One of the most comprehensive reports is based on the biennial *National School Climate Survey* (*NSCS*) through which the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has documented the experiences and challenges of LGBT students in schools across the US in all 50 states since 1999. The survey explores "the prevalence of anti-LGBT language and victimization, the effect that these experiences have on LGBT students' achievement and well-being, and the utility of interventions in lessening the negative effects of a hostile school climate and promoting a positive educational experience" (Kosciw et al., 2012, p. 3) The *2011 National School Climate Survey* (Kosciw et al., 2012), is based on the responses of 8,584 students between the ages of 13 and 20, from grades 6 to 12, who represent more than 3,000 school districts from across the United States. While the *2011 NSCS* shows that the school climate for LGBT-identifying students has improved slightly over the past decade, anti-gay violence remains at alarming levels and schools continue to be hostile environments for LGBT students. Nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT students (84.9 %) responded that they heard "gay" used in a negative way (e.g., "that's so gay")

frequently or often at school, nearly two-thirds of the students heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting masculine or feminine enough), more than 8 out of 10 LGBT students (81.9 %) were verbally harassed, almost 40 % were physically harassed, and every fifth student (18.3 %) was physically assaulted.

This high incidence of victimization of LGBT students at schools has numerous negative effects. As a result of their research, Carol Goodenow, Laura Szalacha and Kim Westheimer (2006) come to the conclusion that, "Despite demographic and school similarities, sexual minority youth differed from their peers on all assessed risk experiences" (p. 578). The ongoing *Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011), other national reports (Kosciw et al., 2012; Reis, 1999), as well as several empirical studies (e.g., Blake, Ledsky, Hehman, Goodenow, Sawyer, & Hack, 2001; Mayberry, 2006; Gipson, 2002; Goodenow & et al., 2006; Tharinger, 2008; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008) suggest that students who experience homophobic bullying are more likely to feel unsafe or afraid at school, to skip class or whole days of school out of fear, change or drop out of school, and are more "at risk" for alcohol and substance abuse, suicide, depression, and sexual risk taking. Building on this research, other research is concerned with examining approaches and possible interventions to make the learning environment of schools safer for LGBT students (Peters, 2003). For example, the merit of inclusive safe school policies has been examined (e.g., Stader & Graca, 2007; Schneider & Owens, 2000; Van De Ven, 1996; Boulden, 1996; McCaskell, 2007; Nickson, 1996) and the value of Gay-Straight-Alliances has also been discussed by a number of authors (Kosciw et al., 2012; Lipkin, 1999; Macgillivray, 2007; Mayberry, 2013; Szalacha, 2004).

The *National School Climate Survey* is complemented by other studies GLSEN commissioned recently. In 2008, GLSEN released the first comprehensive report on LGBT families' experiences in education titled *Involved, Invisible, Ignored* (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008) based on a study that surveyed 588 gay or lesbian parents of school-age children and 154 middle

and high school students with parents who identify as lesbian or gay. It is very telling that LGBT parents and children who have LGBT parents experience the climate of schools similar to LGBT students. This study found that while LGBT parents are actively engaged in their children's education, they often feel excluded from school activities and not accepted by their school communities. Furthermore, their children are often harassed in school simply because of the makeup of their families. Similar to the experiences of LGBT-identifying students, children with LGBT parents experienced verbal harassment because of their parents' sexual identity (42 %), because of their own actual or perceived sexual orientation, or because of their gender expression (32 %). Nearly a quarter (23 %) of students felt unsafe at school due to others' negative attitudes toward people with LGBT parents. The study *The Principal's Perspective* (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008) in which 1,580 K-12 public school principals were surveyed, shows principals underestimate the problem of anti-gay violence. While a majority of secondary school principals reported that students at their schools experience harassment because of their gender expression (95 %) or because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation (92 %), few principals believe this to be a frequent occurrence (9-12 %). Other GLSEN reports examine elementary students' and teachers' experiences with biased remarks and bullying, and their attitudes about gender expression and family diversity[10]; the experiences of LGBT students of color[11]; the experiences of LGBT secondary students who attend schools in rural areas and small towns[12]; or the experiences of LGBT student athletes[13].

One of the ways to improve the school climate and provide an affirming learning environment for LGBT students is through positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events in the curriculum. The GLSEN (2011) research brief *Teaching Respect: LGBT-Inclusive*

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[10] http://glsen.org/playgroundsandprejudice
[11] http://glsen.org/learn/research/national/report-shared-differences
[12] http://glsen.org/ruralreport
[13] http://glsen.org/LGBTathletes

Curriculum and School Climate, which draws on the findings from the *2009 National School Climate Survey*, reports how attending a school with an LGBT-inclusive curriculum was related to a less-hostile school experience for LGBT students as well as increased feelings of connectedness to their school communities. LGBT students also reported feeling better connected with teachers who included LGBT-related content in their curriculum, finding them to be a source of support as evidenced by feeling more comfortable talking with these teachers about LGBT issues and speaking with their teachers about these issues more often. In addition, LGBT students reported hearing less homophobic remarks and experiencing increased support from their peers. The percentage of LGBT students who felt that their classmates were accepting of LGBT people nearly doubled from 37.3 % to 61.2 % when the school offered an LGBT-inclusive curriculum. However, despite these benefits, the vast majority of LGBT students do not have access to such a curriculum. In the *2011 NSCS*, the vast majority (86.6 %) of LGBT students reported they were never taught anything about LGBT people, history, or events in their classes, and only 11.7 % were exposed to positive representations of LGBT topics in their classes. Less than a fifth (17.9 %) reported that LGBT-related information was included in textbooks or other assigned class readings. Among students who did have access to an inclusive curriculum, History/Social Studies, English, and Health are the classes most often reported as inclusive (GLSEN, 2011).

Teachers and LGBT Topics

Ample literature exists that focuses on the perspectives and experiences of teachers in regards to LGBT topics in education. Some of this literature explores the experiences of lesbian, gay and transgender teachers' coming out to students and/or negotiating their sexual or gender identities in the classroom (e.g., DeJean, 2007; Donahue, 2007; Jennings, 1994; Kissen, 1996; Khayatt, 1999, 2007; Rofes, 2005), often in the form of personal testimonials (e.g., Macgillivray, 2008; Horvitz, 2011; Sapp, 2001). In much of this literature, disclosure of a teacher's lesbian, gay or transgender sexual or gender identity is privileged over non-disclosure. A teacher's coming out to students is viewed as beneficial because LGBT teachers who project a positive and healthy

image provide role models for LGBT youth (Horvitz, 2011; Jennings, 1994); teachers use their coming out as “an intentional pedagogical tool” to approach teaching about LGBT issues (Horvitz, 2011); and, coming out contributes to teachers feeling that they can be authentic in the classroom with their students (Sapp, 2001).

Within the professional literature on teacher education, several scholars examine challenges of integrating LGBT topics into teacher education programs (e.g., Clark, 2010; Kissen, 2002; Loutzenheimer, 2001; Szalacha, 2004), showing that while teaching about diversity in general is widespread and institutionalized, LGBT topics are rarely discussed within the context of this work. Research indicates that teacher preparation programs continue to exclude or minimize the voices and experiences of LGBT students, families, and educators, largely ignoring LGBT topics (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Jennings, 2007, 2014; Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Swartz, 2005). When LGBT topics are addressed in textbooks and curricula, they are frequently framed as problematic (Young & Middleton, 2002) and presented with limited breadth or depth (Jennings, 2007, 2014; Jennings & Macgillivray, 2011; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). For example, Allison Young and Michael Middleton (2002) and Ian Macgillivray & Todd Jennings (2008) report that representations of LGBT people in multicultural texts or educational foundations textbooks, used in teacher education classes, were either missing, very limited, or problematic. If LGBT issues were addressed, they were often presented within an anti-bullying/safe schools framework with a focus on the victimization of LGBT students who were presented as “at-risk” or “in crisis.” Moreover, heteronormativity was maintained as LGBT people were represented as being just like heterosexual people, which reinforces the notion of heterosexuality as the norm. In addition, texts mostly represented white LGBT people ignoring the racial and ethnic diversity within the LGBT community. Todd Jennings and Ian Macgillivray’s (2011) examination of the treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender topics in twelve popular multicultural education textbooks used in teacher preparation programs provides further evidence for this trend. Their content analysis showed that while all except one

of the analyzed textbooks included at least some LGBT content, how this content was covered was often limited, with five of the twelve texts devoting less than 1 % to LGBT topics. In addition, many texts relied on the victim narrative, representing LGBT people, and in particular LGBT-identifying students, mainly as victims of discrimination, bullying and harassment, and, therefore, as at-risk for school failure and self-destructive behavior, such as drug abuse or suicide. Missing from these texts were positive representations of LGBT people that show their contributions and achievements.

Other studies within the professional literature on LGBT issues in teacher education analyze pre-service teachers' understanding of the concepts of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity with a particular focus on the attitudes pre-service teachers hold about diversity and sexuality in general and the implementation of LGBT-inclusive curricula in particular. This research shows that many pre-service teachers struggle when thinking about making teaching inclusive of LGBT people and issues (Clark, 2010; North, 2010; Schall & Kaufman, 2003). For example, in a study Mollie Blackburn and JF Buckley (2005) conducted with a group of their pre-service teachers who read *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995) as part of their coursework, they found that, "some of [their] students were offended simply because they were assigned to read the book and appalled by the suggestion that such book is appropriate for middle school students" (p. 204). Even those pre-service teachers who were more accepting, "voiced an unwillingness to share the book with their classes more generally because of their fear of creating controversy" (p. 204).

Janine Schall and Gloria Kaufmann (2003) report that when they read picture books with lesbian and gay characters in Schall's undergraduate course on children's literature, the majority of the pre-service teachers "rejected the idea of children's reading these books in the classroom, saying that books with gay or lesbian characters were inappropriate because children couldn't deal with books 'like that'" (p. 36). However, Steven Athanases and Timothy Larrabee (2003) explored how nearly 100 pre-service teachers responded when taught about LGBT topics in their

program, finding that the majority of their students had a positive stance towards learning about LGBT people and found it meaningful to learn about appropriate terminology and historical perspectives on LGBT culture.

Caroline Clark (2010) investigated the attitudes her master's level pre-service teachers held toward working with LGBTQ people in general, and toward working as allies on behalf of LGBTQ students in schools in particular. Clark found that while there was a "strong personal acceptance of homosexuality" and a strong "anti-homophobic" stance among these pre-service teachers, they nevertheless "in effect [] felt unable or unwilling to do *ally*-work" (p. 706). As Clark (2010) points out, "US teachers enter schools often misinformed and ill prepared to support LGBTQ students – let alone, to work for social change" (p. 704) because even though diversity education within teacher education programs is widespread, it rarely includes in-depth discussions of issues around homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. Few teachers can imagine or feel confident to design and implement a comprehensive curriculum around LGBT topics (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009a-c; Gorski et al., 2013) or feel that they have the knowledge, skills, or power to effectively challenge homophobia, heterosexism, and sexism in their classrooms (Duke & McCarthy, 2009). For teachers who want to engage in anti-homophobia and counter-heteronormative work few resources or narratives exist to reference and this work is often seen as subversive, risky and controversial within local school communities (Atkinson et al., 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009a-c).

LGBT Topics in K-12 Classrooms

Another area of scholarly literature on LGBT topics in education focuses on K-12 classrooms. Much of this literature represents general calls by scholars and educators for curriculum changes that make classrooms more inclusive of LGBT students and their concerns and needs (e.g., Allan, 1999; Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Boulden, 1996, Killoran & Pendleton Jiménez, 2007; Mayberry, 2006; Reese, 1998; Schneider & Owens, 2000). Christina Allan (1999), for example, asserts that teachers "must be as dedicated to embracing students whose

home culture involves homosexuality or bisexuality as they are to embracing students whose home culture involves linguistic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds that are different from those of the dominant, usually homogeneous (and heterosexual) classroom culture" (p. 97). Blackburn and Buckley (2005) argue that teachers, "need to discuss the awkward, the different, and the new so that all students get opportunities to learn about the range of gender and sexual identities that constitute everyone's world" (p. 204).

While there is quite a bit of scholarly literature that explores the theoretical integration of LGBT topics and LGBT-themed texts into curricula or that provides strategies to make classrooms and curricula more LGBT-inclusive, very few studies exist that actually examine the practice of implementation of an LGBT-inclusive curriculum in K-12 classrooms. One of the reasons is surely that LGBT topics in K-12 curricula continue to be silenced and only few teachers actually do this work and report about it. In a study by Blackburn and Buckley (2005), of the 212 high schools that responded to their survey, only 18 (or 8.5 %) reported using texts, films, or other materials that address same-sex desire in their English language arts curriculum. However, only six of these schools used materials that "decidedly foregrounds same-sex desire," while the others reported only touching on the topic tangentially (p. 205). In addition, many of the texts and materials that teachers used presented "very limited, and often troubling, views of LGBTQ people," (p. 205) often focusing on a victim narrative in the context of discussing anti-gay violence (e.g., using the film *The Laramie Project*) or HIV/AIDS (e.g., showing the movie *Philadelphia).* The most disappointing finding of Blackburn and Buckley's survey is that the majority of public U.S. high schools do not use lesbian, gay, bisexual- themed texts, films, or other materials *at all* in their English language arts curriculum, sometimes because school or state policies do not allow positive representations of other sexualities than heterosexuality, and in other cases, schools stated that they "simply did not have materials" or school officials pointed to conservative community attitudes, asserting that they would not use such materials under any circumstances (p. 205).

K-12 Classrooms Studies: Integration of LGBT topics in English Language Arts

The few studies that actually examine K-12 classrooms in which LGBT topics were integrated into the curriculum are descriptive self-reports by the teachers carrying out this work and they mostly describe classrooms where LGBT-themed texts and materials were used with only a single text or for a few class periods (e.g., Athanases, 1996; Hamilton, 1998; Hoffman, 1993; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003) or where teachers touched on gay/lesbian topics by addressing these tangentially when reading and discussing such writers as Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams or J. D. Salinger (Comment, 2009; Greenbaum, 1994). Even fewer reports exist that explore classrooms in which students engaged with lesbian/gay-themed texts or topics in a more sustained fashion over a longer time period (Blazar, 2009; Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009; Young, 2009, 2010).

One of the earliest examples about bringing lesbian and gay literature into a high school classroom is an essay by Martin Hoffman (1993), written in response to self-censorship by teachers, about his experiences teaching Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy,* a pioneering theater play that represents gay Arnold, his lovers, and his adopted son. Hoffmann initially read the play with a group of pre-service teachers in a professional-semester course, most of whom could not imagine teaching such a text in a public high school classroom despite their conviction that students should be introduced to lesbian and gay issues and literature. In response to this, Hoffman decided to go on a "risk-taking adventure" (p. 55) and use this play with the students in his high school creative writing course. Despite his previous experiences that "if an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect exists between me and my students, they will find it in their interest to protect all of us from outside attacks in controversial situations" (p. 56), Hoffman anticipated resistance describing his students as "It is hard to imagine a more homophobic group" (p. 56). When introducing the book, he therefore told his students that "the material might shock or upset them in places," reassuring them that they could opt out of this assignment if they or their parents found it too troubling (p. 56). Hoffman reports his surprise that the response journals that his

students wrote "were full of indications that reading the play had changed students' perceptions and attitudes" (p. 57) with students writing about how they were coming away with a better understanding and an increased acceptance of same-sex relationships and how they felt more compassionate towards gay people. Hoffman also reports his surprise that he did not meet backlash from the side of the parents but that some parents instead actively supported his use of *Torch Song* with his class.

Vicky Greenbaum (1994) wrote about her experiences with teaching homoerotic subtexts in literature to the high school students in her English classes in both public and private schools. Teaching the novel *The Color Purple* during a summer literature class allowed her students to explore their feelings about lesbianism and develop empathy for the lesbian character in the novel. In another classroom, Greenbaum used a group of short stories that featured lesbian and gay characters within the context of reading and thinking about diverse families. Greenbaum recalls as her "most memorable teaching experiment" (p. 73) her teaching of the Tennessee William's novel *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to summer school students as part of an independent school literature class. Greenbaum reports how the results of her teaching were positive throughout as students' comfort levels with talking about homosexuality increased and students moved from initial expressions of disgust (e.g., saying "eeew") to acceptance. Moreover, she points out how important it is for lesbian and gay students to read literature with lesbian or gay characters as she recounts her experiences with Steven, a closeted gay young man in one of her classes.

One of the very few empirical studies that look at the effects of using gay-themed texts on students' attitudes towards lesbians and gays is a descriptive qualitative study that was conducted by Steven Athanases in 1996. Athanases explored how students responded to a lesson on gay and lesbian experiences and homophobia in the context of an ethnic literature curriculum. The goal of this mini-unit, which covered three class periods, was to teach sensitivity to diversity and to work against stereotype formation through the reading of a text that dealt with gay

experiences. Participants of the study were 21 students in a multiethnic 10th grade English class who were also part of a larger year-long ethnography conducted by the Athanases. Data were collected through field notes of observations by the author of the study, audiotapes and videotapes of class discussions, audio-taped interviews with the teacher, writing samples, a student survey, and audio-taped student interviews (administered at the end of the unit). In addition, a retrospective survey and a group discussion interview with former students of the class were conducted two years after teaching this lesson. In his analysis, Athanases reports the following four themes that emerged out of the data: (1) students moved beyond myths of homosexuality and broke stereotypes, (2) students developed empathy for lesbians and gays, (3) students started to think about equality and justice for gays and lesbians, and (4) students identified with the experiences of lesbians and gays. The follow-up survey also showed that the effects of the lesson lasted beyond the unit in changing perceptions of and attitudes towards lesbians and gays in positive ways. While the scope of Athanases' study is limited, it provides evidence that a teacher can successfully integrate a gay-themed lesson into a high school curriculum and that students' attitudes towards lesbian and gay people can positively change after reading a gay-themed text.

In another descriptive narrative, Greg Hamilton (1998) reflects on his experiences reading the young adult novel *Jack* (Homes, 1987) with a group of eleven middle school students, ages 11 to 14. Drawing on the text itself, narratives from class discussions, and an analysis of his own teaching and learning, Hamilton describes several classroom scenarios around the themes of secret, divorce, and telling the truth that the readings and discussions brought up. Hamilton shows how students' reactions to the story created a dialogic continuum representing their varying stances towards the issues around homosexuality that the novel brought up, which allowed students to "create[] a myriad of superhighways where acceptance and denial, understanding and criticism, and love and hate existed together" (p. 37). Hamilton concludes that middle schoolers want to challenge and want to be challenged as "teachers question student assumptions,

responses, and opinions" while also creating safe spaces "for letting students question each other" (p.37).

Allen Carey-Webb (2001) describes the experiences of Tisha Pankop who experimented with teaching low-track high school sophomores in an ethnically mixed inner-city high school *Am I Blue?*, the title story of a collection of short stories by well-known young adult authors that address the theme of lesbian and gay experiences, during a thematic unit on fear. After a read-aloud of the story, the class engaged in a respectful discussion around the fears related to homosexuality and the fears a young lesbian or gay person might face. Most importantly, Pankop emphasizes how reading this story has meant a lot to her lesbian/gay students noticing "a dramatic change for the better in their whole experience in school;" she reports how even students in her other classes who heard about the story asked to borrow copies of the book (p. 62).

Schall and Kauffmann (2003) describe how they engaged with the students in Kauffmann's fourth/fifth grade multi-age class in a one-day exploration of picture books with lesbian and gay characters. Schall had read these books with the pre-service teachers in the undergraduate course on children's literature that she was teaching, receiving mostly negative responses from her undergraduate students who rejected the idea of reading these books in elementary classrooms. Framed as an "information-gathering engagement," the purpose of their study was to identify "the current perspectives and attitudes of children that would help to develop future curriculum" (p. 38). The exploration of the books occurred after the elementary school class had discussed issues around diversity and difference and themes of belonging and building community. Kauffmann connected the reading of the books to the theme of survival by embedding it within discussion of the name-calling that students experienced at school. After a read aloud of the picture book *King and King* (De Haan & Nijland, 2000) in which the prince marries the brother of one of the princesses at the end of the story, and a following whole class discussion, the children were able to choose from a variety of other picture books with lesbian and gay characters, forming literature discussion circles around the books they chose to read. In

order to avoid controversy and troubling the children, students were allowed to opt out of the literature circles. Schall and Kaufmann report that while initially about half of the class felt bothered by reading *King and King,* they ended up being impressed with "how seriously children took this invitation" to read these books (p. 39). They also describe how the children voiced that they wanted to know the truth and understand the diversity of families and wished that they were told about the reality of lesbian and gay people. Schall and Kauffmann write, "It's unfortunate that so many adults feel that homosexuality is something that needs to be 'handled,' especially when children like these are so curious about the subject" (p. 41), and they emphasize how reading books with lesbian and gay characters can fit into existing curricula as they can be "naturally integrated into themes of family, identity, stereotyping, survival, relationships, a sense of belonging, or discrimination" (p. 43). Unfortunately, since the discussion of the books took place only on one single day near the end of the school year, the authors were not able to document in depth and conduct ongoing observations of changes in students' thoughts and attitudes.

Nicole Sieben and Laraine Wallowitz (2009) describe the integration of LGBT topics into their teaching both at the high school and the college level. While Wallowitz created a course entitled Gender and Sexuality in Education for pre-service teachers, which was grounded in critical pedagogy and drew on queer theory (instead of anti-homophobia education), Sieben describes how she taught such controversial topics as feminism, racism, heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia to her high school students, drawing on her experiences as a student in Wallowitz' seminar. Sieben reports how she infused queer issues into the curriculum throughout the year, engaging her students in "investigating the construction, production, and maintenance of what is considered normative" and "challeng[ing] the status quo" in regards to sexual and gender differences, explicitly linking the discussion to issues of oppression (p. 46). Sieben notes the success of her approach, stating that students appreciated the open discussions of these controversial topics, sharing what they learned with other classes and with their parents.

Some of her students recognized changes in themselves, and others became more engaged in school activities that raise awareness about LGBT issues (e.g., participation in the school's Diversity Day). Moreover, instead of receiving parental complaints, several parents called her "to support my approach to teaching queer theory because I was able to get their teenagers to think outside of the proverbial box" (p. 48). As Sieben points out, teachers should not always assume students or parents to be close-minded in regards to a LGBT curriculum, but "we could also assume that other parents (and administrators) can be our allies and support us" (p. 49).

David Blazar (2009) describes how he used performance pedagogy around the reading of Tony Kushner's (1993) Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* – a play that explores the AIDS epidemic and its impact on the gay community in the 1980s – with his senior English class. Over the period of two months, his class read parts one and two of the play, watched scenes from the 2003 HBO film, and utilized drama, allowing students to not only talk about but experience how sexuality and gender are performatively produced. Teaching a gay-themed text to a class of primarily Dominican students, Blazar notes the gaps between the text and his students' experiences and prior knowledge, pointing out how they not only had to wrestle with their own homophobia, often grounded in their religious beliefs, but also with their lack of knowledge about AIDS and the politics of the 1980s. Blazar, therefore, used three approaches to connect his students with the text and make it accessible for them: uncovering and analyzing the universal themes of the play (i.e., love, abandonment, truth, morality), having open conversations about sexuality and AIDS following a safe-space dialogue model, and building relationships with the characters by asking each student to follow and portray a character of their choice from the play. An important insight that Blazar gained from teaching this unit concerns students' curiosity and willingness to discuss issues of "gayness" which initially caused discomfort or resistance. He writes, "While students came with real opinions on gayness, digging deeper into their belief systems exposed an unexpected openness to homosexuality" (p. 80). Some students even became vocal advocates for the "normalcy of homosexuality" (p. 80). Blazar

further points out that this unit was the only space in his school where students could safely express and explore their feelings and opinions about homosexuality and that they eagerly took up this opportunity. In addition, his students demonstrated a willingness to step outside their comfort zones by choosing characters with genders and sexual orientations different from their own during read-alouds of the play when they "convers[ed] with the play through the voices of characters" or when they "interacted with each other as their characters" during the enactments of improvisational scenes (p. 82). Even those students who were distant and continued to hold problematic beliefs related to same-sex sexuality participated; thus, stepping outside their usual frames of thinking, even if only for a moment.

Sara Lewis-Bernstein Young (2009) explores the ways in which students in a year-long high school humanities class on contemporary topics engaged with issues around homophobia and heterosexual privilege within a framework of human rights and social justice. Young argues that LGBT topics are a contemporary issue related to the students' lives since issues such as same-sex marriage and hate crimes directed against gays and transgender people are in the news. In addition, she points out that there always are at least some students with family members or friends that identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Using a critical inquiry approach grounded in theories of critical pedagogy and critical literacies, Young describes how her grade 9 to 12 students became aware of, questioned and disrupted heterosexist and homophobic practices and behaviors in their school. The initial problematizing of the use of the phrase "that's so gay" led to an analysis of how language perpetuates oppression as it privileges some and marginalizes others. Young used a human rights perspective to frame teaching LGBT issues. She engaged her students in reflections on how heterosexual privilege – the unearned privileges granted to people based on their heterosexuality – works and how they themselves were implicated in perpetuating or colluding with heterosexism and heteronormativity. Young specifically connected the work that she did with her students to questions of power asking them to examine "the ways that homophobia in their school connects to how heterosexism operates on linguistic, cultural, and

institutional levels" (p. 111). She engaged her class in research on homophobia, heterosexism, sexual orientation, and gay rights, drawing on research done by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), and arranged for an LGBT panel of guest speakers to share their personal stories. But Young and her class took another important step towards taking action for social change. As students became aware of LGBT issues and the silence around them in their school, they decided to start a Gay Straight Alliance and to organize participation in the annual Day of Silence (www.dayofsilence.org), an event where students remain silent for one day in solidarity with LGBT youth who are silenced on a regular basis. Young describes how her students encountered and learned to work with the resistance their projects met from the side of some faculty and students as well as from the School Committee, finally negotiating a Day of Solidarity with the school community.

Young's work demonstrates three important findings. First, students have a high interest in engaging with LGBT topics because the school environment is saturated with homophobia and embedded in heterosexist and heteronormative practices and behaviors. Second, it is possible to develop a curriculum around LGBT topics even within a conservative school community if conflict is not avoided and resistance is engaged and negotiated. Third, engaging students in an inquiry-based curriculum around LGBT topics grounded in theories of critical pedagogy and critical literacies, allows students to develop skills for becoming democratic citizens that are critically conscious of the important issues of our times and willing to engage in social action and transformation towards social justice. Interestingly, Young is an English teacher, published her work in the *English Journal*, and used critical literacy as a theoretical framework even though her work was carried out in a social studies course.

Finally, a rare example of a study that considers the teaching of transgender issues comes out of the work of Caitlin Ryan, Jasmine Patraw and Maree Bednar (2013)[14]. Their study describes how an urban public school teacher included lessons about gender-nonconforming and transgender people in her curriculum through the use of children's literature and film. Over the course of two school years, the teacher involved her third and fourth grade students in increasingly complex gender work through which her students learned to understand and talk about a wide range of experiences and issues related to gender, gender diversity, gender non-conformity, and what it means to be transgender. In the process, these elementary school children "learned how to question the restrictive social systems around them and think more inclusively about gender expression and identity" (p. 86).

Organized around thematically connected lessons focused on one text or a group of texts, which the authors define as an *episode*, this study describes how the students engaged in increasingly more complex ways with the curriculum. Beginning with initial discussions of "unwritten gender rules" that developed out of their reading of Jaqueline Woodson's (2001) picture book *The Other Side*, the children began to raise questions about gender categories, challenging and expanding their own understandings of gendered behavior. During the second episode, the teacher and her class began to develop the students' critical lens around injustices, expanding the initial talk about bullying to ideas of differences, marginalization, exclusion and oppression. Teacher and students together defined key terms (i.e., homophobia, sexism, classism, xenophobia) and explored intersections of different kinds of oppression. During the third episode, the teacher did a read-aloud of the James Howe (2005) novel *Totally Joe* which features an

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[14] According to their review of the literature, no studies examine the outcomes of incorporating transgender people and gender nonconformity into an elementary school classroom or what such teaching might actually look like (p. 86). However, in a recent publication in Rethinking Schools (Winter 2013-14) Valdine Ciwko describes how she opened up a discussion about transgender people in her 5th grade classroom that was initiated by her students when one child asked, "Can you change from a boy to a girl?"

openly gay, gender-nonconforming middle school student. Positioning her students as "mature enough" to handle conversations about controversial topics (p. 96), students began to explore the differences between gender-nonconformity and identifying as transgender. While students struggled with these complexities and needed support in finding the appropriate language, the authors found that the children were "highly motivated to do so" because this lesson allowed them "to understand their lived experiences and information from popular culture" (p. 96). During the final fourth episode, the class continued to compare and contrast being transgender with gender non-conformity as they watched a video clip of a family with a gender-nonconforming child and read the book *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis & DeSimone, 2009), which the mother had written about her son, in conjunction with the book *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert & Ray, 2008) about a transgender child. Students began to understand the importance of self-identification and increasingly paid "attention to the complexities of pronouns and other language to mark the distinctions between gender identity and gender expression" (p. 100).

Overall, these episodes formed a powerful curriculum through which elementary school students learned to develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the complexities of gender. As Ryan, Patraw and Bednar (2013) conclude, "children are, in fact, quite ready to learn about gender diversity...with carefully scaffolded lessons over time, gender diversity...can be taught appropriately and effectively in elementary schools" (p. 101).

All of these studies illustrate that it is possible to do work around sexualities and gender diversity in schools; however, it is necessary to consider how such work is carried out. In the final section of this chapter, I now turn to the *No Outsiders* project as an illuminating example of a comprehensive endeavor to challenge homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity in schools. It is a project that goes well beyond the walls of one classroom and what makes it particularly interesting for me is that it is framed explicitly by various theories, including queer theory, that also inform my work.

Learning from the *No Outsiders* Project

A participatory action research (PAR) project (September 2006 to March 2009), *No Outsiders* was designed for the purpose of addressing equality in relation to sexual orientation and gender expression in primary schools in Great Britain, involving a team of 26 teacher-researchers working in 17 sites, seven university-based researchers and a diversity trainer. Drawing on feminist, poststructuralist and queer theories, and the principles of critical pedagogy, this praxis-oriented project focused on understanding and challenging homophobia as well as interrogating and interrupting the operation of heteronormativity within primary school contexts. It further worked towards the development of effective teaching approaches that would accomplish this and provided teacher professional development through action and reflection. The project participants were specifically interested in finding ways to move beyond an anti-homophobic discourse of tolerance towards generating new and positive meanings around "queer" issues by disrupting and reinscribing heteronormative discourses and silences. The project was based on the following four key principles, a) participation in the project was voluntary and teacher-centered; b) the project met government requirements for safe schools; c) the project offered sustained collective collegial support and allowed dissensus within the project; and d) the project was informed by expertise and supplied with resources. Project schools received a collection of 25 children's books featuring lesbian, gay and gender-nonconforming characters as well as video resources and posters. In addition, teacher participants and researchers participated in an online blog on the project's website to engage with each other in dialogue and reflection about classroom practices and theoretical issues.

Project members have written extensively about this project in a number of publications, including the following: *Undoing Homophobia in Primary Schools* (Atkinson et al., 2010), a practice-focused book which draws on the project teacher's classroom work; *Invisible Boundaries: Addressing Sexualities Equality in Children's Worlds* (DePalma & Atkinson, 2008), an edited collection of narratives that explore how schools police and contest boundaries around

sex-gender-sexuality; *Interrogating Heteronormativity in Primary Schools* (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009a), an academic analysis of the tensions and challenges that the project presented in particular related to the intersections between queer theory and practice and the possibilities of a queer pedagogy; as well as several articles (e.g., Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008; Atkinson & DePalma, 2008, 2009; Cullen & Sandy, 2009; DePalma & Atkinson, 2006, 2007, 2009b, 2009c, 2010). These publications offer a view into the tensions, contradictions and challenges that arise when practitioners try to implement queer praxis in their classrooms and schools.

Of specific interest is the wide transformational element of this initiative that emerged through the high impact the project had on many levels. Renée DePalma and Elizabeth Atkinson (2009b) found that "putting [the key] principles into practice has opened the door to significant changes in participating teacher-researchers' practice and, often, in the practice of their colleagues, through actions at both macro- and micro-level" (p. 842). The teacher-researchers not only worked with their students in the classroom but they also engaged in school policy development, worked with school councils, acted as mentors to other schools and shared their expertise at regional and national events (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009a). Participants tried to integrate LGBT topics within and across curricula as they initiated book exhibitions, workshops, class assemblies and panels and shared their resources and ideas with colleagues through their schools as well as with their families and friends. On the classroom level, the participating teachers not only used gay-affirmative children's books that were provided by the team but some participants developed cross-curricular inclusion projects, using art, drama, poetry and music through which they tried to actively challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity (DePalma & Atkinson, 2008).

However, tensions around what it meant to 'queer' curriculum and pedagogy around identity, sexuality and social justice permeated the project. DePalma and Atkinson (2009b) note that "one of the central tensions in the project relates to the distinction between anti-homophobia

and counter-heteronormative work" (p. 838), where anti-homophobia work means educating for and about the other based on a discourse of tolerance, while counter-heteronormative work goes beyond this by challenging and disrupting the normalizing discourse of heteronormativity. DePalma and Atkinson point to the difficulties of such counter-heteronormative work when they state,

> Whether tolerant silences and invisibilities can best be disrupted by highlighting lesbian and gay histories and attacking hetero-gender stereotypes or by troubling the binaries implicit in the very categories of lesbian/gay, boy/girl is a question that remains alive and unresolvable in our research" (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009b, p. 839).

In the educative practices they explored, this tension played out in several ways. While some teachers were able to "queer" their practices, for example, by performing "queer" through the enactment of a lesbian Cinderella within a unit on alternative fairytales (Cullen & Sandy, 2009), for many of the teachers "these disruptions occur outside curriculum contexts" (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009b, p. 847). For example, through the process of coming out to their students and claiming their right to have their partnerships recognized with the public sphere of the school, these teachers insisted that their sexuality become normalized; thus, disrupting heteronormative discourses. On the other hand, the silence around sexualities in schools is such a powerful force that even just having the books in the classroom or throughout the school was characterized by participating teachers as "queer acts." As DePalma and Atkinson (2009b) pointed out, "Simply opening the box containing the project books in the staff room becomes a risky political act" because it "pushes the boundaries a little in terms of what is allowed in the classroom and what isn't" (Laura, cited on p. 850).

On the participant level, the struggles around what educational approaches to take to advance sexualities equality became even more evident in the different perspectives participants took and the discourses they drew on in their fundamental understanding of what "queer" education should look like. The online discussion boards on the project website provided project participants with a constant virtual meeting space not only for collective reflection but also for

"teasing out theoretical issues," such as discussions about "the nature of 'queering' and whether/to what extent what teachers are doing in classrooms is 'queer'" (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009b, p. 847). For example, DePalma & Atkinson (2009b) describe an online debate between two participants who took up different viewpoints to approaching identity issues with students. While one participant adopted a poststructuralist view and warned against presenting sexual identities as fixed and stable, the other participant initially took on "an approach of strategic essentialism" (p. 847) that draws upon essentialist categories of gay and straight as a way "to give children something to identify with" (p. 847); however, later, as a result of the discussion, this participant complicated his own stance when he recognized "I always say you're gay or you're straight and that's it, but actually I should be saying so much more" (p. 848). As this example shows, teachers themselves wrestle with and are very much engaged in ongoing learning processes around how to queer education and how they position themselves in respect to queering education, which has important implications on what approaches they will adopt with their students. That participant teachers wrestled so much with implementing a queer praxis in their classrooms demonstrates that queering education needs to start with those who have to implement it in the classrooms: the teachers. Professional development opportunities, structured or unstructured, such as the online discussion board, offer teachers spaces to disrupt their own existing knowledges and to work through their own tensions and maybe even crisis.

Even though the *No Outsiders* project addressed the teaching of LGBT topics within the context of literacy education through the readings of children's books featuring lesbian, gay and gender-nonconforming characters, no specific framework for queering literacy teaching came out of this project. Nevertheless, the work of the *No Outsiders* project provides important insights on the possibilities and challenges of queering literacy teaching. Particularly, the book *Undoing homophobia in primary schools* by the No Outsiders Project Team (Atkinson et al., 2010), a comprehensive collection of essays in which the participating classroom practitioners reflect on their experiences, is instructive.

For example, Kate and Leanne reflect on their experiences using the picture book *King and King* with children from age 4-11. Kate found that while the younger children "took the story at face value, a funny variation of the usual princes and princess stories," the older children showed increasing discomfort, often following the lead of popular children in the class: "We saw that each class looked to its leaders to set the tone. When a popular child received the book positively, the class generally followed. When the dominant boys in the Year 4 class responded with 'disgusting,' the others kept quiet" (p. 26). How important it is to integrate LGBT content across subject areas became evident when the Year 6 class read the book. Having done work in Personal, Social and Health Education and through their history project on the Holocaust, they enjoyed the story and were able to talk about in productive ways.

Leanne who read the book with her Year 1 class (age 5-6) decided to use the children's enthusiasm with role playing and create a film of *King and King*. To her surprise, she found that through her engagement of the children with this book, some of the children became more comfortable in crossing gender boundaries, "girls wanting to be princes, boys wanting to be princesses." After allowing the children to choose their own favorite outfits for the film, "at least two of the boys chose very feminine costumes of their own free will, and we cast two boys as the two princes who fall in love" (pp. 28/29). In the context of working with the book, Leanna also introduced the children to differences in marriage rituals, having guest speakers come in who shared their experiences (one of the heterosexual female teachers talked to the children about her upcoming wedding, a gay male teacher talked about and showed photos of his civil partnership ceremony, and a female Hindu staff member told the children about her wedding). Many teachers are afraid of parental backlash when implementing LGBT-inclusive curricula, a fear that is often well founded; however, when Leanna approached the parents of the boys who played the princes, she was surprised by their positive reactions:

> And they said, 'Oh yeah, that's brilliant.' ... 'Oh, I think that's really good that you are doing that, I am really pleased about it. I am really supportive of the work...When we showed the *King and King* film all the parents came and they all thought it was brilliant;

> they've said such positive things about it. So now we know we've got one whole class of children going through the school who have incredibly supportive parents …. (p. 29).

Positioning students as well as their families as supportive rather than homophobic presents an important shift of thinking that can open doors for more LGBTQ-inclusive curricula.

Realizing how heterosexuality in the elementary classroom "is constructed and maintained as the norm" through "creating and policing what it means to be a boy or a girl" (p. 56), another teacher, Laura decided to engage poststructuralist tools to queer her students' (Year 3) understandings of gender during a unit on alternative fairy tales. Dressing up and performing in the role of a lesbian Cinderella character, "seemingly trouble[ed] the children's assumptions about who it is possible to be in the classroom" (p. 57). However, Laura found that queering the students' understanding was only momentary as "many children across the whole unit of work were reluctant to explore different identities for fairytale characters …. Many simply wanted to replicate the character of the traditional Cinderella" (pp. 103/104). What may be deduced from this is that more than just one lesson, students need a comprehensive approach to LGBTQ inclusion in the curriculum if their assumptions about sexuality and gender are to be shifted.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that much of the work that is being done around the integration of LGBT topics into K-12 curricula stems from English language arts pedagogies. Many of the publications appeared in the *English Journal,* the professional magazine of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). In addition, several books, such as Spurlin's (2000) compilation of essays in *Lesbian and Gay Studies and the Teaching of English Positions, Pedagogies, and Cultural Politics* or Carey-Webb's (2001) book *Literature and Lives: A Response-Based, Cultural Studies Approach to Teaching English,* which includes a chapter on the teaching of LGBT topics, have been published by NCTE. Not only has NCTE taken a progressive stance towards LGBT topics in education, the organization also adopted a resolution in 2009 that explicitly calls for "Strengthening teacher knowledge of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues" and

urges NCTE members to incorporate LGBT issues in their work.[15] Also in 2009, NCTE published a special issue of the *English Journal* that was devoted entirely to the discussion of LGBT topics, providing ideas and curriculum material for bringing issues of sexuality and gender identity into English classes through LGBT-themed young adult literature or other literature with LGBT themes.

It further needs to be noted that since the early 2000s a series of publications has appeared that specifically considers the possibilities of queer theory for education and demonstrates the possibilities for applying queer analytics to educational contexts (e.g., Kumashiro, 2001; Rasmussen, Rofes, &Talburt 2004; Talburt & Steinberg 2000). More recently a number of anthologies also took on issues around sexualities and gender diversity in education, the authors often drawing on queer analytical frameworks. In *A Radical Rethinking of Sexuality & Schooling. Status Quo or Status Queer?*, Eric Rofes (2005) proposes a new, second stage of radical educational approaches that can transform systems of oppression based on a radical rethinking of childhood and childhood innocence. "*Unleashing the Unpopular" Talking About Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity in Education* (2007), edited by Isabel Killoran and Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, brings together the voices of students and teachers around their experiences with LGBT issues in schools. Drawing on critical theory and pedagogies of social justice, one section of the book provides strategies by educators for implementing LGBT issues in the classroom and/or school community. *Sexualities in Education* (2012), edited by Erica Meiners and Therese Quinn, is a diverse collection of edited chapters that invites the reader to enter into conversations about sexualities in education from a queer, feminist, social justice perspective. Throughout the book literary texts, poetry, visual arts, and images from performing arts are interwoven with research-based articles and theoretical essays, showcasing contributions not only

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[15] http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/teacherknowledgelgbt

by academics and educators to this field but also of activists and youth. In contrast to other scholarly publications, *Queering Straight Teachers: Discourse and Identity and Education*, edited by Nelson Rodriguez and William Pinar (2007), shifts the perspective from an analysis of the LGBTQ "Other" to a critical examination of what it might mean to queer straight teachers by challenging institutionalized heteronormativity in educational contexts. In addition, a number of special issue journals contributed to the developing scholarship on queer theory/queer pedagogy/queer curriculum in education. The 2009 issue of the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* presented studies and essays that investigated queer issues within the fields of first-, second- and foreign-language education. In 2010, the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* published a special issue that explored the construction of queer knowledge in educational contexts.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed some of the literature that addresses LGBT topics in education that I find particularly relevant for positioning my dissertation study. Much of this literature addresses LGBT issues in education either from the perspective of looking at the experiences of LGBT students invoking a victim narrative or from the perspective of the challenges teachers and teacher educators face when coming out to their students or teaching in more LGBT-inclusive ways. In addition, this literature review shows a profound dearth of studies that document the actual implementation of LGBT-inclusive curricula at the K-12 schooling level. Most of the literature on LGBT topics in education is highly theoretical or provides general strategies for making classroom safer and more inclusive for queer children and youth. The few studies that exist which explore implementations of an LGBT-inclusive curriculum are not empirical studies but rather self-reports by the teachers who engaged in this work. Through my dissertation research, I hope to extend the research on LGBT topics in education in the form of an empirical study that examines a comprehensive LGBT-inclusive curriculum in the form of a trimester-long high school English literature course that focuses on the voices of LGBT people. In addition, in

this research study I do not frame lesbian, gay, and bisexual students as victims in need of such a curriculum but I rather look at how this class presents a meaningful site of learning for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and straight students. Furthermore, this research speaks back to the representation of teachers as fearful or not knowledgeable enough to implement an LGBT-inclusive curriculum. Instead, I will show through the account of Sara's curriculum how teachers can be social activists through innovative curriculum design.

In the next chapter, I will discuss and problematize some of the educational theories that have been used to frame the teaching of LGBT topics in schools.

CHAPTER 3

CONCEPTUALIZING THE TEACHING OF SEXUALITIES AND GENDER DIVERSITY: PREVALENT FRAMINGS

Tears are streaming down my face. I can't stop sobbing, have to leave the room.

I am participating in a weekend-long workshop on heterosexism that is part of a course on social issues in education offered through the Social Justice Education program. A few days ago, 14-year old Lawrence (Larry) King was shot in the head by a classmate, supposedly because Larry was gay and invited the other boy to be his Valentine. Other accounts speak of Larry's non-conforming gender expression and how students at his school felt threatened by that. Now Larry is dead. His classmate is in prison. Two lives are destroyed. The lives of those who loved them are broken. But as I am watching the photo montage that shows the childhood and family pictures of a sweet boy, I don't see just Larry, I see Dominik, my 13-year old son who just came out to us as gay, a couple of months ago.

Tears are streaming down my face. I can't stop sobbing, have to leave the room. In the photos of Larry's sweet face, I see Nik's sweet face. Inside I tremble. Despite my own comfort in being out as a lesbian in my personal and professional environment, I fear for my son and what he might have to endure because now he not only has two moms but he is further marginalized based on his own sexual identity. Will he be harassed and bullied? How will this change how he will be treated at his school? Right now, he is only out to his family, but what will happen once he comes out at this school to his friends and peers? I know that we live in the Happy Valley and yet, as the incident in Florian's health class that is etched in my mind reminds me, homophobia and heterosexism are a part of the fabric of life even here.

A few months later, some of my fears are confirmed. Upon his coming out at school, Nik has not been invited to join his "friends'" indoor soccer team. When I ask the coach – a lesbian herself with a son on the team! – she lets us know that the team is full, feigning surprise that Nik would want to join the team again because he didn't say anything, as if she couldn't have asked

him, especially since Nik had played on the team for the past three seasons! I am flabbergasted and livid. In the following months I bear witness as my son gets mostly excluded from his former boys' friend group. We decide to choice him into another school district, one that is more supportive of families and kids like ours like ours. It is the school at which Sara teaches.

Not only did these experiences have a personal impact but they also influenced my interests and agenda as an educational scholar. During the following years, whenever possible, I connected course assignments to learning more about LGBT topics in education. I discovered multicultural education, critical pedagogy and social justice education as important educational theories for framing such work, with my projects reflecting a strong focus on anti-bullying work. Framing my work within the dominant 'victim' narrative that views LGBT youth as at risk for harassment with serious implications for their personal and academic lives, I developed a 3-step model for safe schools that considers the intersections between bullying and anti-gay/homophobic violence. Building on this work, I created a resource guide for secondary school teachers who want to create LGBT-inclusive curricula in their classrooms for my Master's degree leadership project. When I took a course on multicultural children's and young adult literature, I felt a profound dissonance because 'multicultural' appeared to privilege literature focused on issues related to race or ethnicity but continued to exclude LGBT-themed literature. Recognizing the power of literature and literacy teaching, I began to explore how LGBT-themed children's and young adult literature can contribute to transformative educational work related to sexualities and gender diversity, for example, by conducting a critical multicultural analysis of young adult literature that features LGBT families. Throughout this time period, I felt deeply grounded in a multicultural, critical pedagogy-based social-justice approach to teaching in LGBT-inclusive ways and these frameworks informed my thinking.

How we think about and enact a curriculum that is inclusive of diverse sexualities and genders matters. The teaching of diverse sexualities and genders in schools can be conceptualized through various theoretical frameworks and approaches that have different underlying practices,

goals and conceptual tools, coming from scholars in the field of education but also from scholars in the fields of psychology, feminist studies, and queer studies. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of multicultural education, critical pedagogy, social justice education, feminist pedagogies, anti-oppressive education, and queer pedagogy, educators have explored ways to disrupt the silence around norm-disruptive sexualities and genders in schools and to make schools more inclusive for LGBTQ students (Atkinson et al., 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2008, 2009a-c; Kumashiro, 2000, 2002; Meyer, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Pinar, 1998, 2003; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007; Spurlin, 2000). What all of these schools of educational thought share is a common concern for social inequities and the transformative potential of education to effect social change. However, each of these educational theories offers different frameworks for thinking about how to teach in ways that integrate the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQ people into education.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine how multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and social justice education provide theoretical frameworks for thinking about how to introduce LGBTQ topics into educational settings. These theories provide prevalent frameworks for those advocating for the inclusion of sexuality and gender diversity in schools and it must be, therefore, of little surprise that the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum, which is the focus of this project, was conceptualized through a multicultural, social justice perspective. In addition, my own teaching philosophy is largely grounded in multicultural, social justice education which informs how I approached and made meaning of what I learned through this dissertation study.

However, while these theories offer important frameworks for addressing LGBT topics in schools, some critiques have been advanced. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss critiques of the following dominant discourses: a) a discourse of tolerance grounded in multiculturalism; b) an anti-bullying discourse that draws on a victim narrative constructing LGBT students as 'at-risk' and in need of protection; and c) a diversity and equal/human rights discourse that contributes to the essentializing of identities.

Prevalent Framings: Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and Social Justice Education

The Place of LGBT Topics within the Multicultural Education Paradigm

Historically, the field of multicultural education (MCE) in the United States emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement, and was closely linked to the early ethnic studies movement and the intergroup education movement. It developed out of the desire to create more equitable educational opportunities for students from racial and ethnic minority groups (Banks, 2001b, 2004, 2008). More recently, multicultural education has been theorized more broadly to include an affirmation of all human diversity, including differences among groups of people and individuals based on socioeconomic status, gender, religion, language, ability, and sexual orientation. Sonia Nieto (2012), for example, defines multicultural education as "challeng[ing] and reject[ing] racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accept[ing] and affirm[ing] the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, gender, and sexual orientation, among others) that students, their communities, and teacher reflect" (p. 42). This emphasis on diversity combined with a pluralist identity-based discourse is characteristic of multicultural education.

However, despite the theoretical inclusion of sexual orientation within lists of diversity in multicultural commitments to an affirmation of human diversity, discussions of sexuality and gender diversity or LGBT topics are still largely absent in K-12 multicultural school curricula. The inclusion of such topics remains contested and considered controversial, often based on the personal beliefs and values of those who oppose such an inclusion. Research shows that many teachers and pre-service teachers struggle when thinking about making teaching inclusive of LGBT people and issues, feeling unprepared or unwilling to address LGBT topics in their classrooms or arguing that LGBT topics do not have a place in multicultural education (Clark, 2010; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011; North, 2010; Schall & Kaufmann, 2003). Other opposition to the inclusion of LGBT topics within multicultural education comes from religious

conservatives or others who argue against the social acceptance of LGBT people or from those who argue that LGBT people do not represent a cultural group (Jennings & Macgillivray, 2011). As Jennings and Macgillivray (2011) point out, this argument falls short because multicultural education is not about teaching about culture and, in addition, it can be argued that LGBT people and their communities share many of the criteria that are used to define a cultural group, such as social practices, a common history, having a shared identity and a sense of group belonging.

Drawing on queer theory, Will Letts (2002) offers a critique of conceptualizations of multiculturalism that present limited notions of diversity. He points out that "although perspectives focused on inequities related to sex, gender, socio-economic status, 'race,' ethnicity, and disability have drawn increasing attention of educators and researchers, there is almost complete silence about …. sexual identities" (p. 119). He further emphasizes that the "recognition of 'queer' aspects of multiculturalism, when it does exist, rarely extends beyond adding a placeholder (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [lgbt] students, gays and lesbians, queers) to a list of diversity categories" (p. 119), calling this an "add lgbt and stir" approach to multicultural education.

Various scholars have developed typologies that represent different approaches to multicultural education depending on theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, key elements and objectives. For example, James Banks (2001a) developed a taxonomy of multicultural curriculum and pedagogy models, classifying these as contributions, additive, transformative or social action approaches. Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (Grant & Sleeter, 2006; Sleeter & Grant, 2003) highlight five approaches to MCE, differentiating between: a) the approach of teaching the exceptional and culturally different (a model that focuses on groups of students different from the 'mainstream'); b) the human relations approach; c) single group studies; d) the multicultural approach; and e) the multicultural and social reconstructionist approach. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), likewise, differentiate between five types of multicultural education: conservative multiculturalism/monoculturalism, liberal multiculturalism, pluralist

multiculturalism, left-essentialist multiculturalism, and critical multiculturalism. Nieto (1994, with Bode, 2012), on the other hand, uses the notion of dynamic levels of multicultural support for diversity, distinguishing between schools that are monocultural and not offering any support (on the lowest level), schools that increasingly teach tolerance, respect and acceptance (respectively increasingly support for diversity), and schools that are characterized by affirmation, solidarity and critique of diversity (highest level of support).

As the work of these scholars shows, multicultural education has been theorized, applied, and enacted in widely differing ways with varying implications for the inclusion of LGBT topics into teaching. While a detailed discussion of each of these approaches goes beyond the purpose of this chapter, it is important to recognize the critical turn in multicultural education. There is a recognizable shift in the way multicultural education is currently theorized. During the past decade, multicultural education has not only grown to include a broader range of human differences but it also moved beyond simple changes of the curriculum and pedagogical practice to include reflection and critique of the intersectionalities and complex relationships that are inherent within identity categories (Kumashiro, 2001, 2002; Nieto & Bode, 2012). Some scholars have called for a critical turn in multicultural education that reconceptualizes multicultural education as a social justice undertaking with a clear focus on critical pedagogy, social justice and anti-oppression work (Adams, Bell, and Griffin 2007; Kumashiro, 2000, 2002; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Pelo, 2008; Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010; Schoorman, 2011). These scholars argue that the field needs to move away from a diversity-based education that privileges simply the inclusion and affirmation of human differences to an education that engages students in broad-based examinations of identity, power, privilege and oppression (Nieto & Bode, 2012).

These shifting philosophical perspectives provide the context within which to consider the teaching of LGBT topics. Within the critical turn to multicultural education, LGBT issues and history are inextricably interwoven into the basic concerns of multicultural education. Building on the tenets of multicultural education – equity, access, social justice and the concept of

inclusive schooling – critical multicultural education makes issues around sexuality and gender diversity central concerns for educators. As Elizabeth Meyer (2010) emphasizes,

> These theories take the foundational principles of multicultural education and extend them to the area of greatest possible impact: critically reexamining power structure in society in order to positively transform students and society and challenge oppression and discrimination in all its forms through education. (p. 16)

Such a shift in educational goals, requires a different approach to classroom pedagogy. In the following section, I review critical pedagogy as the theory and practice underlying critical multicultural education.

Critical Pedagogy as the Theory and Practice Underlying Critical Multicultural Education.

As Joe Kincheloe (2008) states in his book *Knowledge and Critical Pedagogy*, it is difficult to define the term critical pedagogy in a brief and compelling manner. Critical pedagogy is more than a teaching approach or method; it is a theory of political education in which a new language, qualitatively different social relations within a classroom, and a new set of values form a radical practice of freedom (Giroux, 1983). As such, critical pedagogy is rooted in critical theory. Kincheloe (2004) states, "The notion of critical pedagogy – the concern with transforming oppressive relations of power in a variety of domains that lead to human oppression…finds its origins in critical theory" (p. 45). Critical theory, developed by the Frankfurt School – the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003) – emerged during the post-World War II period taking as its project a critique of the positivistic paradigm that defined understandings of the world. Interested in "the social construction of experience" and the "power relations of the social and historical contexts," one of the goals of critical theorists was to advance "a more egalitarian and democratic social order" (Kincheloe, 2004, pp. 47/48). Informed by this critical epistemology, "a central dimension of critical pedagogy involves its understanding and use of knowledge" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 10). As Kincheloe notes, knowledge as conceptualized within critical pedagogy takes on a different form than in mainstream versions. Knowledge, theories, and beliefs, established as 'Truth', are always

problematized and contested within a critical pedagogy framework. The boundaries of what is considered knowledge are challenged and pushed. Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode (2012) call critical pedagogy, therefore, "an exploder of myths" that exposes and demystifies taken-for-granted truths through critical analysis. In other words, critical pedagogy examines how particular bodies of knowledge have been privileged while others have been marginalized or silenced.

Underlying critical pedagogy is the belief that our social world is unjust and characterized by power struggles and inequality. Critical pedagogy's goal is to uncover and disrupt hegemonic discourses and fight oppression through transformation and social change. Kincheloe (2004) notes how critical pedagogy demands "understanding of diverse forms of oppression including class, race, gender, sexual, cultural religious, colonial, and ability-related concerns" (p. 49). Through critical questioning, critical pedagogues seek to expose how power and privilege play out in society and students are encouraged to think critically about how power operates in society. The literature of critical pedagogy, following Paulo Freire (2000/1970), argues for a concept of social justice that is dynamic and revolutionary, and which involves a commitment to engage in critical reflection, dialogue, and social activism (Freire, 1998b; McLaren & Baltodano, 2000; McLaren & Fischman, 1998). For critical pedagogues, the concept of social justice is a foundation upon which to disrupt and change unjust, unequal, and undemocratic political institutions and practices (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1999). Critical pedagogy recognizes the transformative and liberatory potential of education. As theory, as method, and as praxis, critical pedagogy expresses a desire for and action toward a socially just world that is "not yet" (Kincheloe, 2008).

Grounded in the notion that power and knowledge are always linked, critical pedagogy recognizes education as political and teaching as a political act. Ira Shor (1992) emphasizes the inherent political nature of education, writing, "all forms of education are political because they can enable or inhibit the questioning habits of students, thus developing or disabling their critical relation to knowledge, schooling, and society" (pp. 12/13). While the definition of a critical

educator varies, most critical pedagogues agree that the activity of teaching is an inescapably political process (Freire, 2000/1970; Freire, 1998a; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Zeichner, 1993). Within this framework teachers are viewed as "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux & McLaren, 1986), not transmitters of knowledge as in the dominant banking model of education (Freire, 2000/1970).

Nieto and Bode (2012) argue that multicultural education *is* critical pedagogy because "it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change" (p. 42). Multicultural education and critical pedagogy also share a common concern for marginalized groups. Nieto and Bode (2012) note how multicultural education is inclusive of many differences, while Kincheloe (2004) states how "critical pedagogy is interested in the margins of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and marginalization" (p. 23). Educators working within a multicultural education and critical pedagogy framework pay attention to issues of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability, not only accepting and affirming differences but also actively challenging and rejecting racism and other forms of discrimination. This commitment to social action and change is essential to a critical social justice-based multicultural education and critical pedagogy. Henry Giroux (2004) states that "any viable notion of critical pedagogy has to foreground issues not only of understanding, but also social responsibility and address the implications the latter has for both affecting students and for influencing a democratic society" (p. 247). Nieto and Bode (2012) emphasize that "multicultural education invites students and teachers to put their learning into action for social justice" (p. 52), moving them beyond academic discourse to reflection and social change.

Even though the value of critical pedagogy has been acknowledged, it has also been critiqued. Some argue that "critical pedagogy crosses a threshold between teaching criticality and indoctrinating" by "prejudging" what conclusions students must arrive at (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Feminist scholars, in particular, have critiqued the male-centered discourse of critical

pedagogy theorists that does not reflect differences between female and male experiences and excludes the voices of women. Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992) notes that "theorists of critical pedagogy have failed to launch any meaningful analysis of or program for reformulating the institutionalized power imbalances between themselves and their students or of the essentially paternalism project of education itself" (p. 98). Kathleen Weiler (2001) has criticized Freire's work as presenting a generalized understanding of oppression that situates oppression within classism without sufficient consideration of the intersection with other forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism. According to Weiler, Freire "call[s] forth 'the oppressed' as a general category without acknowledgment of the complexities and differences among real people" (p. 75). Advocating instead for a feminist pedagogy that is appropriate for women, Weiler writes,

> Like Freirean pedagogy, feminist pedagogy emphasizes the importance of consciousness raising, the existence of an oppressive social structure and the need to change it, and the possibility of social transformation….Like Freirean pedagogy, feminist pedagogy assumes as fundamental the need to challenge dominant assumptions of knowing and knowledge and to value all students. What distinguishes feminist pedagogy from these other approaches…is its analysis of patriarchy and attempts to develop an education appropriate for women. (p. 68)

Others have criticized critical pedagogy's focus on the disadvantages of oppressed groups. Ricky Allen and Cesar Rossatto (2009), for example, examine the limitations of critical pedagogy, as commonly conceptualized in U.S. multicultural and social foundations fields calling for its "re-invention" (p. 165) by considering the specificities of the U.S. social context. Claiming that historically critical pedagogy has focused on the oppressed as the "idealized subject" in need of empowerment (p. 167), they argue for "a refinement of critical pedagogy that deals more explicitly with students from oppressor groups and, to a lesser extent, those in oppressed groups who have internalized the discourse of the oppressor" (p. 165). Constructing the category of the "oppressor student" who is "a member of an oppressor group (White, male, middle- or upper-class, etc.) and a benefactor of oppressor group membership" (p. 165), they emphasize that critical multicultural educators should use critical pedagogy to directly challenge systemic privilege (e.g., White privilege, male privilege, class privilege, heterosexual privilege, etc.) by

engaging students in critical examinations of their unearned privileges and challenging them to gain a consciousness of how they contribute to hegemony (p. 170). Allen and Rossatto's (2009) distinction between an "oppressed" and an "oppressor" student is important to consider when thinking about a critical pedagogy that engages students with LGBT topics. Classrooms in which LGBT topics are discussed will most likely have more straight- than queer-identifying students. Within such a context it is crucial that heterosexual/cisgender privileges and the hetero- and cisnormative construction of the social world, in general, and the institutional world of the school in particular, be critically examined and challenged.

LGBT Issues within a Social Justice Education Paradigm.

While overlapping with many of the theoretical tenets offered by critical multicultural approaches and critical pedagogy, social justice education offers a particularly strong framework when advocating for the inclusion of LGBT topics into schools. Lee Anne Bell (2007) defines as the goal of social justice education,

> to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p. 2)

At the core of social justice education is, therefore, the critical analysis of systems of oppression and the processes and practices that operate to keep these systems in place. Bell further explains that:

> Social justice education uses an *interdisciplinary conceptual framework* for analyzing multiple forms of oppression and *a set of interactive, experiential pedagogical principles* to help learners understand the meaning of social difference and oppression both in the social system and in their personal lives. (p. 2)

As with multicultural education/critical pedagogy, social justice education employs pedagogical practices that are student-centered, often project-based, and that ask students to engage in dialogue and critical thinking with the goal of social transformation. However, social justice

education distinguishes itself from multicultural education approaches by paying specific attention to processes of socialization and how these interact with processes of privileging, marginalizing, and othering.

In addition, social justice theories of education clearly acknowledge that issues related to sexuality and gender diversity must be critically explored within educational contexts. The two leading books on social justice education, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007) and *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams, Blumenfeld, Castañeda, Hackman, Peters, & Zuñiga, 2000) offer sections that specifically focus on sexism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression while paying attention to the intersections among these oppressive systems. For example, the readings in the sexism section of *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* include a discussion of the ways in which gender intersects with heterosexism, race and ethnicity, and class. *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* offers stand-alone curriculum designs for sexism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression while also acknowledging the intersections among these. In her overview, Pat Griffin (2007) writes, "sexism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression are distinct yet overlapping manifestations of oppression. Because of their interrelationship and the identity concepts associated with them, sex, gender, and sexuality are often confused or conflated" (p. 167). Part of the work of social justice educators who focus on issues of sexuality and gender diversity is therefore to pull apart and help students understand the distinctions between sex, gender, and sexuality before students can critically engage with sexism, heterosexism and transgender oppression as systems of oppression. The distinction between these different systems of oppression is also relevant because while overlapping each of these forms of oppression manifests differently and for different groups of people. Too often, the use of the acronym LGBT leads educators to focus only on the oppression of lesbian and gay people to the exclusion of bisexual people or those who experience oppression based on their gender expression and/or gender identity.

While the theoretical frameworks of multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and social justice education offer valuable paradigms for thinking about teaching LGBT topics in schools, critiques have been advanced particularly coming from feminist and queer scholars. These critiques concern some of the dominant discourses that are attached to these frameworks as they relate to LGBT issues in education: a) a discourse of tolerance grounded in multiculturalism; b) an anti-bullying discourse that draws on a victim narrative constructing LGBT students as in need of protection; and c) a diversity and equal/human rights discourse that contributes to the essentializing of identities.

Problematizing the Teaching of LGBT Topics within a Multicultural Education/Critical Pedagogy/Social Justice Education Framework

Multiculturalism and the Discourse of Tolerance.

There is no question that tolerance and education have been closely linked in the public mind. Education has been identified by many as a premier civic venue to promote tolerance by teaching understanding and demonstrating support for so-called minority groups. It is a commonly held belief that schools are the critical institution for learning tolerance, a virtue that is deemed essential to a democratic society. In the United States, tolerance has been hailed as a central liberal value and virtue and key on how to address the increasing diversity in our schools which necessitates that we address issues around culture and difference in schools. The discourse of tolerance of diversity permeates pedagogical culture and literature, but it is particularly attached to multicultural education. Many of the teaching resources offered through leading organizations like the Anti-Defamation League, Facing History and Ourselves, or the Southern Poverty Law Center – which administers the site Teaching Tolerance.org – focus on developing students' tolerance of differences by offering resources that aim at challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination.

Feminist scholars have offered powerful analysis and radical critiques of the history and contemporary discourses of tolerance. Susan Talburt and Shirley Steinberg (2000) argue that

introducing LGBT role models and fighting for LGBT acceptance is simply another form of tolerance discourse. Deborah Britzman (1995) raises questions about pedagogies that do not disrupt the "conceptual geography of normalization" in schools instead producing "the subject of difference as a disruption" (p. 152). For Britzman, what is at stake is how we can think ethically about "what discourses of difference, choice, and visibility mean in classrooms, in pedagogy, and in how education can be thought about" (p. 152). Rejecting visibility approaches, Britzman maintains that it is not enough to add marginalized voices to the curriculum or to teach knowledge about an 'Other'.

Wendy Brown (2006), in *Regulating Aversion*, more generally problematizes the uncritical promotion of tolerance, revealing how discourses of tolerance regulate normativity; thus, serving to perpetuate and even promote discrimination through a hierarchical valuation of difference. She unmasks the dark side of tolerance showing how tolerance associates difference with aversion and how the act of toleration is accompanied by a sense of superiority. Brown maintains, "tolerance is never innocent of power or normativity" because "almost all objects of tolerance are marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable by virtue of being tolerated, and the action of tolerance inevitably affords some access to superiority" (p. 14). Brown further argues that, at times, tolerance does not alleviate but rather help to circulate "racism, homophobia, and ethnic hatreds" in constructing a tolerant "us" versus an intolerant "them" (pp. 9/10). Brown emphasizes that tolerance talk effectively undermines a social and political analysis because it operates "outside the politics of identity production, apart from power or inequality; it is simply a matter of responding to 'difference'" (p. 117); thus, relegating the management of difference to the individual level instead of addressing the underlying power issues.

While Brown does not specifically allude to the discourse of tolerance within multicultural education, she repeatedly mentions how tolerance employs and infiltrates a number of discourses and operates through a range of knowledges and institutions, for example, in the form of pedagogical and popular discourses that circulate in and among schools. Brown writes,

> When, for example, middle and high schoolers are urged to tolerate one another's race, ethnicity, culture, religion, or sexual orientation, there is no suggestion that the differences at issue, or the identities through which these differences are negotiated, have been socially and historically constituted and are themselves the effect of power and hegemonic norms, or even of certain discourses about race, ethnicity, sexuality, and culture. Rather, difference itself is what students learn they must tolerate. (p. 16)

Her argument points to several problems around employing tolerance talk in schools. Casting differences as inherent sites of conflict, certain identities of students are presented as the problem. Moreover, emphasizing individual prejudice and individual responsibility for tolerance prevents a critical engagement with issues of inequality, which are really the sources of social problems. Moreover, even though tolerance within educational contexts is generally defined as respect for human difference or for "opinions and practices [that] differ from one's own," in practice, it often means little more than managing the burden of the diversity of the student population in terms of their identities (Nieto & Bode, 2012). In effect, tolerance discourse means a retreat from equality and far-reaching justice projects and efforts, foreclosing projects that take as their goal connection across differences, solidarity or community.

Further, thinking about diversity framed in terms of prejudice, hostility, or challenge is limiting. Recently, the term allophilia – derived from the Greek words for 'liking' or 'love' and the 'other' – has been advanced to develop a new positive language in regards to diversity and difference that builds on the notion that many people like others who are different from themselves (Pittisnky, 2009). Todd Pittinsky (2009), therefore, proposes to move beyond tolerance in the classroom through the five components of allophilia – affection, engagement, kinship, comfort, and enthusiasm – which can "offer teachers a systematic framework for moving their classrooms toward the positive-not the less negative, but the truly positive" (p. 214). Framed in this way, difference would not be perceived as a problem that requires tolerance, but as an asset connected to positive feelings.

The Victim Narrative and the Discourse of Anti-Bullying and School Safety

Generally speaking, calls for making schools and curricula more LGBT-inclusive are grounded rather in an anti-homophobia, and more explicitly anti-bullying stance, than counter-heteronormative work – a discourse appropriated especially when communicating with the public or through the media (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009a). As outlined in Chapter 2 in the section on *Experiences of LGBT Students*, much scholarly work that considers LGBT topics in education is framed by a victim narrative that casts LGBTQ youth as 'in crisis' or 'at-risk' because of the high prevalence of anti-gay bullying and harassment in schools. Most of the literature on LGBT issues in education sets the stage by including at least some reference to research that exposes the victimization of LGBTQ children and youth. Within this line of thinking schools need to become more LGBT-inclusive as an anti-bullying intervention because educators have an ethical responsibility to provide a safe learning environment for all students, including LGBTQ-identifying students or students with LGBT-identifying parents (Meyer, 2010). And indeed, research that examines the extent of anti-gay bullying and harassment in schools (e.g., GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008; GLSEN, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008) provides strong empirical support for a focus on school safety and anti-bullying interventions. In fact, research shows that LGBT-inclusive curricula that provide positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events improve the school climate for LGBT students (GLSEN, 2011 – see also Chapter 2). However, such reliance on the victim narrative with its accompanying anti-bullying discourse needs to be challenged because this framework fails to address the root causes for anti-gay bullying and harassment as it focuses on individual level oppression rather than addressing the systemic issues arising from hetero-/cissexism and hetero-/cisnormativity, and it provides a diminished view of LGBTQ youth.

Within an anti-bullying discourse, there is often a focus on changing the individual behaviors of those who are involved in bullying incidents: the bullies, the bullied/targets, and the bystanders. This goes hand in hand with a focus on homophobia – the irrational fear and/or

disgust felt for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people – to the exclusion of an examination of the root causes for anti-gay bullying and harassment. In addition, many teachers, parents and students find that heterosexist and genderist violence is a legitimate and understandable consequence of the non-conformity of targeted students (Hinson, 1996). All of this contributes to an individualized rather than systemic understanding of anti-gay violence in schools. As DePalma and Atkinson (2007) point out, "...focusing on the unfortunate victim risks propagating a discourse of majority privilege where injustice is considered an individual rather than systematic issue" (p. 509).

Research, however, has shown that anti-gay bullying and harassment rather than being just an expression of individual homophobia are used strategically to maintain the dominant heterosexual and cissexist social order, which is based on the heterosexist notions of patriarchy, masculine dominance, a strict dichotomy of masculinity and femininity with corresponding roles and behavior rules, and acceptable gender presentations. In other words, "Heterosexist violence reflects and reinforces the privilege of heterosexuals and perpetuates the marginalization of those who do not conform to dominant social constructions of masculinity and femininity" (Hinson, 1996, p. 253). Moreover, heterosexist violence often seems 'natural' and is legitimized because schools are embedded in and reflect many broader cultural, institutional and systemic practices, within and outside of schools (Hinson, 1996). Rather than adopting a reactive, anti-bullying approach, schools must adopt proactive approaches that seek to disrupt the institutionalized reinforcement of dominant hetero- and cissexist norms which are at the root of anti-gay violence. This requires that schools address anti-gay violence through a framework that considers how heterosexism, homophobia, cissexism, genderism, and transgender oppression operate simultaneously at individual, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

In addition, taking a punitive approach through zero-tolerance policies that prohibit anti-gay language also sends the wrong message. For example, trying to erase the usage of the word 'gay' in fact reinscribes the negative meanings of this word – if we can't say the word and get punished for it, it must be bad. More productive would be to proactively present same-sex

sexualities and desires in new and positive ways, reinscribing the word ‘gay’ with positive meaning. Atkinson and DePalma (2009) suggest that “in order to break old chains, new chains of invocation must be forged. In order to deconstruct ‘gay’ as an insult, it must be allowed to acquire new, positive and intelligible meanings and associations” (p. 25). Altering such citational chains is one of the tools that queer theory can offer.

Furthermore, invoking a discourse of victimization provides “a diminished view of the self that is increasingly likely to invoke our empathy and interest in others because their vulnerability and damage supposedly sheds light on our own” (Ecclestone, 2004, p. 123). While there is power in individual stories of victimization and pain to inspire social action – a form of strategic reliance on victims in our discourses of equality and diversity – this risks turning the inclusion of LGBTQ topics into an act of pity while undermining the potential to show the resiliency of LGBTQ youth. Instead of focusing on the victimized individual, it should be more productive to deconstruct the social processes that lead to such victimization. DePalma and Atkinson (2007), for example, suggest that educational interventions should critique and reshape society’s notions of what is defined as transgressive, and why. This signifies a major shift of thinking away from problematizing norm-disruptive sexualities toward problematizing heterosexuality itself and the discourses and social processes: “Shifting the gaze from the Other to the othering processes operating within society, it becomes society, not the marginalized victim, that needs help” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2007, p. 510). Educating about sexuality and gender diversity is now seen as relevant for everybody (Nieto, 2012).

Moreover, framing LGBT-inclusivity within an anti-bullying discourse also fails to acknowledge that despite the evidence that research provides for the negative consequences of heterosexism, homophobia and antigay violence on students, recent research also shows that more and more students show less constraint by stereotypic roles, are more celebratory and assertive of their sexual and/or gender identities, having a sense of pride of self, and are able to establish a strong self-concept (Savin-Williams, 2005). In fact, queer children and youth show astonishing

resilience when having to come to terms with their sexual orientation/gender identity in an often hostile, abusive environment.

Essentializing Identities: the Diversity and Equal/Human Rights Discourse

The teaching of LGBT topics in schools is frequently located within a liberal humanist identity-based framework, characteristic of multicultural and social justice education, that adopts the discourse of 'inclusion' and 'affirmation of diversity' and 'equal' or 'human rights' to advocate for the positive representation of diverse genders and sexualities in schools. Multicultural education and social justice education approaches rely on the notion of essential social identities in their call for an affirmation of human diversity. Connected to this discourse of affirming diversity are calls for inclusion of students' identities so that students see their lives and experiences reflected in the curriculum. Brenda Brueggemann and Debra Moddelmog (2002), for example, emphasize how teaching LGBT topics provides students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender with "a place where they can 'be themselves,' read about others like them, and acquire increased self-worth" (p. 318). In addition, many scholars acknowledge that schools need to value sexuality diversity within a framework of teaching human rights because "Understanding and respecting human rights is an important aspect of citizenship" (Meyer, 2010, p. 56).

Poststructuralist theorists have critiqued multiculturalism with its identity politics as a liberal invention that essentializes cultural differences (Brown, 2006). This tension between identity-based educational approaches and poststructuralist critiques of essential identities presents some of the major challenges when thinking about LGBT-themed curricula. Rosi Braidotti (1987) articulated the "paradoxical consequences of a postmodern identity politics" pointing out, "In order to announce the death of the subject one must first have gained the right to speak as one" (p. 237). We also depend on identity categories for our "intelligibility" and because "we might be attached to them politically, socially, relationally, psychically, orgasmically" (Youdell, 2010, p. 88). And while some advocate for "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 1990,

1992) as an option for allowing discrete and essentialist categories to persist temporarily, while recognizing their limitations, because an overall strategic aim is advanced (Nixon, 2009), others point out how, "Essentialism, however strategic, runs the risk of reifying categories that a queer project seeks to disrupt" (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009b, p. 851). These tensions that develop in response to such critiques of diversity/inclusion and equal/human rights discourses related to calls for making schools more LGBT-inclusive are also a part of this dissertation project.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed some of the prevalent theoretical educational frameworks for thinking about LGBT-inclusive curricula in schools: multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and social justice education. What these schools of educational thought share is a common concern for marginalized groups, social inequities, and the transformative potential of education to effect social change. They provide, therefore, strong frameworks for advocating for curricula and pedagogies that consider sexualities and gender diversity.

The final part of the chapter problematizes the teaching of LGBTQ topics through these framework by discussing the critiques that trouble some of the discourses which inform the teaching of LGBTQ topics through these frameworks: a) a discourse of tolerance grounded in multiculturalism; b) an anti-bullying discourse that draws on a victim narrative constructing LGBT students as in need of protection; and c) a diversity and equal/human rights discourse that contributes to the essentializing of identities.

Despite the critiques advanced in response to some of the dominant discourses that circulate through these frameworks, I acknowledge that these critical educational theories deeply inform my own work. As a teacher, teacher educator, and educational researcher, I consistently draw on notions of affirmation of diversity, social justice, the need for social action and transformation with the goal of working towards education that is socially just and equitable for all students. However, as I ventured beyond the boundaries of critical educational studies, I recognized how it might be productive to look towards queer theory and explore its usefulness for

reframing and rethinking the teaching of LGBTQ topics in schools. Hence, in the next chapter, I examine how the teaching of LGBTQ topics can be reconceptualized through queer theoretical perspectives.

CHAPTER 4

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE TEACHING OF LGBTQ TOPICS THROUGH QUEER THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Queer – to queer – not queer enough.

Critical moments not only happen when something happens or relates to us personally (as with Florian's health class or Dominik's coming out) but sometimes they can also happen on an intellectual level. Reading Kevin Kumashiro's article in which he examines four primary approaches educators have taken to work against multiple forms of oppression in schools – what he calls four approaches to antioppressive education – was one of those critical intellectual moments when you feel like your whole framework for understanding something has been uprooted and the intellectual ground, upon which your scholarly work is standing, is trembling and crumbling.

Up to this moment, I had grounded my scholarly work exclusively within a critical multicultural education paradigm, committed to critical pedagogy and social justice. I had wholeheartedly embraced identity-based approaches to teaching for social justice. Knowing how I felt affirmed and empowered by an LGBT-inclusive curriculum that allowed me to connect course content to my personal identities and interests, I was convinced that this was the way to work against the marginalization and discrimination of LGBT students, families, and teachers.

But Kumashiro's critique of an education for and about the Other shook up my convictions. All of a sudden I understood that these approaches, standing on their own, can produce new exclusions and boundaries. Kumashiro's critique of an education that is critical of privileging and Othering was a bit harder to digest. This type of educational approach is already considered radical and it makes up the core of critical pedagogy and social justice education. My own awareness of systems of oppression and how they operate was still fairly new and I had experienced my own learning within this approach as powerful. Kumashiro's theorization of the fourth approach, an education that changes students and society, was both confusing and

affirming. His use of the concept of crisis deeply resonated with me as it informed my own beliefs that the most profound learning happens when we move outside of our comfort zones and push our thinking. This notion was part of my teaching philosophy and I embraced it wholeheartedly. However, what did Kumashiro mean with his critique of viewing oppression as structural? Hadn't I just learned that it was? And what did he mean by citational practices?

Kumashiro draws in his work on feminist queer poststructuralist theories, so I decided to pursue this new line of thinking and enrolled in the certificate program of Advanced Women's, Gender, and Sexualities Studies. I began to look for literature on queer theory and those scholars that explored a queering of pedagogy and curriculum. And I entered a crisis. I decidedly felt not queer enough to queer my own work. I struggled with the often inaccessible language of queer scholarly work – rejecting it as elitist and exclusionary, vowing to never write like that myself. I pushed back, feeling the need to affirm my lesbian identity – yes, that's who I was, not queer but lesbian. And, I pushed back, feeling the need to affirm my intellectual identity – I was a critical multicultural, social justice educator/scholar, not a queer theorist. I pushed back, feeling the need to affirm the value of identity politics – after all, this was what has brought us more rights and protections. I pushed back, feeling the need to affirm my own desire to be recognized as normal – who are queers to tell me that same-sex marriage is a homonormative enterprise? I felt angry at queer's insistence to trouble and disassemble the very foundations upon which my 'self' rested and in which it was anchored. It is a crisis that I am still laboring to work through.

This dissertation is part of this labor. This chapter is part of this labor. Writing about queer scholars' work is part of this labor. Because I am still wrestling with queer – to queer – not queer enough. But as I begin to employ the conceptual tools queer theorizing and Kumashiro's work have to offer, I feel my understandings expand.

Learning happens through crisis. I understand.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the teaching of LGBT topics in schools is frequently located within a liberal humanist identity-based framework, characteristic of

multicultural and social justice education, that adopts the discourse of ‘equal rights’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘affirmation of diversity’ to advocate for the positive representation of diverse genders and sexualities in schools. However, scholars drawing on queer theory have critiqued such identity-based approaches to teaching about LGBTQ topics. These scholars have engaged with questions around ways to challenge heteronormativity and to promote gender and sexuality equity within educational contexts (Duke & McCarthy, 2009; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Mayo, 2014), theorizing the notion of queering teaching (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Moita-Lopes, 2006), developing queer curriculum (Sumara & Davis,1998; Pendleton Jimenez, 2009), defining and enacting a queer pedagogy (Britzman, 1995; Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Dilley, 1999; Luhmann, 1998; North, 2010; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Vicars, 2006), applying queer theory in education (Dilley, 1999; Pinar, 1998, 2003), and queering educational research (Chang, 2005; Filax, 2006; Mayo, 2007; Renn, 2010, Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). These developments have the potential to re-conceptualize a social justice-based multicultural education that goes beyond affirmation of students’ identities by troubling constructs of difference and normalcy and placing questions around oppression, power, and privilege at the center of analysis.

In this chapter, I turn to two schools of thought that can be helpful in expanding how educators can think about addressing LGBTQ topics in schools: queer pedagogy and antioppressive education. These theoretical frameworks offer different lenses and conceptual tools that can shift this type of work from a focus on making schools more inclusive and supportive for LGBTQ students, families, teachers, and staff to one that seeks to break down the hetero- and cisnormative institutional and discursive structures that characterize schools and oppress those who resist dominant notions of sexuality, sex, and gender.

In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the origins and central tenets of queer theory as the philosophy that critically informs queer pedagogy and Kumashiro’s theory of antioppressive education. I begin by providing a brief historical context for the emergence of queer theory. Then, I review two theories advanced in Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s work that have critically

informed (and continue to do so) the work of queer scholars. Building on this, I lay out some of the central tenets of queer theory.

In the second part of the chapter, I explore how queer theorizing has been taken up by scholars in the field of education, particularly in relation to curricular ideas and pedagogical practices. First, I consider the theoretical contributions of queer theory to the field education. Next, I examine how queer theorizing can be brought to bear on educational praxis. Here, I engage with questions around what it might mean to queer the curriculum and to engage in what some have termed queer pedagogy, and discuss how queer education scholars have engaged with notions of difference and identity, processes of normalizing, and the relation between knowledge, ignorance, and resistance to learning (Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Britzman, 1995, 2012; Kumashiro, 2000, 2002; Luhmann, 1998; Morris, 1998; Sumara & Davis, 1998).

In the third and final part of the chapter, I review Kevin Kumashiro's (2000, 2002) theory of antioppressive education as a powerful theoretical framework for addressing LGBTQ topics in schools because it bridges queer, poststructuralist and feminist conceptualizations of identity, power, privilege and knowledge production to other critical educational approaches that address oppression. Following Kumashiro's work, I present and discuss each of the four primary approaches to challenging various forms of oppression in schools that he identifies and analyzes to provide an overview of what antioppressive education encompasses and how it provides a meaningful framework when considering the teaching of LGBTQ topics.

Before doing that, let me begin by briefly describing the historical context of the emergence of queer theory because this poststructuralist philosophy transformed and expanded how we can envision teaching LGBTQ topics.

A Brief Historical Context of the Emergence of Queer Theory

Queer theory emerged as a subfield within the field of critical theory and cultural studies in the 1990s, in response to critiques of assimilationist strategies and progress narratives of the lesbian and gay liberationist movement, as a critique of stable, unitary, essentialist identity

categories, and as a critique of empiricist methods that claim to represent reality and objective truth (Duggan, 1995), largely transforming the field of lesbian and gay studies. Growing out of a social reform movement and the activism of queer action groups like Queer Nation or Act Up, queer scholars sought to transform their actions into theoretical analysis (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). The term queer theory is often attributed to Teresa de Lauretis (1991) who deliberately used the provocative phrase *queer theory* as a "form of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses" (p. iii) and to "construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual" (iv), rejecting, transgressing, and transcending "or at the very least problematiz[ing]" the standard "lesbian and gay" terminology (v). However, while de Lauretis may have been the first one to use the phrase *queer theory*, others before her had already written works that are considered foundational for a new theorizing of sexuality, gender, and sex with the following pieces of this theoretical school most often cited as seminal and catalysts for the field (Jagose, 1996; Halperin, 2003): Michel Foucault's (1978) *A History of Sexuality*, Judith Butler's (1990/2006) *Gender Trouble*, and Eve Sedgwick's (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet.* In the following I discuss two theories coming out of that work that contributed greatly to queer theorizing: (1) Foucault's theory of the discursive production of sexual identities; and (2) Butler's theory of performativity.

Contributions of Foucault's and Butler's Work on Queer Theorizing

Foucault: the Discursive Production of Sexual Identities

Michel Foucault's (1978) *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* in which he explicates his theory of the discursive production of sexual identities is considered a catalyst for queer theorizing as it reveals the discursive constructedness of sexual identities and categorizations. For Foucault, identities are not stable and essential to the self but rather discursively produced within their specific social, cultural and historical context. Using a genealogical approach that considers the intersections of power, knowledge and sexuality, in *History of Sexuality* Foucault traces how modern categories of sexuality were created through the

combined processes of a medicalization of sex acts, speciation, belief in truth and reverse discourse. By revealing the processes involved in the modern construction of the homosexual in the West as a person and identity, Foucault dismantled dominant thinking that casts sexual identity as an inherent, essential and stable aspect of a person's being. Foucault explained the process of the speciation of the homosexual as follows:

> The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life-form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality . . . The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (p. 43)

The discursive production of sexualities theorized by Foucault (1978/1990) – the belief that individuals are created through and by discourse which itself is created through webs of power and knowledge – shifts how we might want to think about and engage with diverse sexualities and the questions we might want to ask. Acknowledging identity categories as discursively produced, makes "queer about interrogating how discourses of sex and sexuality are implicated in the processes through which we are made as 'subjects' who are sexed and sexualised in particular ways" (Youdell, 2009, p. 36). In other words, rather than concentrating on what it might mean to be a person of a particular sexuality, the focus of analysis moves to the deconstruction of the historical, social, cultural and discursive processes that produce and reproduce sexual identities.

Such a focus on discourse also shifts how power and transformation are conceptualized. For Foucault, power is not structured into hierarchies of power but enacted through the discourses that create webs of knowledge. While some discourses express hegemonic knowledges that naturalize and normalize specific ways of being, in the repetition of discourse there is always already the possibility of contestation and subversion and with this the possibility for transformation. Foucault (1978/1990) theorized such subversive discourse as "reverse" discourse (p. 101), explaining how through the construction and naming of the homosexual as a person and identity people with non-dominant sexual identities not only were placed in a labeling category

but they also were enabled to assert agency by creating and expressing their self-identities and demanding recognition: “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 101). Just as the discourse of homosexuality made it possible for people to become a ‘homosexual’, it also produced new alternative discourses that created new lines of thinking related to sexuality and gender. For example, the rejection of the medicalized term homosexual and its replacement by lesbian and gay, the re-appropriation of queer as an affirming and politically transgressive term of self-identification, or the contemporary proliferation of terms of self-identification related to diverse and norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes are powerful examples of such subversive reverse discourse through which dominant notions about sexuality, sex and gender have been and continue to be challenged, disrupted, and shifted. In other words, reverse discourses are subversive as they reframe and potentially alter how people think and feel about diverse sexualities, genders and sexes. Recognizing the power of altering dominant discourses through reverse discourses opens up new possibilities for engaging with issues of sexuality and gender diversity.

Butler’s Theory of Performativity

Another highly influential theory that disrupts dominant notions related to sexuality, sex and gender is Butler’s theory of performativity. Her 1990 work *Gender Trouble,* in which she developed her theory of the performativity of gender, is frequently “cited as one of the founding texts of queer theory” (Butler, 1990/2006, vi). Drawing on French poststructuralism, and taking up Foucault’s work, which she subjected to a feminist reformulation, in *Gender Trouble* Butler set herself the task to “deconstruct identity” and “denaturalize” gender, sex and compulsory heterosexuality through a critical genealogy of gender that examines the institutional and discursive practices by which sexual difference and the category of woman is constituted (Butler, 2008, p. 106). In fact, Butler pulls apart the sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself,

revealing gender and sex as mutually constitutive constructions and, consequently, destabilizing not only binary gender categories but also binary sex categories. In so doing, Butler (1990/2006) further unravels what she calls the "heterosexual matrix": the "hegemonic discursive/epistemic model" of "a grid" in which "a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) [] is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (p. 208). In other words, Butler makes visible how the idea of congruence between only two existing sexes and genders (woman=female=feminine; man=male=masculine) produces the idea of compulsory heterosexuality. Butler further exposes the regulatory ideals of sex, gender, and compulsory heterosexuality as "a norm and a fiction" that disguises itself as the law (p. 185) but that can only be maintained through "political regulations and disciplinary practices" (p. 186). Understanding the dynamic that underlies the heterosexual matrix and the disciplinary practices and regulations that are necessary to keep it in place effectively disrupts notions of heterosexuality as normal and natural.

Moreover, Butler reveals sexualized and gendered speech acts, gestures, behaviors and enactments as performative in the sense that they produce and reproduce continuously a series of effects that fabricate and sustain the illusion of an essential natural core of sexual and gender identities (p. 185). For Butler, roles around sexuality, sex and gender are not only performed but such enactment is performative because it has productive consequences in that it fabricates the fantasy of a natural gendered and sexualized self (p. 186). Such theorization of identity as everyday performances through actions, speech utterances, and behaviors denaturalizes sex, gender, and compulsory heterosexuality and successfully suspends the idea of pre-existing, essential, stable and unitary identities.

Building on this, Butler's theory of performativity provides new lines of thinking about agency and transformation because "the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed" (p. 200). In other words, if how

we construct sexual and gender identities is created by what Butler terms "stylized repetition of acts" (p. 191), then transformation becomes possible through "variation on that repetition" (p. 198) that constitutes "subversive repetition" (p. 199), for example, in the form of the "failure to repeat" (p. 192) or "parodic practices" (p. 200). For example, Butler examines the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the adoption of butch/femme identities as instances of subversive repetition (p. 187). Rejecting critiques that these practices uncritically appropriate or reflect gender- and/or sex-stereotyping, Butler maintains that through the performance of imitation of gender the assumed naturalness of the "original" is revealed as a fantasy that is just as fabricated as the imitation (p. 188). In other words, practices that cross the boundaries imposed on sex, gender and sexuality are disruptive and offer opportunities for transformation. Like Foucault's notion of the reverse discourse, Butler's theory of performativity therefore allows for resistance and change through repetition with difference.

Central Tenets of Queer Theory

Butler's and Foucault's work has been immensely influential for queer theory and informs many of its central tenets. Grounded in the notion that identities are performative and discursively and relationally produced and enacted, queer theory takes as its project the contestation and destabilization of identity categories through the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses and practices that structure knowledge about sexuality, gender and sex. In other words, queer theorists attempt to deconstruct the histories and the social and discursive processes that produce oppressive identity categories which they view as "socially constructed, politically controlled and discursively instituted by religious, medical, psychological, and scientific communities" (Morris, 1998, p. 278). Hence, queer theory dismantles the notion that sex, gender, and sexuality are essential binaries, that bodies are either male or female, that social roles are either masculine or feminine, and that sexuality is either heterosexual or homosexual (Valocchi, 2005).

In addition, queer theory "break[s] down traditional ideas of normal and deviant, by showing the queer in what is thought of as normal, and the normal in the queer" (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 60), thus effectively challenging and disrupting normalizing discourses. In other words, "in a reversal of traditional ways of understanding others (in contrast to the norm), queer theory attempts to understand the norm in contrast to others" (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 63). In this way, it shifts the analytical gaze from one that focuses on homosexuality as the non-normative sexuality to one that opens up the "heterosexual closet" for analysis (Sumara & Davis, 1998, p. 216), effectively "queering" heterosexuality.

Based on such theorizing, queer politics reject what they perceive to be assimilationist strategies and progress narratives produced in the context of civil rights politics and the corresponding human rights discourse, instead attempting to retain the "revolutionary potential" (Pinar, 1998) of norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes to decenter and destabilize heterosexual normalization through what queer scholars and activists envision as transgressive anti-assimilationist politics (Gedro, 2010). Unlike humanist projects that are grounded in the notion of a basic sameness of all human beings despite their differences, queer transgressive projects emphasize dissimilarities and work from the assumption that there is no common foundation that all humans share. As Marla Morris (1998) noted, "queer identities move toward what I term foundationless dis-similarities…we are not alike, we are not the same, we are not one" (p. 277). For queer theorists, rather than uniting by a "unitary identity" queers unite "only by their opposition to disciplining, normalizing social forces" (Seidman, 1993, p. 133). In refusing to adopt a discourse of basic sameness, queer theory clearly distinguishes itself from other theories of difference that depend on this discourse, for example, when advocating for tolerance and empathy with those who are different from the norm. For queer theorists, this discourse of basic sameness is not transformational because it keeps the 'us versus them' or 'normal versus other' binaries intact. Instead, queer theory asks us to take an oppositional subversive stance to all

normative practices and regimes and to deconstruct the productive effects of such practices and regimes.

The critical method of deconstruction, understood as a form of social analysis of discourse and text, is central to queer theory. As William Pinar (1998b) says, "Queer theorists focus on those fundamental discursive structures that need to be disrupted, structures that make oppressive institutional practices possible" (p. 14). Consequently, queer theory shifts the focus from identity-based discourses of LGBT rights and assimilation to an analysis of the "interaction of language and action, self- and social identity, power and difference, experience and what is taken for knowledge, and the function of institutions to ensure equity beyond tolerance or representation" (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 64). Through such deconstructive analysis queer theory provides alternative conceptualizations of knowledge and new lines of thought that serve as interruption not reproduction (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). In other words, queer theory opens intellectual spaces in which what is otherwise taken for granted as stable, natural, or normal is challenged, interrogated, and explored, thereby allowing for new ways of looking, new paradigms of analyzing, and new methods of representing (Gedro, 2010). Based on these central tenets of queer theory, this school of thought has been characterized as non-canonical, polyphonic, transgressive, contradictory, and problematic (Bryson & de Castell, 1993; de Lauretis, 1991; Pinar, 1998).

As this discussion shows, queer theory engages with many of the key philosophical concepts, such as language, discourse, difference, identity, power, and knowledge that are also central to critical humanist educational theories, such as multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and social justice education. However, as a poststructuralist project, queer theory understands and presents these concepts in decidedly different ways, challenging educators to think differently about issues of difference and diversity, in general, and sexuality and gender diversity, more specifically. The recent increase in educational work informed by queer theorizing points to the possibilities of bringing these bodies of thought and practice into a

productive, even if complicated, relationship. In the following section, I examine some aspects of this relationship more closely.

Contributions of Queer Theory to the Field of Education

Many scholars have wrestled with the questions and tensions that arise when queer theory comes to bear on education. In a broad sense one could say that queer theory disrupts not only traditional mainstream models of education but also educational models rooted in critical theory, such as critical multicultural and social justice models, and critical pedagogy. Queer theory as a poststructural theory drawing on deconstructionist methods of analysis expands what critical theory and its offspring critical pedagogy had already set out to do: to trouble and rethink how educators engage with notions of difference, identity, power and knowledge in teaching, learning, and research. Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell (1993), for example, state that

> One of postmodernism's main contributions to theories of "difference" has been the deconstruction of the kinds of essentialist theorizing about sites of oppression in traditional and critical theorizing. …. In educational discourses, postmodernist theorizing (Lather, 1990) has cast doubt on latter-day critical theorists' monolithic claims of being able to identify the ideological underpinnings of oppressive pedagogies and, from a safe distance, therefore, to restructure educational environments so as to realize the goals of their "liberatory" or "emancipatory" projects. (pp. 296/297)

Bryson and de Castell's words point to critiques of what queer educational theorists perceive as assimilationist mainstream multicultural educational approaches that rely on strategies that demand positive representations of LGBT life in schools to fight the invisibility, marginalization, and injurious effects of homophobic discourse on LGBTQ students, families, and teachers. Arguing that such approaches and narratives of affirmation are grounded in liberal notions of tolerance, acceptance or empathy, they have pointed to the danger that such curricula and pedagogies of inclusion in fact produce new lines of exclusion because their centering on identity politics contributes to the reinscription of otherness (Carlson, 1998; Kumashiro, 2000, 2002).

Rejecting mainstream notions of anti-homophobia curricula that attempt to change the ignorance, attitudes, and beliefs of heterosexual students through pedagogical strategies and

curricular changes that rely on providing information about LGBTQ people and issues, queer education scholars further maintain that it is not enough to add marginalized voices to the curriculum or to teach knowledge about an 'Other' (e.g., Britzman, 1995; Kumashiro, 2000, 2002; Luhmann, 1998), calling such anti-homophobia education "sentimental" (Britzman, 1995, p. 158). While these educational theorists acknowledge that the "cultural and historical changes concerning lesbian and gay people (e.g., demands for civil rights, redefinition of family) reconstitute "bodies of knowledge and knowledge of bodies" (Britzman, 1995, p. 151) that are worthy of consideration within educational contexts, they seek to trouble how educators engage with such knowledges, arguing that it is not a lack of knowledge that needs to be addressed but rather that students need to unlearn already existing harmful knowledges that produce oppressive practices and structures in schools and beyond.

Looking to queer theory, these queer education scholars argue that a more "radical form of educative praxis" (Bryson & deCastell, 1993, p. 299) is necessary that can provide a "critical or subversive intervention" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 142) into the "conceptual geography of normalization" in schools which produce "the subject of difference as a disruption" (Britzman, 1995, p. 152). However, how do we move from queer theory with all its complexities and inherent ambiguities to classroom practices? Or in other words, how do we develop a queer pedagogy as queer praxis? This problem has engaged a number of educational scholars throughout the past almost two decades. The questions, what is queer pedagogy or what do we do when we queer pedagogy are not easily answered. As Susanne Luhmann (1998) asked,

> How can one imagine a queer pedagogy? … Is a queer pedagogy about and for queer students or queer teachers? Is a queer pedagogy a question of queer curriculum? Or, is it about teaching methods adequate for queer content? Or, about queer learning and teaching—and what would that mean? (p. 141).

In trying to answer these questions, I now turn to how queer theorizing has been taken up by various educational theorists as they envision queer praxis in the form of a queering of curriculum and pedagogy. In the following section, I draw on the early work done in this area of knowledge

production, much of which has appeared in *Queer Theory in* Education, an anthology of essays edited by William Pinar (1998a), that was the first comprehensive attempt to bring together scholars in an exploration about the possibilities of queer theory for pedagogy, curriculum, and educational research. I do so because these scholars' theorizing about what it means to queer educational practices continues to inform the work of latter scholars. By troubling notions of difference and identity, recentering analysis on processes of normalizing, and rethinking the relation between knowledge, ignorance and resistance to learning, pedagogy and curriculum are developed as radical educative praxis that shifts and expands the educational practices and strategies available when working with marginalized knowledges, such as LGBTQ topics, in the classroom.

Queer Pedagogy as Radical Educative Praxis

Troubling Difference and Identity

As discussed before, queer theorizing troubles commonsense notions about difference and identity that dominate mainstream educational discourses. Queer theory rejects the dichotomous, hierarchical structuring of differences or, in other words, the construction of binary identity categories based on social markers of difference (i.e., woman/man; girl/boy; female/male; feminine/masculine; homosexual/heterosexual). It further dismantles the notion of essential, stable and unitary identities, instead revealing them as discursively and performatively produced and reproduced within regulatory regimes of control. As Luhmann (1998) reminds us, "*queer* aims to spoil and transgress coherent (and essential) gender configurations and the desire for a neat arrangement of dichotomous sexual and gendered difference, central to both heterosexual and homosexual identities" (p.145).

Such fundamental changes in conceptualizations of difference and identity must critically inform a queering of curriculum and pedagogy through which discursive categories of identity pertaining to sexuality, gender and sex are interrogated. Understanding sexual identities as "social relations" (Britzman, 1995, p. 68), queer educational scholars suggest that queer curriculum and

pedagogy are interested more in understanding differences among persons than in understanding differences among categories of persons by asking about the circumstances of identification, thus, opening possibilities for adaptation and rearticulation (Sumara & Davis, 1998, p. 198). Unlike diversity-based education that privileges the inclusion and affirmation of human differences or social-justice based education that seeks to help learners understand the meaning of social difference and oppression both in the social system and in their personal lives, a queered pedagogy and curriculum makes its project the troubling and unraveling of constructs of difference and identity itself. In other words, queer pedagogy and curriculum wants to engage students with questions around the historical, social and discursive production of categories of difference related to sexuality, sex and gender and the effects of such production. Part of this pedagogical process is the troubling of commonsense notions about identities of sexuality, sex and gender by exploring notions of identities as non-binary, unstable, fluid, and changeable and the power of self-identifications. Another part of queering pedagogy concerns the deconstruction of the 'self versus other' or 'us versus them' binaries through which norm-disruptive sexualities, sexes and gender continue to be marginalized. This work can be supported by recentering the focus of analysis in the classroom from one on identities to one on processes of normalizing.

Recentering Analysis on Processes of Normalizing

At the core of a queering of curriculum and pedagogy is the idea that the dichotomous processes of normalizing and othering and the structures in which these processes are embedded need to be deconstructed and disrupted. Numerous queer scholars engage with notions of 'normalcy', making it queer pedagogy's project to "intervene in the production of so-called normalcy in schooled subjects" within the heteronormative spaces of schooling (Bryson & de Castell, 1993, p. 299). Taking up Butler's idea of "failed repetition," Britzman (1995) envisions a queer pedagogy that refuses "repetition of normalcy" (p. 153). For Luhmann (1998) queer pedagogy sets as its task the "subversion of central strategies of normalization" that maintain the heterosexual/homosexual binary in schools (p. 145). And William Tierney and Patrick Dilley

(1998) argue that "Rather than concentrate exclusively on what they claim to be surface-level issues—faculty appointments, an inclusive curriculum, a gay-friendly environment—queer theorists argue that structures [that privilege some and silence others] need to be disrupted (p. 65). But how can a queer pedagogy accomplish this task?

Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis's (1998) work explores the intersection of queer theory and curriculum theories through the lens of identity and its complex relations with sexuality and knowledge and provides an explicit framework for queering educators' thinking about pedagogy and curriculum. Grounding their theorizing in an understanding of sexuality as "a relational construct that functions to reinforce heteronormative and homophobic structures" (p. 198), they develop the following six dimensions of a queer curriculum and queer curriculum practices (see pp. 215-217):

- Queer curriculum understands sexuality not as an object of study but a valence of all knowing.
- Instead of focusing on the representation and interpretation of LGBT identities, queer curriculum seeks to make visible and disrupt the heterosexual normal calling into question the stability of heterosexuality.
- Queer curriculum creates situations that allow the exploration of sexuality, identity, and knowledge as complex, entangled relations.
- Queer curriculum practices are interested more in understanding differences among persons than in understanding differences among categories of persons by asking about the circumstances of identification, thus, opening possibilities for adaptation and rearticulation.
- Queer curriculum explores questions of desire, pleasure, and sexuality and seeks to interrupt our understandings of each of these.
- Queer curriculum creates heterotopic spaces that function as interruptions of normalized knowledge.

In understanding sexuality as relational, Sumara and Davis' queer curriculum framework moves pedagogical attention away from one of inclusion and positive representation of LGBT identities to one where the "normal" of heterosexuality – or, in other words, the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990/2006) – becomes visible and available for critique. Following Sedgwick's (1992) notion of the "epistemology of the closet," for Sumara and Davis, queer curriculum, rather than focusing on sexual identities "wonders about the unruly heterosexual closet" (p. 216). Consequently, Sumara and Davis suggest that "queer theory asks not that pedagogy becomes

sexed, but that it excavate and interpret the way it already *is* sexed and, further, that it begin to interpret the ways in which it is explicitly *heterosexed*" (p. 199). In summary, their framework asks educators to create pedagogical spaces and practices where normalized knowledges related to desire, pleasure, sexuality and identity are interrupted and rearticulated. This attention to processes of learning and knowledge production is central to queer pedagogy and has been further explored through an examination of the relation between knowledge, ignorance and resistance.

Relation Between Knowledge, Ignorance and Resistance

Teaching about LGBTQ topics is generally constructed as a controversial issue with specific emphasis on students' resistances to learning about such topics. Examining the relation between knowledge, ignorance and resistance has, therefore, been of particular importance for educators interested in efforts to queer curriculum and pedagogy. Particularly Deborah Britzman (1995, 2012) in her work has drawn on psychoanalytical concepts, such as the role of the unconscious, to explore how, what, and whether people learn. Britzman reconceptualizes students' resistances to learning as a desire to ignore (i.e., to ignore discomforting knowledge) and a desire for self-affirmation (and not learning). She emphasizes that,

> 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. (1995, p. 159)

By theorizing resistance and ignorance as unconscious defense mechanisms against knowledge that is perceived as threatening to existing knowledge and the self, Britzman shows that "it is knowledge that is a form of resistance" (p. 159), effectively turning the phrase "resistance to knowledge" upside down. In other words, knowledge can function in ways that leads to resistance. Echoing Spivak's (1992) question: "What is it to learn and to unlearn," Britzman argues that a queer pedagogy needs to consider the role of the unconscious and other psychological factors that allow learners to avoid learning and that in order for new knowledge to become accessible it is necessary to unlearn old knowledge.

Following Britzman, Luhmann (1998) conceptualizes ignorance and resistance as “what one cannot bear to know” (p. 150). Critiquing critical pedagogies for constructing a binary opposition between knowledge and ignorance, Luhmann argues that ignorance constitutes knowledge, saying “ignorance is not the opposite to knowledge but an opposition to knowing. Instead of a lack of information, ignorance is a form of psychic resistance, a desire not to know” (p. 149). Like Britzman, Luhmann argues that a queer pedagogy needs to address not a lack of knowledge, but the (psychic) resistance to knowledge, the unconscious refusal to understand. She writes,

> Hence, what is at stake in a queer pedagogy is not the application of queer theory (as a new knowledge) onto pedagogy, nor the application of pedagogy (as a new method) for the dissemination of queer theory and knowledge. Instead, at stake are the implications of queer theory and pedagogy for the messy processes of learning and teaching, reading and writing. (p. 151)

Another queer education scholar who has extensively explored the relation of knowledge, resistance and ignorance is Kevin Kumashiro (2000, 2002) who examines how queering our understandings of these concepts not only requires a radical rethinking of learning but also teaching[16]. In his work, Kumashiro questions "what it means to teach in ways that challenge different forms of oppression...what it means to address our resistances to discomforting knowledges, and about what it means to put uncertainties and crisis at the center of the learning process” (2002, p. 8). For Kumashiro, what is at stake is teaching in ways that are not oppressive but subversive (2002, p. 7). Two of the concepts that he uses are of particular relevance when considering the relation of knowledge, ignorance and resistance: that of “the uncontrollable and unknowable in education” (2002, p. 7) and that of “crisis” as a catalyst for learning (p. 8).

Kumashiro argues that we have to rethink assumptions that cast teaching as an act that we can “expect to be knowable and controllable and predictable (such as with what Paulo Freire has

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[16] For a further discussion of his theory of antioppressive education see the next section in this chapter.

called the ‘banking’ concept of education)” if we acknowledge that learning and teaching are relational and that students desire to resist discomforting knowledges. Instead we need to acknowledge “the unknowability” of the act of teaching (2000, p. 149) that always leaves “a…space between…the teacher/teaching and the learner/learning, and between what is conscious and unconscious to the teacher, as well as what is conscious and unconscious to the learner” (2000, p. 149). In other words, teachers can never fully know whether and what their students learn or what students will do with what the teacher is trying to teach. For Kumashiro, it is in this unknowable “space between” where a queer pedagogy can insert itself as it asks teachers to embrace the “unknowability” of teaching and learning), to “trouble their own practices” (2002, p. 68) and to work with, instead of trying to avoid, moments of “crisis” (2002, p. 8).

Like Britzman and Luhmann, Kumashiro considers some of the psychological factors that occur in the context of learning, paying particular attention to the construct of crisis. Kumashiro proposes that “we desire teaching and learning in ways that affirm and confirm our sense that *what we have come to believe is normal or commonsensical in society* is really the way things are and are supposed to be” (2002, p. 57), preventing us from confronting and engaging productively with “discomforting forms of knowledge” (2002, p. 6), which consequently results in resistance to change (2002, p. 24). Arguing that “’learning’ mean[s] learning things that are uncomfortable because they complicate a person’s ‘frame of thinking’,” he advocates for placing “crisis at the center of the learning process” (2002, p. 8). Drawing on Britzman’s (1995) argument that all learning involves unlearning, Kumashiro recognizes that processes of encountering discomforting knowledges and unlearning can lead students into a “state of ‘crisis’ or paralysis (such as feeling emotionally upset)” that can lead to resistance (2002, p. 48). He therefore emphasizes that learning requires that students “work through the crisis” before they can develop a “desire for change” (2002, p. 48).

The work of the authors discussed in this section illustrate that bringing queer theorizing to bear on education in the form of a queering of curriculum and pedagogy is productive because

it opens up new lines of thinking about difference and identity, demanding the disruption of normalized notions of sexuality and gender, and reconceptualizing the relation between knowledge, resistance and ignorance. In so doing, a queered pedagogy and curriculum provides a provocative intervention into traditional as well as critical educational approaches that address sexual and gender diversity. However, the queering of curriculum and pedagogy remains a highly theoretical project with very few documented examples of actual implementation in classrooms outside of higher education. In addition, several scholars, even those committed to queer pedagogy, have pointed to tensions and possibly impossibilities of such pedagogical praxis (Bacon, 2006; Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Youdell, 2009, 2010), some of which I will briefly examine in the following section.

Impossibilities of a Queer Pedagogy

One of the major challenges of a queer pedagogy is the result of its poststructuralist critique of identity politics. Queer pedagogy's rejection of visibility approaches of inclusion, based on queer theory's insistence that social categories be deconstructed in order to avoid essentialist constructions of identities, appears counter-productive within educational spaces that continue to silence and marginalize the experiences and stories of LGBTQ people and where LGBTQ students, families and teachers are still struggling to become intelligible subjects. Bryson and de Castell (1993), for example, speak of the "insistent irresolvability" of essentialist constructions of identity in the context of pedagogical practice (pp. 285/286), noting that "Deliberate representations of sexual difference – for instance, lesbian sexuality – play a key and effective role in an oppressed group's struggles for voice, visibility, and empowerment" (p. 289). This remains true today, when LGBTQ students, families, and teachers are still fighting to gain that right to speak in schools.

In addition, it appears to be impossible to escape the notion of identity when teaching about a topic that is necessarily bound to sexual and gender identities. Bryson and de Castell (1993), for example, regarding the limitations of their queer interventions in teaching a lesbian

studies course, commented, “What this taught us is that lesbianism, although it could of course be any other subordinated identity, is always marginal, even in a lesbian studies course, and that lesbian identity is always fixed and stable, even in a course that explicitly critiques, challenges, deconstructs ‘lesbian identity’" (p. 294). Their experience points to the unsolved dilemma of trying to unfix identities that always already are and remain marginalized in educational spaces.

In other words, when teaching LGBTQ topics, even when employing a queer approach to curriculum and pedagogy, it becomes questionable that identities can or even should be cast aside or deconstructed. After all, having, naming and maintaining an identity provides an anchor in the messiness of life, even when we experience marginalization and discrimination based on such identity. Even the pursuit of normalcy – so heftily critiqued in queer thinking – must be understood as an understandable response to social constraints that punish those who do not conform to dominant norms. Jen Bacon (2006) gets to the root of these tensions and impossibilities when she says,

> That tension is, in part, a tension that we all deal with in our classrooms, curricula, and institutions every day, because it is a tension that resides within each and every one of us. We all rely on identity, and yet we are troubled by it. We all want inclusion, and yet we sometimes find ourselves feeling exclusive. We all want to challenge heterosexist and homophobic ideas, structures, and discourses when we find them, and yet we sometimes find ourselves wanting to be normal. Our students want to be normal too, because it is a measure of privilege to be able to shun the normal–to queer the categories of our lives for the delight of pushing our politics further than our bodies might readily go, and they are in the process of acquiring that privilege. (p. 279)

The tension between queer approaches to curriculum and pedagogy and other critical educational approaches that address sexual and gender diversity appears to be unresolvable. I will now turn in more detail to Kevin Kumashiro’s (2000, 2002) theory of antioppressive education because I view it as an example for envisioning a pedagogy and curriculum that bridges such tensions and offers educators a framework for addressing sexual and gender diversity by drawing on the conceptual tools and resources that all of these approaches provide.

Kevin Kumashiro's Theory of Antioppressive Education

Kevin Kumashiro (2000, 2002) theorizes an antioppressive education that is grounded in feminist, queer and post-structuralist thinking with the intention of extending instead of replacing a social-justice based multicultural education. Kumashiro argues that the "multiplicity and situatedness of oppression, and the complexities of teaching and learning" (2002, p. 23) require that educators who want to engage in antioppressive education employ a combination of educational approaches while also exploring the possibilities of poststructuralist, feminist and queer perspectives for their teaching practices. Importantly, he emphasizes that no one theory can "give *the* answer, the panacea, the best practice" since "every educational practice makes possible some antioppressive changes while closing off others," but that each theory can help educators "imagine different possibilities for working against oppression" (2002, p. 9). His theory of antioppressive education, therefore, provides a valuable framework for creating and implementing curriculum and pedagogical practices that draw on the conceptual tools and resources of all of the educational theories and approaches that I have discussed so far.

At the core of Kumashiro's theory is the concept of oppression, which he poses as the underlying issue that educators need to address when working towards social justice and social transformation. His definition of oppression emphasizes the multiple manifestations of oppression; thus, opening the door for an intersectional queer approach to pedagogy. He explains oppression as, "a social dynamic in which certain ways of being in the world—including certain ways of identifying or being identified—are normalized or privileged. Forms of oppression include racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, colonialism, and other 'isms.'"[17]

Based on his review of extant literature, Kumashiro in his article "Toward a Theory of Antioppressive Education" (2000) and his book *Troubling Education (2002)* identifies,

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[17] www.antioppressiveeducation.org/definition

summarizes and critiques four primary approaches to antioppressive education, each of which conceptualizes the nature of oppression and works against oppression in different ways, which is expressed through different goals and particular curricula, pedagogies, and educational policies. These approaches are: education for the Other[18], education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and Othering, and education that changes students and society. Each of these approaches can be employed to challenge racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. In the following, I lay out Kumashiro's critique of each of these approaches.

Education for the Other

Antioppressive education approaches that fall within the paradigm of *Education for the Other* take up the notion that students who are 'othered' based on one or more of their social identity markers often experience marginalization, discrimination, harassment, physical and verbal abuse, exclusion and isolation in schools with often detrimental effects. *Education for the Other* approaches take as their goal to improve the schooling experiences of these marginalized students in two ways: by changing schools from harmful spaces into safe, affirming, and materially sound spaces (e.g., through the implementation of safe school policies, support groups, student alliances, or spaces that provide resources) and by employing culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge diversity among students, embrace and affirm their differences, and incorporate and connect students' identities and life experiences to their learning.

While the affirmation of students' diverse identities and the provision of safe and supportive spaces is important and valuable, an *Education for the Other*, with its focus on prejudice and the interpersonal harmful treatment of those who are perceived as the Other, is problematic because of the following. First, it implies that the Other is the problem because it

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[18] Kumashiro uses the term Other to "refer to those groups that are traditionally marginalized, denigrated, or violated (i.e., Othered) in society." People as the Other are "often defined in opposition to groups traditionally favored, normalized, or privileged in society, and as such, are defined as *other than* the idealized norm" (2002, p. 32).

focuses on the negative experiences of the Other who does not fit into the norms of schools and society. Second, it requires that educators define and identify the Other – a process that is highly problematic because it reinforces artificial lines of inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, Kumashiro urges educators to ask who the Other is that we are educating for, to "look to the margins to find students who are being missed," to "re-create the spaces by asking, whom does this space harm or exclude," "to ask what practices does this program foreclose or make unthinkable" and "whom does this pedagogy miss or silence" (2002, p. 38). Third, it neither problematizes the privileging of the 'normal' nor does it acknowledge that oppression is multifaceted and context-specific because identities are complex, fluid, shifting, and intersecting. Kumashiro notes, "the situated nature of oppression (whereby oppression plays out differently for different people in different contexts) and the multiple and intersecting identities of students make difficult any antioppressive effort that revolves around only one identity and only one form of oppression" (2002, p. 38). He, therefore contends that educational efforts should "address multiple oppressions and multiple identities" (2002, p. 38).

Education about the Other

The second approach *Education about the Other* considers specifically how the school curriculum can attempt to work against oppression through increasing knowledge about the Other. Oppression in this approach is conceptualized as the cause of lack of knowledge or existing harmful knowledge in the form of partial, incomplete, distorted or misleading understandings that students have about the Other because of exclusion, invisibility, and silence or disparagement, denigration, and marginalization (2002, p. 40). This approach to antioppressive education focuses on curriculum changes to bring about change, for example, by including specific units on the Other, by reading literature about and/or by the Other, or by integrating lessons on the Other continuously throughout the curriculum (2002, p. 41). Hence, this approach seeks to bring visibility and give voice to marginalized groups with the goal of normalizing differences and Otherness so that students can develop empathy for the Other.

However, Kumashiro troubles this approach because there is the danger of presenting "a dominant narrative of the Other's experience" (i.e., the queer experience) through which "Otherness might become essentialized and remains different from the norm" (2002, p. 42), reinforcing rather than disrupting harmful 'norm versus Other' or 'us versus them' binaries. Also, this approach often "positions the Other as the expert" which might "reinforce[] the social, cultural, and even intellectual space/division between the norm and the Other" (2002, p. 42). Further, this approach assumes that it is possible to gain full knowledge or discover the truth through accurate portrayals – an assumption which has been refuted by postmodern thought that any knowledge can only always be partial.

Kumashiro argues that instead of changing the curriculum to fill in gaps in knowledge, the existing partial, and often harmful, knowledge needs to be disrupted. He emphasizes that "changing oppression requires *disruptive* knowledge, not simply more knowledge" (2002, p. 42), reminding us that "the value of lessons about the Other comes not in the truth it gives us about the Other, but in the pedagogical and political uses to which the resulting (disruptive) knowledge can be put" (2000, p. 35). For Kumashiro, such disruptive knowledge can develop when educators ask their students to consider questions around silences, absences, stereotyping, or the privileging of particular ideologies in texts. Such disruptive knowledge can also develop when educators provide opportunities for students to separate "their sense of self from a sense of normalcy" as they acknowledge and work against their own privileges (2002, p. 44).

Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering

The third approach to antioppressive education, *Education that is critical of privileging and Othering*, takes off where the other two approaches leave off – with an examination of how some groups and identities are normalized and privileged while other groups and identities are othered, and how these dual processes of privileging and othering are maintained through social structures, ideologies, and the legitimizing language of "normalcy" and "commonsense" (2000, p. 36). In other words, not the knowledge about the Other but knowledge about the dynamics and

processes of oppression and how we are complicit with or contribute to oppression becomes the focus of inquiry. Educators working within this approach understand that schools are social institutions that transmit dominant ideologies which serve to "reproduce existing social order" (2000, p. 36). Antioppressive education that adopts this approach is based on a "*critique and transformation* of hegemonic structures and ideologies" (2000, p. 36) through the development of a critical consciousness that requires that students learn to recognize and understand the oppressive processes of privileging, normalizing, marginalizing, and othering and to *un*learn what is considered normal or normative (2000, pp. 36-37). It is here where aspects of queer theory enter antioppressive teaching as privileged and normative thinking is interrogated with the goal of disruption. Within this approach, "Thinking critically, then, involves recognizing this couching and masking of privilege, and teaching critically involves unmasking or making visible the privilege of certain identities and the invisibility of this privilege" (2000, p. 37). Students learn how they are privileged and positioned by some of their identities, and how they participate in the positioning of others (2000, p. 37). Moreover, this approach of antioppressive education has as its goal social transformation based on students' empowerment to challenge oppression as they learn about oppression and develop critical thinking skills (2002, p. 46). Central to such thinking is the idea that once students have become critically conscious about the injustices of the world, they will want to work toward change.

While Kumashiro acknowledges that this approach can encourage students to resist oppressive ideologies and practices and to engage in transformative efforts, he cautions that consciousness-raising and empowerment not necessarily lead to subversive political action and social transformation (2002, p. 48). He further emphasizes that purely structural explanations for oppression do not allow for a "more situated understanding of oppression" (2000, p. 38) that takes into account the "diversity and particularity" of experiences with oppression (2002, p. 47). Pointing to the "fluidity of identity and power relations" through which power shifts and is exerted differently in different situations (2002, p. 48), Kumashiro asserts that "because all

individuals have multiple identities, not all members of the same group necessarily have the same or even similar experiences with oppression" (2000, p. 38). He, therefore, argues for an approach to antioppressive education that acknowledges the multiplicity and situatedness of oppression and recognizes how different forms of oppression intersect.

Education that Changes Students and Society

The fourth approach to antioppressive education, which Kumashiro calls *Education that changes students and society* draws on the poststructuralist notion that "oppression originates in discourse, and, in particular, in the citing of particular [harmful] discourses, which frame how people think, feel, act, and interact" (2000, p. 40). As Kumashiro points out, "conceptualizing oppression as *discursively* produced is helpful for understanding how oppression can play out differently in different contexts" (2000, p. 41); thus, acknowledging the situatedness and complexity of oppression. Moreover, Kumashiro employs the notion of "citation" to explain how harmful discourses become oppressive through continuous repetition as they get cited over and over (2002, p. 50). Oppression therefore is also "citationally produced" (2002, p. 53). Kumashiro employs another poststructural concept "supplementation" to explain how such citations can be altered by adding something new when they get repeated (2002, p. 52). For Kumashiro, the notions of citation and supplementation both help us understand how oppression is produced and reproduced and what can be done to change it.

Bringing about change within this poststructuralist approach to antioppressive education goes beyond developing a critical consciousness of oppression towards "altering citational practices" (2002, p. 52) through the processes of disruption, supplementation and reworking (e.g., the term queer has been disrupted and re-appropriated by the queer community as a term of empowerment). Kumashiro suggests that repeating harmful discourses with a difference (supplementation), for example, using stereotypes in a critical way instead of simply prohibiting their use has the potential to transform harmful discourses that have oppressive effects.

In addition, Kumashiro maintains that change involves "troubling or 'unlearning' what we have already learned"– a process that can be emotionally discomforting and lead to "crisis" when it "disrupts our commonsense view of the world" (2002, p. 63). Kumashiro recognizes that such crisis can result in "psychic resistance to change" because "we unconsciously desire learning only that which affirms what we already know and our own sense of self" (2000, p. 43). For Kumashiro, then, antioppressive education needs to create spaces "in which students can work through crisis" (2002, p. 63) and learn "to desire change, to desire difference" (2000, p. 43). Antioppressive teaching and learning, therefore, takes place "through entering and working through crisis" because this process involves "changing ourselves" as we move into "different intellectual, emotional and political spaces" (2002, pp. 63/64). Kumashiro proposes that students get the opportunity to work through crisis by revisiting the crisis through testimony so that they can supplement and rework it with new meanings. Part of this process involves reflexivity, asking us to reflect on how we are implicated in oppression and what this means for our sense of self (2002, p. 64). For Kumashiro, these practices "queer our understanding of ourselves" and support the deconstruction of the norm versus Other binary (2002, p. 64).

While Kumashiro emphasizes that the poststructuralist theorizing that informs this fourth approach to antioppressive education complicates and complements the other three approaches by rethinking how students can engage with difference and identity as they enter and work through crisis and resistance, he is also aware that an education premised on asking students to constantly work through crisis is problematic (2002, p. 69). It raises ethical questions, for example, around students' vulnerabilities related to the disclosure of moments of crisis and what they will need to work through such crisis, as well as questions around what crisis might mean for different students who enter into such conversations from different places (2002, pp. 69/70).

In addition, Kumashiro's critique of the first three approaches – Education for the Other, Education about the Other, and Education that is critical of privileging and othering – does not seem to account for the potential that these approaches have for bringing about change. I would

argue that interventions in the form of the creation of safe and supportive spaces, the adoption of culturally response teaching practices, or curriculum changes may be able to effectively disrupt dominant school structures and practices. For example, a curriculum such as Sara's Gay and Lesbian Literature class not only teaches about the queer Other, or provides a space where queer students can see their lies mirrored in the literature they encounter in their English class, but it also changes the school culture as a type of knowledge that once was illegitimate and invisible becomes valued and validated.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I examined queer pedagogy and Kumashiro's theory of antioppressive education as theoretical frameworks that complicate and extend prevalent critical education theories that frame the teaching of LGBTQ topics. I considered Foucault's theory of the discursive production of sexual identities and Butler's theory of performativity as theories that critically inform queer theorizing. I showed how queer theory provoked educational theorists to rethink concepts such as language, discourse, difference, identity, power and knowledge. In the process, they theorized a queering of curriculum and pedagogy through which notions of identity, difference, and normalcy are troubled and disrupted and through which the relation of knowledge, ignorance and resistance is explored and rethought. Finally, I discussed Kumashiro's theory of antioppressive education as a framework that bridges critical education approaches with queer poststructuralist thinking.

However, like other scholarly work that draws on queer theorizing, queer pedagogy and even Kumashiro's work are largely theoretical. Kumashiro acknowledges that "Educational research has yet to offer many concrete examples of educators making use of these insights in their classrooms" (2000, p. 41). In addition, even though Kumashiro explores some implications for English classroom, these theories do not explicitly address the context of literacy teaching. In the following chapter, I will develop a framework for reading queerly in the English literature classroom through which I seek to bridge the goals, practices and conceptual tools of queer theory

specifically to literacy teaching. It is my goal to reconceptualize how teachers think about creating, implementing, and analyzing curricula through which they engage their students with LGBTQ-themed texts by developing what I term *queer literacies*.

CHAPTER 5

TEACHING LGBTQI-EXPANSIVE LITERATURE: TOWARD QUEER LITERACIES

If you can imaginatively enter into another person's life, you cannot hate and wound that person. You know what it is like to be them. They are not Other. They are the Same.
Art allows that imaginative connection with people and situations outside our own. Art gives us more than mental understanding or generalised sympathy – it shows us another's pain, another's struggle. It joins life together where hatred would sever it.

And what's poetry but a way of finding a language for what cannot be said?
And what's theatre but a way of showing us what is hidden?
And what's painting and sculpture but a way of giving form to the formless?
And what's music but the sounds of our cries and the rhythm of the universe?

Never let anyone tell you that art is a luxury. Art is the best of the human spirit – our way of being more than we are – all that we are. Sometimes I think art is our only chance.

- Jeanette Winterson (2001)

In Chapters 3 and 4, I discussed multicultural education, critical pedagogy, social justice education, queer pedagogy and antioppressive education as important theoretical frameworks for supporting the teaching of LGBTQ topics in schools. While all of these educational schools of thought are rooted in critical theories that consider the injustices of our social worlds, each of them offers different pedagogies grounded in overlapping, expanding, or diverging ideas, concepts and goals when thinking about how to engage with issues around sexuality and gender diversities in schools, which I explored and discussed in the previous chapters. What all of these educational theories share is a common concern for social inequities and the transformative potential of education to effect personal and social change. More specifically, all of these theories make it their project to consider the educational implications of issues of difference, identity, language, discourse, knowledge and power, suggesting a rethinking of the processes of teaching and learning through radical forms of educative praxis.

Although these educational theories provide broad frameworks for addressing issues around sexuality and gender diversity in schools, they do not address specifically the teaching of LGBTQI-expansive literature – a term that I will use henceforth to disrupt the notion of

inclusiveness (i.e., making curriculums inclusive for LGBTQI students or teaching LGBTQI-inclusive literature). Poststructural theorizing has disassembled the notion of inclusion of diversity, pointing out how every inclusion creates new boundaries of exclusion in the process of bringing some from the margins in to the center while continuing to leave others out. I, therefore, suggest using the term *expansive* to signal a process of expanding through an opening up and breaking up of boundaries instead of bringing in.

In this chapter, I want to explore how the teaching of LGBTQI-expansive literature, particularly in English language arts classes, can be reframed by bridging the goals, practices and conceptual tools of queer theory to critical literacies teaching. Drawing upon principles of critical theory concerned with the social construction of experience and the positive transformation of conditions of human oppression (Kincheloe, 2004) and feminist queer poststructural thinking which emphasizes the discursive, relational and performative production of identifications (Butler, 1990/2006, 2008; Meyer, 2010; Talburt, 2000; Youdell, 2005, 2006, 2009), it is my intention to open up spaces for new imaginaries for teaching issues around identity, diverse sexualities and genders, as well as social justice in schools (Atkinson et al., 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009a-c).

My work is grounded in the deep belief that literature allows for the "imaginative connection" Winterson (2001) writes about in the quotation that introduces this chapter. It is through imaginative connections and that which unfolds when "finding a language for what cannot be said...showing us what is hidden" that literature develops its transformative potentials. These imaginative connections happen in various ways, as readers see themselves and their lives reflected in the literature and as they encounter "images, ideas, and cultures that are outside their daily experiences" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 265). Literature as mirrors through which possibilities for "identification through representation" are available for readers as well as literature as windows into society that "expand" readers' understandings of the world as they "go beyond themselves" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 265) can have transformative effects for

readers. However, Maria José Botelho and Masha Rudman (2009) challenge us to consider how literature can invite readers into transformative action as they step through the metaphorical door that represents the reader's critical engagement with the ideologies embedded in the literature. They write, "Mirrors reflect our language use and windows afford expanses to new understandings, whereas doors invite action" (p. 265). It is through the representative function of literary texts in conjunction with a critical analysis of how the texts discursively construct realities, identities, and subject positions for the reader that queer's discursive and performative approach to transformation connects with critical education's identity-based approaches in relation to literacy education. As Botelho and Rudman (2009) say, "It is reading that goes beyond stretching children's cultural imagination to reading that fosters a historical and sociopolitical imagination" (p. 102).

Acknowledging the transformative potential of literature, it is my goal to theorize what I term *queer literacies* as a framework for designing, implementing, and analyzing curricula through which students explore and critically engage with LGBTQI-expansive literature. In part one of this chapter, I briefly outline how reading queerly has been conceptualized as alternative reading practices thus far; first turning to the notion of reading practices as engaged by queer education theorists, and then discussing literature that has been published very recently on the topic of queer literacy. Next, I review some of the central tenets of critical literacies which have been widely adopted as a framework for literacy teaching by educators who ground their teaching in the critical educational theories that I have discussed in the previous chapters. Drawing on the literature discussed as well as what emerged for me from the study of the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, in part two of this chapter, I develop the multidimensional theoretical framework of queer literacies. Finally, in part three of this chapter, I discuss *queer moments* as a useful theoretical concept to explore and illustrate how the dimensions of queer literacies manifest when students engage with LGBTQI-expansive literature in the classroom.

Reading Queerly Through Alternative Reading Practices

Conceptualizing Alternative Reading Practices

Much of queer theorizing has its root in textual interpretations and literary theory, with key thinkers of queer theory reinterpreting historical records (e.g., Foucault, 1978/1990), psychoanalytic and feminist texts (Butler, 1990/2006), novels (Halberstam, 1998; Sedgwick, 1990; Sumara & Davis, 1998), visual texts (Fuss, 1991; Miller, 1990) or popular culture texts (Doty, 1993).[19] Serving as a method of literary criticism (Bacon, 2006), queer theory provides analytical and conceptual tools that educators can employ when seeking to read queerly with their students. Queer educational scholars, such as Britzman, Luhmann, Morris, or Sumara and Davis, whose work I already touched on in the previous chapter, have taken up these tools to conceptualize alternative reading practices for educational contexts. Britzman (1995) in her influential essay on queer pedagogy powerfully demands, "stop, reading straight," writing,

> Reading practices might well read all categories as unstable, all experiences as constructed, all reality as having to be imagined, all knowledge as provoking uncertainties, misrecognitions, ignorance, and silences. The point is that what is at stake is the capacity of the educational apparatus and its pedagogies to exceed their own readings, to stop reading straight. (p. 164)

This is a reconceptualizing of reading practices that emphasizes the disruptive rather than an affirmative function of reading, making the reading process messy, uncontrollable, and discomforting. Morris (1998), on the other hand, emphasizes the "digressive" dimension of queer reading practices (pp. 277/280), viewing queerness as an aesthetic or sensibility when reading and interpreting texts (art, music, literature). For her, such digressive reading offers opportunities to "uncover the possibility of the text's radical political potential" (p. 277) by pointing out silences or absences and understanding curriculum as gendered, political, historical, racial, classed, and aesthetic; thus, "unresting" the curriculum and challenging the status quo (p. 284).

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[19] As referenced by Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013

Other scholars have engaged with the questions we ask of texts when reading queerly. For Luhmann (1998), for example, reading queerly means raising subversive questions, such as "How do we insert ourselves in the text? What positions do we refuse? Which ones are desirable?" (p. 149). For Kumashiro, what is at stake is not only what is said in a text but rather what is left unsaid. He writes, "The unsaid is what gives the said its meaning" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 61). He suggests a range of subversive questions that get at what is unsaid; thus, encouraging reading in antioppressive ways. Kumashiro (2002) further draws on Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1997) concept of "routes of reading" (p. 77), suggesting that alternative reading practices can make possible poststructuralist rereadings of difference, normalcy, and intersections that "illuminate many complexities and contradictions in our experiences of oppression, and disrupt any one way to 'understand' oppression (p. 78). Such variations, for Kumashiro, provide alternative ways to "'read' identity, culture, and oppression" through readings that focus on "Otherness and difference," on "privilege and normalcy," and on the "intersected and situated nature of Otherness and privilege" (pp. 77/78). It is through such "antioppressive routes of reading" that change can happen as we "queer[] our very selves" (p. 78).

In other words, framing reading practices through a queer lens provides an analytical and pedagogical basis for interrogating and interrupting normative notions of sexuality and gender. Such queer conceptualizations of alternative reading practices and routes have very recently been taken up by several scholars who specifically explore the notion of reading queerly related to children's literature. In the following section, I will discuss this scholarship and its implications for my project.

Conceptualizing Queer Literacy for the Teaching of LGBTQ-Themed Children's Literature

The notion of queer literacy has lately been introduced related to the teaching of LGBTQ-themed children's literature in classrooms. Both Wayne Martino and Wendy Cumming-Potvin (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014) as well as Aubry Threlkeld (2014) draw on queer theoretical and critical literacies perspectives to examine how

what they term a “queer-infused critical literacy framework” or “critical queer literacy approach,” respectively, can be employed to address same-sex parenting and non-normative sexuality and gender through the reading of children’s literature in the elementary school classroom. These scholars advocate for blending critical literacies and queer pedagogy in an attempt to move such readings beyond a simple inclusion of LGBTQ-themed texts to reading practices that challenge heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Threlkeld (2014) argues that “critical literacy needs to become queer” in response to its silences and absences around issues of sexuality (p. 224), suggesting that queer critical literacy take an approach of “intersectional reflexivity” (Jones & Calafell, 2012) that recognizes the “complicated social matrix” of intersecting oppressions (p. 224). For Threlkeld, a queer critical literacy approach needs to question and challenge not only heteronormativity – which privileges and naturalizes heterosexuality – but also homonormativity – the norms that seek to produce assimilated lesbian and gay people that are “just like” heterosexual people (i.e., white, middle-class, gender normative, and in loving, committed relationships). Such homonormativity effectively wants to produce acceptable lesbian and gay subjects by applying heteronormative values to gays and lesbians.

Threlkeld places her discussion of queer critical literacy that troubles both hetero- and homonormativity in the context of teaching children’s literature about same-sex parents in elementary school classrooms. Based on her review of such literature and her discussion of how these books can accomplish this work, she suggests five practical strategies for critical queer literacy practices that can be used in the classroom: using annotated bibliographies to discover a wide range of texts featuring same-sex parents, avoiding the reading of texts in isolation, encouraging students to author authentic texts, teaching beyond the text critical thinking, and letting students reveal bias while modeling preferred language (pp. 234/235).

Not only is it not quite clear, how these strategies represent a queer approach to critical literacies, but moreover some of the terms that Threlkeld uses, particularly the notions of

‘authentic texts’ and ‘preferred language’, need to be troubled from a poststructuralist perspective. While Threlkeld uses the idea of authentic texts to mean those text that students produce grounded in their identities, poststructuralist understandings of identities raise questions about how students perform and negotiate their identities in relation to their audience (e.g., the teacher or other students in the classroom) through such textual production. The term preferred language is also ambiguous. In explaining what she means by it, Threlkeld defines it as “anti-oppressive language” (p. 235), which may be a better term because it allows teachers to frame issues of language around the productive effects of language

Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2011), likewise, want to provide insights into the “pedagogical potential for interrupting heteronormativity in the elementary school classroom” through literary resources for children that feature same-sex parents and relationships (p. 480). Recognizing the “social and political character of literacy education ... [as] a normative social and cultural project (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 6), Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2011) argue that homophobia and heterosexism need to be interrogated in the critical literacy English classroom (p. 482).

Their discussion focuses on research undertaken with two Australian elementary school teachers and the narratives these teachers produced as they reflected on using picture books and media resources with representations of same-sex families or relationships in their elementary school classrooms. The teachers’ reflections revealed that they held on to heterosexist and heteronormative assumptions – “straight thinking” (p. 494) – despite their willingness to consider utilizing these resources. Asserting that they themselves were not homophobic, these two teachers expressed cautiousness and self-monitoring when thinking about the use of these literary resources, citing parental surveillance grounded in the “cultural, religious and moral values of the parent community” (p. 487) and concerns about age appropriateness related to the literary resources (p. 493). Consequently, these teachers suggested de-emphasizing issues of sexuality in

the resources by focusing on other themes of the texts (i.e., bullying); thus, depoliticizing the readings (pp. 485-487).

Pointing to the transformative possibilities of "deconstructive reading practices" (p. 498) that trouble what Britzman (1995) terms the "production of normalcy" as well as the "discourse of sameness" (p. 490), Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2011) suggest that teachers employ what they call a "queer-infused critical literacy framework" for critically interrogating their own reading practices and "opening up spaces for interrupting heteronormativity" (p. 497). They propose that this can support teachers in "creating 'risky' pedagogical spaces for working at the limits of heteronormative thinking in the critical literacy classroom" in ways that "think[] about social difference beyond *the impulse to normalize*" (p. 499). In a more recently published article, Cumming-Potvin and Martino (2014) draw on interviews with a queer-identified elementary school teacher and her reflections on the potentials of reading LGBTQ-themed texts with her students to develop what they call now a "queer and trans-infused approach" (p. 1).

While these authors' works are useful in beginning to think about how the reading of LGBTQI-expansive literature can be reframed by drawing on analytical tools queer theorizing has to offer, neither one offers a thorough theorization of the concepts they introduce. Threlkeld's five strategies for critical queer literacy practices are very general and seem to focus on practices already well-established in critical literacies classrooms. It would have been productive to develop more in depth the notion of intersectionality and the relation of hetero-/homonormativity within a context of critical queer literacy practices. Likewise, missing from Martino and Cumming-Potvin's discussion is what exactly constitutes their queer and trans-infused critical literacy framework and how teachers might use it to engage students with LGBTQ-expansive literature. For example, how might teachers employ "deconstructive reading practices" to disrupt the production of (hetero)normalcy in their classrooms when they read LGBTQ-themed texts with their students?

More informative in this regard is Caitlin Ryan and Jill Hermann-Wilmarth's (2013) essay on queer readings of award-winning children's literature. Like Threlkeld, Martino and Cumming-Potvin, these authors draw on queer theorizing to suggest alternative reading practices; however, in so doing they do not apply the notion of queer readings to LGBTQ-themed texts but argue that a wide range of familiar children's books, which are already on the shelves of classrooms and school libraries, can be read queerly. Defining queerness as "the disruption of normative categories relating to sexuality, gender, bodies, and desire" (p. 144), Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth propose that queer readings of children's literature provide means to explore the "socially constructed norms of real life" related to sexualities and genders (p. 142) even within the normative spaces of schools in which norm-disruptive sexualities and genders are silenced. Informed by the deconstructive strand of queer theory, the authors suggest a destabilizing analytic approach to reading children's literature that expands traditional reading practices by exploring the multiple, transgressive meanings of a text, by disrupting what is considered normal, and by highlighting the gendered and heteronormative constructions of a text (p. 145).

In their essay, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth describe various methods – a page-by-page analysis, a holistic analysis, a themed analysis, and a gendered analysis – that can provide different routes for reading a text. They then apply these methods to the readings of four popular children's books: Sendak's (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*, Woodson's (2001) *The Other Side*; DiCamillo's (2003) *Tale of Despereaux*, and Patterson's (1977) *Bridge to Terabithia*. Following each reading, the authors provide specific suggestions for questions and practices that can support teachers in applying queered reading practices in their own readings and as they engage students with these texts. For Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth, such queer readings "create alternative interpretations of familiar texts and highlight often unspoken moments in all kinds of stories" (p. 145) by "pay[ing] attention to contradictions, ambiguity, and things not said" and by making visible and disrupting the binary constructions of the heterosexual matrix on which texts

depend (p. 148) with the goal of "changing children's heteronormative frames of reference" (p. 150). That this is an undertaking which is highly relevant for children needs to be emphasized because, as the authors remind us, "recognizing characters who make queer turns and create spaces where their subjectivities are alternatively safe or dangerous or powerful or queer or normal is a mirror of what children do" (p. 168).

The work of these authors provides important insights about the pedagogical implications of bringing queer theorizing to bear on literacy education. Their notions of queer reading practices support my own theorizing of queer literacies. Like these authors, I see great potential in bridging queer theoretical thinking to a critical literacies approach when reading LGBTQI-expansive literature with students, believing that both of these theories on their own have limitations but can productively inform each other. While queer theory offers important insights on how to rethink the teaching of LGBTQI topics (see the discussion above), discussions concerning a queering of curriculum and pedagogy have generally remained either highly theoretical or they are not that queer, representing really just a focus on gay and lesbian. Critical literacies approaches, on the other hand, generally do not consider what it means to teach in ways that are expansive of norm-disruptive sexualities and genders but they provide a framework that has been applied to educational praxis. Ample research and literature exists on how to put critical literacies into practice with illustrative examples from classrooms across content areas and age groups. It would go beyond the purposes of this chapter to explore this expansive literature; however, in the next section of this chapter, I want to review some of the central tenets of critical literacies which have been widely adopted as a framework for literacy teaching by educators who ground their teaching in critical educational theories.

Transcending Conventional Notions of Reading and Writing: Critical Literacies

Situated within the broader framework of critical pedagogy, critical literacy is "a mindset" or "a philosophy" rather than a set of literacy teaching methods or skills that seeks to problematize and politicize literacy teaching for the overarching goal of transformative action and

social justice (Mulcahy, 2008, p. 16). Critical literacy has, therefore, been conceptualized as a pedagogy of resistance (Wallowitz, 2008). Various definitions of critical literacy exist; however, common to different definitions of critical literacy is that it "transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one's world" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 474). Like other critical educational approaches, critical literacy is grounded in a transformational framework that explicitly calls for connecting reading practices to social action arising out of the increased awareness of injustice developed when reading literary and everyday texts critically. In this sense, critical literacy is inherently ideological and political, challenging and encouraging readers "to think about the relationship between language and power" and "to question the underlying ideologies of discourses and everyday life" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 475). Giroux (1993) offers the following explanation:

> Critical literacy points to pedagogical practices which offer students the knowledge, skills, and values they will need to critically negotiate and transform the world in which they find themselves. The politics of critical literacy and cultural difference engages rather than retreats from those problems that make democracy messy, vibrant, and noisy. (p. 376)

Critical literacy takes as its point of departure the notion that reading is a social, critical, and culturally mediated process which unfolds in a social and historical context, is a situated social and cultural practice, and through which readers and writers enact their roles as members of particular communities (Street, 1984; Wallace, 2003). For Catherine Wallace (2003), critical literacy is underpinned by the following set of assumptions: the need, in educational settings, to address social and political issues through text study; the recognition that reading is a public and social act as much as it is individual and private; and that texts and our readings of those texts relate to the wider society, not just reflecting but constituting contemporary social life (p. 5).

Moreover, critical literacy has expanded notions of literacy itself and notions of text. Following the work of the New London Group[20] and the postmodern and poststructuralist turn in literacy studies, critical literacy has been redefined as critical literacies, expressing the view that readers draw on multiliteracies – a range of multiple literacies when engaging with texts based on textual modalities (i.e., print literacy, visual literacy, media literacy) as well as the various contexts in which the literacy practices occur (i.e., home literacies, school literacies). The New London Group (1995) describes multiliteracies in relation to "the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on," with particular attention to "the mass media, 'multimedia' and electronic 'hypermedia'" and in relation to "the realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness" (p. 3). From this results an expansive view of what we mean by text, moving away from one that relies on traditional print-based texts for literacy teaching to one that includes nontraditional texts, such as TV, film, video, music, advertising, art, multimedia, or the Internet.

While these definitions provide a broad understanding of critical literacies, Mitzi Lewison, Amy Seely Flint and Katie van Sluys (2002) identified the following four dimensions of critical literacy based on a review of the research and professional literature of 30 years: a) disrupting the commonplace; b) interrogating multiple viewpoints; c) focusing on sociopolitical issues; and d) taking action and promoting social justice (p. 382). According to Lewison, Flint and van Sluys, the dimension of 'disrupting the commonplace' includes interrogating texts; developing a language of critique; analyzing how texts shape identities, construct discourses, and support or disrupt the status quo; and including popular culture and media as part of the

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[20] New London Group, a name that derives from their initial meeting in New London, New Hampshire, 1994) and includes critical literacy theorists from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, such as Bill Cope, Mary Kalantzis, Gunter Kress, Allan and Carmen Luke, Martin Nakata, James Gee, Sara Michaels, Courtney Cazden, and Norman Fairclough.

curriculum. The dimension of 'interrogating multiple viewpoints' makes differences visible by focusing on the voices of those who have been traditionally marginalized or silenced, engaging readers in processes that allow them "to understand experiences and texts from [their] own perspectives and the viewpoints of others and to consider these various perspectives concurrently" (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). From the dimension of 'focusing on sociopolitical issues', critical literacy is seen as an approach that goes beyond the personal by interrogating how sociopolitical systems shape our understandings, by engaging readers in the politics of daily life, and by challenging unequal power relationships. DeNicolo and Franquiz (2006) argue that "critical encounters with social issues" can encourage "grand conversations" within a continuous cycle of communicational tension and resolution that scaffolds critical literacy development (p. 167). The dimension of 'taking action and promoting social justice' is often seen as the central element of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2002). It is through this dimension that existing discourses can be changed and cultural borders can be challenged and redefined. The four dimensions of critical literacies that Lewison, Flint, and van Sluys identified present a strong framework for reading critically but can be enhanced by insights gained from queer theorizing for reading LGBTQI-expansive literature with students.

Further informative is Edward Behrman's (2006) work on critical literacies classroom practices, based on his review of articles that present lessons or units that support critical literacy at the upper primary or secondary levels (grades 4-12) across different content areas. Behrman identified six broad categories of classroom practices related to students' activities and learning tasks: reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, producing countertexts, conducting student-choice research projects, and taking social action. Of these, I want to briefly discuss how Behrman defines reading from a resistant perspective and producing countertexts, because his description of these categories differs significantly from how I define them in a queer literacies framework.

According to Behrman's analysis "reading from a resistant perspective" speaks to the reader position in relation to authorial intent, as readers move from an author-centered view to one where they consider how they position themselves and how they are positioned by the text in relation to their own identities (i.e., race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality, and religion) or from an "alternative frame of reference" (p. 493). In the process, readers deconstruct the notion of the ideal reader, the assumed intended reader, adopting the position of a resistant reader. Such a view of resistance differs considerably from conceptualizations of resistance in queer theorizing through which resistance is viewed in relation to knowledge (see Chapter 4 for my discussion).

Behrman describes the category of "producing countertexts" as students creating counternarratives that present a topic from a nonmainstream perspective (p. 494). Behrman's analysis reveals that students produce such counternarratives in the form of personal responses to a topic, for example, through writing a reading log or journal, a personal narrative, or a narrative that employs someone else's view. He writes, "Essentially the countertext approach identifies students as members of a marginalized subgroup whose 'voice' has been given legitimacy" (p. 494). From a queer poststructuralist perspective, such counternarratives have less to do with who does the producing and more with how the narrative makes visible, challenges and disrupts dominant assumptions and narratives and intervenes in normative discourses.

As the first part of this chapter shows, the theorizing of alternative reading practices in the form of queer readings or critical literacies provide many important insights for a reconceptualizing of the teaching of LGBTQI-expansive literature in school classrooms. While critical literacies practices in classroom settings have been explored in great depth, the application of queer readings as a form of queer praxis remains largely unexplored. The few existing studies that employ queer literacy approaches examine a very limited subfield: that of teaching LGBTQ-inclusive children's literature in elementary school classrooms. Moreover, none of these studies actually explores the implementation of a queer literacy approach in an actual classroom. In the

following part of this chapter, I develop a multidimensional *queer literacies* framework and pedagogical approach for the design, implementation, and analysis of a curriculum that focuses on LGBTI-expansive literature.

Reconceptualizing the Teaching of LGBTQI-expansive Literature: Toward Queer Literacies

Theory alone cannot combat oppression; however, a combination of theory and practice might effectively transform social injustices in the form of antioppressive praxis (Lather, 1986). In what follows, I draw on this notion of praxis, the joining of theory and practice with a focus on "action and reflection upon the world in order to change it" (hooks, 1994, p. 14). I develop *queer literacies* specifically as a multidimensional theoretical framework for the context of critical literacies teaching in response to what emerged for me by studying the Gay and Lesbian Literature course while at the same time using it to analyze and illustrate Sara's and her students' engagement with the curriculum.

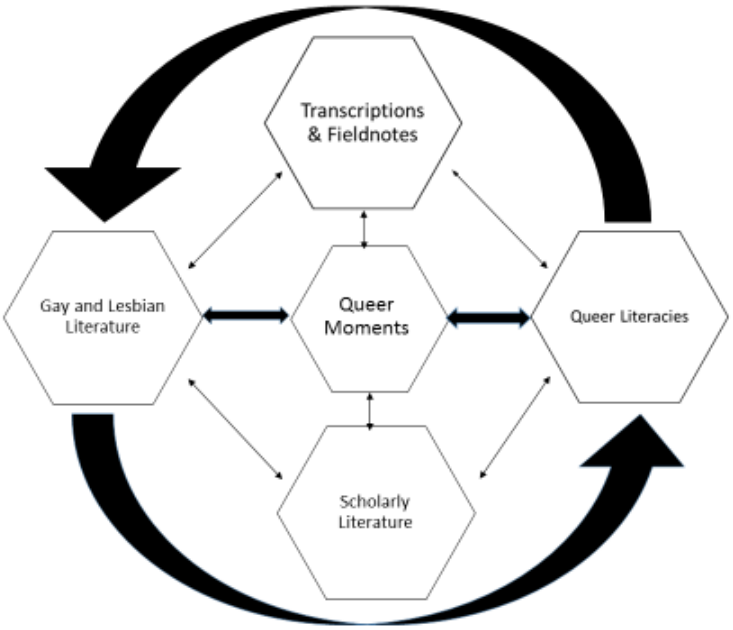

Figure 1: Visual representation of relationships of queer literacies to empirical materials

This figure represents a visual representation of the reciprocal relationships among the queer literacies framework and the empirical materials and scholarly literature that inform it. As the figure shows, the queer literacies framework at the same time represents the interpretative work coming out of the empirical materials and scholarly literature, an interpretative lens that turns back to frame the analysis of the Gay and Lesbian Literature class and the teacher's and her students' engagement with this curriculum, and a conceptual tool to illustrate how queer praxis played out in the Gay and Lesbian Literature class in the form of queer moments. As I was transcribing the audio-recordings of classroom conversations and interviews, reading these transcripts with my fieldnotes, and coding these empirical texts, I noticed critical instances of discourse and interactions that I termed (and coded) as queer moments. I began to ask myself what made these moments queer and turned back to the scholarly literature to find answers. Bringing the literature into conversation with the empirical materials and my emerging analysis, I decided to develop a multidimensional framework that could serve as my theoretical *and* analytical framework. In other words, the dimensions of the queer literacies framework that I develop in the following pages are an outcome of theorizing based on empirical work and the analysis of scholarly literature. However, since this is only a two-dimensional visual representation of my research project, it has limitations and is inadequate because it can neither capture the complex relationships among all the sources that help me name the dimensions of queer literacies and the queer moments in the classroom nor does it reflect all the recursive processes that contributed to my analysis and interpretation.

In developing the six dimensions of queer literacies, I draw on theoretical thinking from the various theories explored in the previous chapters with a main focus on the central tenets of antioppressive education and queer pedagogy (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2010; Britzman, 1995; Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Butler, 1990/2006; DePalma & Atkinson, 2008, 2009a-c; Killoran & Jiménez, 2007; Kumashiro, 2000, 2002; Luhmann, 1998; Meyer, 2010; Morris, 1998; Pinar, 1998). In addition, I want to acknowledge that Lewison et al.'s (2002) multidimensional

framework of critical literacies inspired me to identify and define the multiple dimensions of my queer literacies framework. Furthermore, I draw on postmodern understandings in using the term queer literacies to emphasize the multiplicity of literacies related to the multiple types of texts and contexts and ways of responding through which students engage with LGBTQI-expansive literature.

While some dimensions of the queer literacies framework were very present in the Gay and Lesbian Literature class, others were less or not fully realized. I therefore suggest that framing the teaching of LGBTQI-themed texts through a queer literacies approach might offer opportunities to expand the work already done in Sara's class. In this way, I hope to overcome the theory/practice dichotomy by not just theorizing the framework but by illustrating the educative praxis of this framework. Hence, the queer literacies framework represents findings of the research project that informs this dissertation and, at the same time, it presents recommendations for queer praxis when engaging students with LGBTQI-themed texts. However, showing the dimensions of queer literacies solely in terms of findings and recommendations would obscure how the dimensions of queer literacies informed the analytical processes of this study. Analysis of the empirical materials of this study was not that linear but rather recursive. I developed the dimensions of queer literacies in response to my initial readings and codings of the empirical materials and my understanding of relevant literature but then turned back to the empirical materials to read them again, now through the lens of the dimensions of the queer literacies framework. The dimensions of queer literacies now functioned as sensitizing concepts that framed analysis and interpretation. In so doing, the dimensions of the queer literacies framework afforded a multilayered lens to show the complexities of queer praxis in the context of high school literacy teaching focused on LGBTQI-themed texts. In other words, in this project there are no neat boundaries between theorizing and analyzing, and there is no linearity that moves from a review of the literature to a theoretical framework to analyzing and presenting the

findings. The boundaries among these steps of the research process appear blurred in my work as I move back and forth, theorizing what I analyze and analyzing what I theorize.

Therefore, readers might raise questions about where to place the discussion of the queer literacies framework in the context of the dissertation narrative. I decided to place this discussion at the conclusion of my literature review/theoretical framework part of the dissertation and before the presentation of the findings chapters to emphasize its connection to the various literatures that inform it and to lead into the analytical part of this project where I use the framework as a lens to make meaning of the empirical materials. In the analytical part of the dissertation, queer literacies is used to analyze queer moments that surfaced in Sara's classroom.

While asserting the primacy of social justice as a central organizing framework for queer literacies, in what follows, I suggest six dimensions or pedagogical moves that encourage queer literacies within the specific context of English literature classrooms. I propose a theoretical framework and pedagogical approach for creating, implementing, and analyzing curricula that provides students with opportunities to critically and queerly engage with LGBTQI-expansive texts. I conceptualize queer literacies as a process of critical reading practices that include the following six interconnecting dimensions:

1. Dimension 1: recognizing as legitimate bodies of knowledge and making the focus of inquiry the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQI people.
2. Dimension 2: developing an understanding of the dynamics of oppression related to normative systems of regulation of sexuality, gender and sex (i.e., homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, cissexism, genderism, transphobia).
3. Dimension 3: troubling knowledges in the form of commonsense, partial and distorted understandings of sexuality, gender, and sex.
4. Dimension 4: using the critical method of deconstruction for the literary and social analysis of discourse and text.

5. Dimension 5: engaging with and producing counternarratives that open spaces for new imaginings about sexuality, gender and sex.
6. Dimension 6: creating spaces where students can enter and work through feelings of discomfort and crisis.

In the following sections I outline and define each of the six dimensions of queer literacies.

Dimension 1: Focusing on the Stories, Experiences, Cultures, Histories, and Politics of LGBTQI People

The first dimension of queer literacy – recognizing as legitimate the bodies of knowledge and making the focus of inquiry the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQI people – emphasizes the non-canonical approach of queer literacies that takes as its point of departure the voices and stories of LGBTQI people. Emphasizing a focus on queer texts which offer deliberate representations of diverse norm-disruptive sexualities, genders, and sexes, this dimension pushes the boundaries and "unrests" curriculum by digressing from mainstream "official" discourse (Morris, 1998, p. 284) as educators create pedagogical spaces "where the hitherto unsayable could be uttered" (Bryson & de Castell, 1993, p. 296) and that allow for "thinking the unthought of in education" (Britzman, 1995, p. 155). While recognizing that it is possible to read queerly any text (see Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013) and that reading queerly texts that do not represent specific LGBTQI experiences might be the only available option in some contexts, I fear that doing so perpetuates the silencing of LGBTQI voices and experiences. This first dimension of queer literacies, therefore, asks teachers to do the risky work of curricular boundary pushing and to center their curriculum on LGBTQI voices that have traditionally been silenced in school classrooms.

Beyond making difference visible by reading the stories of LGBTQI people, this dimension recognizes that reading is a social, critical and culturally mediated process; thus, asking for contextualized readings that involve students in the study of the social, cultural and

historical changes concerning LGBTQI people. In other words, when engaging students through a queer literacies approach, they will consider the social, cultural and historical contexts in which sexualized and gendered identities are produced and situated. While students come with a lot of partial understandings about LGBTQI people into classrooms, they generally lack a deeper knowledge about the cultural and historical contexts that give meaning to LGBTQI experiences and stories. For example, many students have very limited understandings of important historical events, such as the Stonewall Uprising and its relation to civil rights struggles and the lesbian and gay liberation movements, or the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s/1990s that ravaged urban gay communities in the U. S. In addition, the reading of LGBTQI-expansive literature occurs within a contemporary context in which the struggle of LGBTQI people for equal rights is ever present. This dimension of queer literacies, therefore, recognizes the interdisciplinary potential of reading LGBTQI-expansive texts with students so that students can draw connections to past and current events. It also recognizes students as democratic citizens who need a deepened knowledge about the cultural, social and historical context in which such struggles and debates occur so that they can participate in more fully informed ways.

Furthermore, this dimension of queer literacies acknowledges the importance of reading multiple texts and/or text sets with students so that students can encounter and read multiple perspectives concurrently which will support the development of deeper understandings of the complexities of diverse sexualities, genders and sexes over time. No one text can accomplish the difficult work of troubling entrenched commonsense beliefs and assumptions related to sexuality, gender and sex. Moreover, this dimensions draws on expansive notions of text, asking that teachers not only read literary texts with their students but also include everyday texts drawn from TV, film, Youtube, social media, advertisement, music, magazines, to the Internet. Media texts and popular culture texts can promote students' understandings of the "underlying ideologies of discourses and everyday life" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 475). In addition, this dimension

recognizes how students' and teachers' own stories can become texts for study in the classroom as they share and make connections to their own experiences.

Working within this dimension, further, means acknowledging the complexities of the experiences of LGBTQI people. In using the term LGBTQI, queer literacies at the same time acknowledges the distinctive experiences of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex but not queer as well as those who identify as queer, while at the same time using the umbrella function of the term 'queer' for all norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes. In addition, this dimension of queer literacies asks teachers to resist the common equation of 'queer' with 'lesbian and gay'. Too often when we speak about LGBT, the BT remains silent because educational work almost exclusively focuses on lesbian and gay issues. This dimension of queer literacies, therefore, calls explicitly for the inclusion of bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer experiences and issues into queer readings. I included the 'I' specifically because it brings particular attention to the experience of intersex people who find themselves outside of binary sex categories.

Dimension 2: Understanding the Dynamics of Oppression

The second dimension – developing an understanding of the dynamics of oppression related to normative systems of regulation of sexuality, gender and sex – defines working against oppression as a central goal of queer literacies. A queer literacies approach, therefore, places questions of identity and difference, privilege, power and structural oppression at the center of analysis. In so doing, it provides opportunities for students to recognize how sexuality, gender and sex are highly regulated social systems of control that work on multiple levels (individual, institutional, social and cultural) and that are culturally and legally produced and enforced through discourse and practices.

This dimension of queer literacies engages students in interrogations of various systems of oppression related to sexuality, gender and sex (i.e., homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, cissexism, genderism, transphobia), while at the same time inviting an

intersectional analysis that explores the intersections of sexuality, gender and sex with issues of race, ethnicity, social class, ability, religion, and other markers of difference. This intersectional aspect of queer literacies emphasizes the multiplicity of oppression and recognizes how identities are multiple, complex, fluid, shifting, and intersecting, thereby allowing for a "more situated understanding of oppression (whereby oppression plays out differently for different people in different contexts)" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 38). In other words, reading queerly in antioppressive ways "privileges difference rather than essence in the construction of identity" (Carlin, 2011, p. 57) and it provides students with opportunities to read LGBTQI-themed texts through a lens that places the stories and experiences within a context of dynamic oppression.

Furthermore, often students lack the language and key terminology to read and talk about texts in antioppressive ways. It is therefore necessary to connect the readings of LGBTQI-themed texts to explicit teachings of language and key terminology related to issues of sexuality, gender and sex so (i.e., homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, use of pronouns, or vocabulary related to categories of difference, such as cisgender, transgender, intersex, etc.). It is important to take the necessary time to introduce and clarify these terms and fill them with meaning so that students can develop a vocabulary that will allow them to frame their understandings and discussions of the LGBTQI-themed texts they read in antioppressive ways, avoiding an othering or exoticizing of the LGBTQI people they encounter through texts. This is especially important when considering that holding on to oppressive language can further marginalize and stigmatize LGBTQI students in a classroom that is intended to be a safe space. In developing vocabulary, a queer literacies approach further works against oppression by providing opportunities for students to reinscribe their understandings of norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes with new and positive meanings and language.

Finally, the antioppressive dimension of queer literacies considers students' own positionalities related to norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes. First, it asks teachers to position their students as mature, motivated and knowledgeable instead of immature and

homophobic. Repositioning students in this way can change the climate and dynamics in a classroom in ways that allow students to adopt rather than resist an antioppressive stance (read non-phobic). Second, it asks students to engage in processes of critical reflexivity through which they explore how they are positioned and how they position others in relation to the privileges and disadvantages attached to their sexualized and/or gendered identities. In other words, this dimension of a queer literacies approach involves students in reading practices that allow them to develop critical consciousness and understanding of the oppressive processes of privileging/normalizing and marginalizing/Othering related to self and others.

Dimension 3: Troubling Commonsense Knowledge

The third dimension of a queer literacies approach – troubling commonsense, partial and distorted knowledge of sexuality, sex and gender – recognizes that reading LGBTQI-themed texts with students can only function as antioppressive education if it goes beyond a teaching for and about the non-normative sexualized and/or gendered Other (see approaches 1 and 2 as outlined by Kumashiro, 2000, 2002). It is through learning by unlearning that the partial, and often harmful, understandings that students already hold around LGBTQI issues when entering the classroom can be troubled and disrupted.

Working within this dimension of queer literacies means drawing on poststructuralist understandings of identity, difference, power, knowledge and desire that denaturalize, disrupt and expand the constructions and meanings of binary sex-gender-sexuality categories. Reading queerly, then, means destabilizing the idea of fixed, unitary, and essentialist identity categories, while simultaneously interrogating how identities are unstable and fluid, discursively and performatively produced, and relationally constructed. In other words, central to reading queerly within this dimension is the breaking apart and denaturalizing of binary categories of difference related to sexualities, genders and sexes (homosexual vs. heterosexual, gay/lesbian vs. straight, female/feminine vs. male/masculine, girl/woman vs. boy/man). This work can be accomplished

by reading multiple texts alongside each other that represent different experiences along the spectrums of sexuality, gender and sex.

Moreover, working within this dimension means to trouble students' normative frames of thinking, disrupting dominant notions of what is considered normal and taking apart the normal versus deviant binary. Such troubling involves an ontological shift that flips or reverses the reader's analytical gaze. In so doing, students will crack open the heterosexual closet for analysis (Tierney & Dilley, 1998), calling into question the stability of heterosexuality (Sumara & Davis, 1998) instead of just focusing on the LGBTQI 'Other'. In other words, students will stop reading straight (Britzman, 1995) and *un*learn what is considered normal or normative (Kumashiro, 2002, pp. 36-37). In addition, when using a queer literacies approach, students not only read with an eye towards heteronormativity but also interrogate the discursive production of homonormativity in texts. To accomplish this work, a queer literacies approach requires that readers adopt alternative reading practices.

Dimension 4: Using the Critical Method of Deconstruction

The fourth dimension of queer literacies – using the critical method of deconstruction for the literary and social analysis of discourse and text – signals the readers' engagement in analytical reading processes where questioning assumptions and asking critical questions perform important work in deconstructing hegemonic discourses that structure knowledge about sexuality, sex and gender. Reading queerly within this dimension means exploring the multiple, transgressive meanings of a text, by disrupting what is considered normal, and by highlighting the gendered and heteronormative constructions of a text (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013). Therefore, this dimension allows readers to "uncover the possibility of the text's radical political potential" (Morris, 1998, p. 277).

Through deconstructive work students are asked to take an interrogative, subversive, transgressive position (Gedro, 2010; Luhmann, 1998) that seeks to deconstruct the histories and the production of oppressive identity categories, particularly those that are implicated in the

binaries of sexuality, sex, and gender. This dimension of queer literacies seeks to shift reading practices to a focus "on those fundamental discursive structures that need to be disrupted, structures that make oppressive institutional practices possible" (Pinar, 1998b, p. 14) and makes central the analysis of the "interaction of language and action, self- and social identity, power and difference, experience and what is taken for knowledge" (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 64). Deconstructive reading practices allow readers to explore how "texts are constructed by interrogating and denaturalizing the text's manifold assumptions" (Giffney, 2009, p. 7). When engaging students with a text in this way, the focus of analysis becomes the construction of sexuality, sex and gender through textual presence as well as absences, silences, secrets and exclusions. Deconstructive readings are possible through various routes of reading (Ellsworth, 1997; Kumashiro, 2002), for example, by doing close readings of texts, by employing a holistic analytical approach, doing a themed analysis, or looking specifically at issues of sexuality and/or gender in a text.

Central to this dimension of a queer literacies approach is the asking of critical questions. Kumashiro (2002) suggests a range of subversive questions that encourage queer reading practices, such as: What do these stories tell us about the group they seek to represent? How does this story represent an experience that is shaped by a particular historical context? Which stereotypes do these stories confirm? Which ones do they disconfirm? What voices are silenced, and how do those silences perpetuate certain dominant discourses? What do I desire to see repeated in these stories? How do I desire only certain interpretations, and how do I resist others? Did I enter any crises when reading? (pp. 130/131). In addition, subversive questions ask readers to reflect on how they position themselves in relation to a text and how they are positioned by the author and the text. Conceptualized in this way, this dimension of queer literacies requires asking critical questions not only of the text but of oneself. It is a reading beneath the surface and beyond the text with the goal of reading against and troubling commonsense ways of thinking and understanding.

Dimension 5: Engaging with and Producing Counternarratives

The fifth dimension of queer literacies – engaging with and producing counternarratives that open spaces for new imaginings about sexuality, gender and sex – speaks to alternative conceptualizations of knowledge around sexuality, sex and gender as new lines of thought are developed that serve as interruption not reproduction (Tierney & Dilley, 1998) and produce new alternative imaginings (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Drawing on the poststructuralist notion that "oppression originates in discourse, and, in particular, in the citing of particular [harmful] discourses, which frame how people think, feel, act, and interact" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 40), this dimension of queer literacies suggests that harmful discourses about norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes can be disrupted, altered and re-appropriated in positive ways. In other words, working within this dimension means to "alter[] citational practices" through the processes of disruption, supplementation, and reworking (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 41).

Counternarratives in this dimension of the queer literacies framework are understood to be stories that challenge, disrupt, and/or flip dominant narratives and discourses related to sexuality, gender and sex. Such counternarratives, on the one hand, expose and make explicit how normative assumptions, stereotyping, and misleading information construct certain sexualities, genders and sexes as normal and natural while others are constructed as deviant and unnatural; thus, speaking back to such constructions. On the other hand, counternarratives produce new and previously untold stories based on the experiences of LGBTQI people. Such counternarratives, therefore, provide powerful stories of resistance. Within a queer literacies approach, students will encounter multiple counternarratives through readings and viewings of text, or they can produce their own counternarratives in response to such readings/viewings.

Dimension 6: Discomfort and Crisis

The sixth dimension of queer literacies – creating spaces where students can enter and work through feelings of discomfort and crisis – recognizes that when students engage with LGBTQI-themed texts through a queer literacies approach, they might experience a crisis in the

form of emotional discomfort and/or cognitive dissonances because encountering new knowledge, unlearning old harmful knowledges, and employing subversive reading practices threatens their self or upsets their worldviews. Instead of avoiding the development of experiences of such crisis, working within this dimension of queer literacies means viewing crisis as a potential catalyst for change and, therefore, asks teachers to create spaces in the curriculum where students can enter and work through such crisis (Britzman, 1995; Kumashiro, 2000, 2002). Engaging students in self-reflective learning activities, for example, in the form of free-writes, journals or creative projects, can provide students with space to do this work.

Thus far, I have laid out and defined the six dimensions of a queer literacies framework that can inform how teachers create and implement a curriculum focused on the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQI people. Using insights gained from various educational theories, in particular queer and antioppressive pedagogies, I have developed a queer literacies framework that is intended to expand how teachers and students engage with LGBTQI-expansive texts in the classroom. In the following section, I turn to the notion of *queer moments* which I will use to bridge this theoretical framework to educational praxis.

Queer Moments

I use the concept of "queer moments" (Jackson, 2010; Sedgwick, 1993) to explore observable manifestations of queer literacies in the classroom. I define *queer moments* as critical instances of classroom discourse and interaction or "critical performative pedagogical moments" (Harman & French, 2004) that exhibit one or more of the dimensions of the queer literacies framework previously discussed, which can surface in unplanned, unintentional ways.

I find queer moments to be a useful concept when exploring how Sara and her students engaged with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum in the classroom. As I was reading and re-reading the transcriptions of the classroom recordings and contemplating what it meant to impose a queer theoretical framework on the analysis of a curriculum/class that was not conceptualized as queer, I was struck by those moments that appeared to be queer to me. The

concept of the "queer moment" has been used by Eve Sedgwick in her 1993 collection of essays *Tendencies*. Here, Sedgwick refers to queer as "a continuing moment" (xii), creating a paradox by placing two contradictory terms – a moment which is an instant that does not continue – next to each other. Unlike Sedgwick's paradox of the queer moment as a challenge to temporality, I want to use the notion of the queer moment to explore another paradox, that of the queer classroom. It is difficult to imagine school classrooms as queer spaces since schools are sites where dominant and normative notions of sexuality, sex and gender are regularly taught, maintained and reinforced. In addition, within the current climate of accountability and high stakes testing that mandates the teaching of "official" knowledges, a queering of the curriculum seems utterly impossible. Furthermore, the complexities of queer thinking appear to be too difficult for children and youth to understand, and for teachers to enact in their classrooms. Even in a high school class focused on the stories and experiences of LGBTQ people, the engagement with such stories and experiences might not necessarily be queer. However, I was surprised to find how queer moments did surface at times. Those were unplanned for, unintentional moments that made me think that what was happening in this class was queerer than I anticipated or thought.

For Sedgwick, a queer moment is "recurrent, eddying" (xii) with the word "recurrent" being defined as "occurring or appearing again or repeatedly." Thus, a queer moment is a moment that repeats and comes again. Sedgwick's use of the word "eddying" is even more revealing. In the American Heritage dictionary, the word "eddy" is given two definitions[21]. The first defines it as "a current . . . moving contrary to the direction of the main current, especially in a circular motion." The second definition describes an eddy as "a drift or tendency that is counter to or separate from the main current, as of opinion, tradition or history." Queer moments as "eddying" can, thus, be understood as moments in which or through which dominant and

[21] http://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=eddy

normative narratives about sexuality, sex and gender are opposed through counternarratives that trouble, disrupt, challenge, and present alternative ways of thinking and imagining sexuality, sex and gender. Contrary to understandings of teaching as fully plannable, a notion that has been critiqued by educational theorists such as Kumashiro (2002), it is important to realize that queer moments can occur quite "naturally" (Jackson, 2010) in classrooms.

Janna Jackson (2010) defines "naturally queer moments" in the classroom as those moments "when queerness becomes a part of the fabric of the curriculum instead of a focal point; in other words, moments when students take no particular notice of it" (p. 36). In her essay, Jackson attempts to depict and explore what those "naturally queer moments" can look like in the classroom in the hope of showing how education can move into a direction where queerness "is seen as bringing a playfulness and a way of thinking that turns traditional notions on their head in productive and useful ways" (p. 37). For Jackson, queer moments are "instances where queerness enters the classroom without dominating it" (p. 40). While Jackson looks at what happens when queerness becomes an unplanned part of the curriculum, not focusing on "those moments of rebellion in the classroom, nor those moments when teachers explicitly challenge students' thinking; instead, it explores those nonmoments when queerness was hardly even noticed and argues that this comprises queer pedagogy as well" (p. 42), I use the notion of queer moments to explore those moments in the Gay and Lesbian Literature course through which dimensions of the queer literacies framework surfaced in often unplanned and/or unintentional ways.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explored how the teaching of LGBTQI-expansive literature, particularly in English language arts classes, can be reframed by bridging the goals, practices and conceptual tools of queer theory to critical literacies teaching. Based on my examination of existing conceptualizations of queer reading practices and taking into account the central tenets of critical educational theories, such as antioppressive education and critical literacies education, I theorized what I term queer literacies as a multidimensional framework for designing, implementing, and

analyzing curricula through which students explore and critically engage with LGBTQI-expansive literature in ways that goes beyond a mere approach of inclusion and adding marginalized voices to the curriculum. Finally, I discussed queer moments as a useful theoretical concept for exploring and illustrating how the dimensions of this queer literacies framework manifest when students engage with LGBTQI-expansive literature in the classroom. Both the queer literacies framework as well as the notion of queer moments critically inform my analysis, interpretation and discussion of the Gay and Lesbian Literature course.

Turning from the more theoretical sections of this dissertation to the practical implications of the theories discussed on educational practice, in Chapter 6, I will discuss more in detail the methodology that informs my study.

CHAPTER 6

CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY

Three years ago I established my first contact with Sara – I was conducting a mini-study for a course that I took on qualitative research methods. It was a brief encounter with only a few classroom observations and two interviews that helped me gain some understanding of the history of the Gay and Lesbian Literature class and Sara's teaching of it. During the following years, Sara and I stayed in loose contact; she became my younger son's Gay-Straight-Alliance (GSA) advisor and teacher when he took 'Gay and Lesbian Lit' during the first trimester of his Senior year. When I first asked Sara if I could come and observe her class for a whole school trimester for my dissertation research, I felt Sara's reluctance. During one of my initial interviews for my mini-study she had confided that observations make her nervous. I understood. Yes, Sara is a veteran teacher, respected by her colleagues and beloved by her students, but having an outside person sit in on your teaching, a critical researcher who is observing with a critical eye, taking notes, and audio-recording is very intrusive and feels very risky. You don't know how this person will affect your teaching or your students. You don't know how this person will read what is going on in the classroom. And, I knew how important this class was for Sara. This curriculum is her life work, she has poured her heart and soul into creating and implementing it. I understood the potential fear of having an outsider come in with a critical eye, taking apart a life's work. I empathize. So, for the year or so following the mini-study, Sara and I kept in loose contact. Once in a while when I substitute taught at the high school, we would run into each other and chat. When Sara took the school's GSA to an LGBTQ youth conference, I went along as a parent chaperone. When I needed to observe a class for my comprehensive exam study, Sara introduced me to her friend who taught a Gay and Lesbian History class at the alternative campus of the high school. So, after more than a year of relationship building, when I finally asked her whether she would allow me to become a part of her classroom for a school trimester, she agreed. Still cautiously, pointing out how she would not be able to spend much time

with me outside of the regular class time due to her busy schedule and suggesting that I come only two, a maximum of three times a week. Yet, in my proposal for IRB approval I pushed a little, including in the consent forms three to four weekly classroom visits. Sara agreed. And as the school trimester progressed and I became a regular part of the classroom, she became incredibly supportive, giving me precious class time to introduce the students to the study, providing me with folders to collect student work, allowing me to take students out of the class to interview them, audio-recording a couple of class sessions that I could not attend, and much more. Despite her concerns and maybe fears, Sara opened her classroom and herself to me and my research. I will forever be indebted to her for that. And in thinking about what is called so abstractly 'methodology' – the topic of this chapter – I know that I will want to be respectful of Sara and her work and her students in how I think about carrying out this project. After all, it is a project that is both close to Sara's and to my heart.

I begin this chapter with this reflexive piece of writing because I want to emphasize that what and how a researcher studies matters. Reflexivity in research reminds us that as researchers, our autobiographies and our social and political locations affect our research. Wanda Pillow (2003) emphasizes that the use of reflexivity in social science research is distinct from reflection as it demands an other, or in other words, it examines the self in relation to others. Williams (1990) understands reflexivity as a form of additional fieldwork, particularly in the context of doing ethnographic research. She writes, "My notes constitute the field, and my attempt to understand them is in a very real sense fieldwork" (p. 255). Reflexivity in this sense is a methodological tool that interrogates the process of knowledge construction, explores and exposes the politics of representation, and that forefronts researcher subjectivities in the research process. Understood in this way, reflexivity is not a single or universal entity but rather an active, ongoing practice that saturates every stage of the research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Our research interests and the research questions we pose, as well as the questions we discard, reveal something about who we are and who we want to be. Our choice of research design, the research

methodologies, and the theoretical frameworks that inform our research are governed by our values and reciprocally help to shape these values. Who we choose to include and who we choose to exclude as participants in our research is revealing. Moreover, our interpretations and analyses, and how we choose to present our findings as well as whom we make our findings available to, are all constitutive of reflexive research.

Reflexivity in research is, thus, a process of critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In this way, reflexivity becomes a political tool that challenges modernist beliefs in objectivity and so-called "truths" and pushes the researcher to engage in deconstructive processes that explore and expose the politics of representation. Moreover, reflexivity is not only a mode of self-reflection (a turning inward) but also a mode of political awareness (turning outward) because it acknowledges the power relations inherent in any research (Etherington, 2007). For example, it raises questions around how to do research in ways that are non-exploitative, useful and empowering (Etherington, 2007). Employing reflexivity as a methodological tool, therefore, fits well into a queer poststructuralist research framework. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to contextualize my dissertation project through a process of reflexivity through which I place myself and my practices under scrutiny. In the first part of this chapter, I contextualize this project by reflecting on what is broadly termed methodology in research literature: a description of the research design as well as the methodology used to analyze and interpret what has been called data. In the second part of this chapter, I describe the actual background for the study, including information about the geographical and institutional context and the research participants. This includes a reflection on my own roles and subjectivities as they relate to this project.

Reflecting on the Methodology

Research Design

Since this study addresses social issues that are implicated within systems of oppression, such as heterosexism, cissexism and transphobia, the project follows some of the principles of critical qualitative research (Carspecken, 1996, 2001). As a critically positioned researcher, I purposefully adopt a research agenda with the purpose of transforming political and social realities (Creswell, 2003), viewing my dissertation study as a form of social activism (Carspecken, 1996). Following D. Soyini Madison (2005), I see myself as a critical ethnographer who "disrupts the status quo, unsettles neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions, and brings to light underlying operations of power and control. Resists domestication, moves from 'what is' to 'what could be'" (p. 5). In this way, I acknowledge the possibilities of research for transforming social inequities and injustices. Just like teaching, doing research is a political act for me. This critical orientation aligns with Sara's expressed goal of making her curriculum public so that other teachers and school districts can use it as a model for their own curricular developments in expanding their teaching in ways that address sexualities and gender diversity.

Despite its critical orientation and considering the queer poststructuralist framework that I use to theorize my project, when looking more closely at my research methodology, my work remains largely grounded in more traditional ways of doing research. At times I wrestled with what it might mean to queer my research practices, wondering, for example, about the possibilities of disrupting the norms of representation in my field, or envisioning a more collaborative research approach that breaks apart the researcher-participant divide and hierarchy. As it turned out, I did not realize these possibilities because they were not doable or I felt not empowered enough to do so. While I love the idea of close collaboration between the university-researcher and the teacher-researcher, even timid attempts at involving Sara and/or her students more collaboratively in this project failed. As mentioned in my introductory reflections to this chapter, Sara was clear about not being able to get involved more deeply in the project beyond the

classroom observations and one or two interviews. Teachers are busy and already responsible for so many things outside their classroom teaching that true collaborative research is hard to achieve. My attempts to engage students more closely with the study were futile as multiple attempts to contact them through email yielded no replies.

In addition, I also did not feel comfortable to employ different means of representing my work. As an emerging scholar, I still feel bound by the norms that regulate scholarly work in general, and the norms of my field in particular. Hence, I decided to rupture such norms only in what I perceive as small ways, for example, by inserting my personal voice into the writing through a personal critical narrative (French, 2008) that is woven into the fabric of the story of this project instead of the customary inclusion of just a section on researcher subjectivities (which I will include additionally). Making visible who I am in the context of my project signifies my attempt to deliberately speak back to constructions of a neutral or authoritative authorial voice that so often permeates academic writing. In offering readers the opportunity to read my theorizations, interpretations and discussions with my personal story, I hope to make explicit the constructedness of this narrative that is my dissertation. After all, the way I choose to tell the story of Sara's curriculum and her and her students' engagement with the Gay and Lesbian Literature class is only one possible story and it allows for multiple ways of reading it. In that way, I feel this project indeed reflects poststructuralist understandings.

However, the project also remains within traditionally recognized research approaches. The project is located in the broad paradigm of qualitative research, an approach to research that focuses on the study of social phenomena in natural settings, in this case a teacher and her students' engagement with a gay and lesbian literature curriculum in a high school classroom. It employs multiple interactive methods, uses an emergent design that is responsive to the researcher's growing knowledge about a project, and is fundamentally interpretative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2011; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Rossman & Rallis, 2011). John Creswell (2007) identifies fives approaches to qualitative research: narrative research, case study, phenomenology,

ethnography, and grounded theory research. In this dissertation I largely draw on two of these approaches – ethnography and case study, each of which I discuss in the following two sections.

Ethnographic Approach

This study is not an evaluation of the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum nor of Sara's teaching of it. Rather, it is an exploration of how the teacher and her students engaged with the curriculum and each other and how a literature curriculum centered on the voices of LGBTQI people constitutes a meaningful site for learning and teaching in a high school classroom. This is reflected in the research questions that guide this study (see Chapter 1), and I feel that they were most meaningfully examined using an ethnographic approach to engaging with what Denzin (2013) calls "empirical materials." Ethnographic methods allow the researcher to gain an insider view of what happens in the research site as the researcher has the advantage of being both an observer and a participant in the research setting. Furthermore, ethnographic methods let the researcher use multiple and flexible techniques, such as observation, interviews, the collection and analysis of material artifacts, and questionnaires, through an extended period of time which provides for a more holistic exploration of the complex interactions that are characteristic of classrooms. In this way, the ethnographic practices employed allow me to provide a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the classroom discourse and interactions around the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum. Further, ethnographic methods provide an added layer to a study because they involve the researcher in self-reflexive work, begun with the writing of fieldnotes and continued throughout the study through the writing of memos or the keeping of a researcher's journal (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

In addition to observations of the field site, focus group discussions and interviews are often employed within an ethnographic approach to research to add another layer of data. While I initially planned to conduct only individual interviews with some of the students, time constraints toward the end of the school trimester pushed me to talk with them in small groups. Not only did this allow me to have almost all students reflect on their experiences with the class, but I also

found it to be very productive because the students developed strands of thought as they built on or responded to each other's comments. According to Madriz (2000, p. 835), the format of a focus group discussion offers participants a "safe environment where they can share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in the company of people," which participants often find more "gratifying and stimulating" than individual conversations with the researcher. Moreover, focus groups "create the conditions for the emergence of .... a consciousness focused on social change" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 641) as participants engage with each other's thoughts. I found this to be true for the interviews that I conducted with small groups of students. However, I also conducted more formal interviews with semi-structured questions with two students as well as with Sara. These interviews allowed me to elicit responses from my participants that provided answers to some specific topics that I wanted to explore, such as the development and implementation of the course, or the rationale behind some of the curricular choices that Sara made. For both the group and the individual interviews, I identified several broad questions going into the interview, but then I adjusted my questions in response to the participants' answers as the interviews unfolded. In that way, the interviews became more dialogic and conversational as the participants and I exchanged our perspectives (Rossman & Rallis, 2011).

Case Study Approach

This study further employs the approach of a case study. Case studies are "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 1988, p. 21); or, in other words, they explore "bounded systems" (i.e., cases) "over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Bounded by place (e.g., a classroom) and time (e.g., a semester) and positioned within a specific context (e.g., the community), a case study approach enables particularity and depth of analysis. As Patton (2002) notes, "While one cannot generalize from single cases or very small samples, one can learn from them – and learn a great deal, often opening up new territory for further research...." (p.46). The present study provides such an in-depth and detailed exploration

of a single classroom with the purpose of looking at the larger phenomenon around the implementation of an innovative and, what some might consider, controversial curriculum (Rossman & Rallis, 2011).

Reflecting on Analytic Methods

As a critical researcher whose practices are situated in queer feminist poststructural thinking, questions about the practices used to make meaning of one's research – generally called data analysis – are fraught with tensions. Poststructuralist education theorists, such as Elizabeth St. Pierre (2000, 2011, 2013), have provided powerful postmodern critiques of what she calls "conventional humanist qualitative methodology" (p. 613). St. Pierre (2011) maintains that this type of qualitative research has become "conventional, reductionist, hegemonic, and sometimes oppressive" and has lost its radical possibilities to produce different. She, therefore, calls for a renewed commitment to a "reimagination of social science inquiry" enabled by postmodernism (p. 613). St. Pierre (2011) further emphasizes that poststructuralist theorizing has "deconstructed many of qualitative methodology's concepts/categories: e.g., *interview* (Scheurich, 1995), *validity* (Lather, 1993), *data* (St. Pierre, 1997), *voice* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009), *reflexivity* (Pillow, 2003);" and yet, as researchers we are still asked to "organize [our] work into inadequate existing concepts (e.g., *research design, data, data collection, data analysis, interview, observation, representation*)" (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 613). However, St. Pierre (2011) also makes clear that she "*do*[es] *not and cannot offer an alternative methodology*—a recipe, an outline, a structure, for post qualitative research—another handy 'research design' in which one can safely secure oneself and one's work" (p. 613). It is with this messiness that I wrestle in my own research.

In particular, St. Pierre (1997, 2011, 2013b) has troubled the concept of data (and data collection and data analysis and others) that is so central to research, writing**:**

> It's difficult to understand why we believe that isolating and labeling a word or group of words (a chunk) with another word (a code) is scientific or rigorous or "analysis". If a word is data, isn't a code (a word) data as well? Do we code codes? I argue that coding is a positivist practice. (2011, p. 622)

Norman Denzin (2013), likewise, has engaged with the tensions that develop when researchers working from a critical poststructuralist paradigm continue to use the concept of data in their work. Denzin suggests imagining "a world without data" in which researchers recognize that "data are processes constructed by the researcher's interpretative practices" and, therefore, view them as productive and performative (p. 355). Denzin proposes to use the term "empirical materials" (p. 355) to avoid the positivist assumptions underlying the use of the term data, a suggestion that I will follow henceforth. Such poststructuralist theorizing and deconstructing of the constructs of data, data collection, and data analysis troubles my writing about the so-called methodology of this study. My readings of St. Pierre and Denzin occur at a time when I am writing on the last edits of the dissertation and while they produce new lines of thought for me, I acknowledge that the analytical and interpretative processes that produced this dissertation narrative are indeed largely located in conventional ways of doing "data analysis." In particular, I have drawn on the work by Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw (1995) and their methods to interpreting and representing ethnographic research, a methodology that reflects a modified grounded theory approach.

Modified Grounded Theory Approach

In this project, I draw on a modified grounded theory approach to the interpretation and representation of ethnographic research. Kathy Charmaz (2011) argues that grounded theory methods can advance social justice research, research that addresses issues of privileges, inequities, and equality. Charmaz describes the grounded theory method as an iterative, interactive analytic process through which the researcher goes back and forth between analysis and data collection with the purpose of constructing theory from data. Charmaz (2011) writes, "the logic of grounded theory involves fragmenting empirical data through coding and working with resultant codes to construct abstract categories that fit these data and offer a conceptual analysis of them" (p. 361). And herein, lies the problematic. As conceptualized by Charmaz (2006, 2011) and others (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), grounded theory is "a

method of social scientific theory construction" (Charmaz, 2011) and as such is in tension with poststructuralist ways of doing research (see my previous discussion of St. Pierre's and Denzin's work). For Gary Thomas and David James (2006) grounded theory is not "consistent with the tenets of qualitative inquiry" (p. 768) because the set of procedures and techniques demanded by a grounded theory approach constrain the creative and interpretative work that is central to qualitative research which seeks to understand complex social worlds. Thomas and James (2006) emphasize that "there is no ground, no hidden truth residing somewhere in the data ready to inscribe itself" (p. 782) and that no fracturing and cleaning up of data can bring the researcher "closer to a definitive, transcendent understanding" (p. 785) discovered from the data.

Yet, I continue to position my work within a grounded theory approach. Why? For one thing, I generated creative and interpretative understandings through my engagement with the empirical materials that constitute this dissertation study rather than wanting to verify existing theories. And while the term "ground" needs to be troubled within a poststructuralist framework because it could imply "solidity and fixity" (Thomas & James, 2006, p. 770), I do see the empirical materials in conjunction with existing theories grounding, or anchoring, my interpretative work. Furthermore, I want to acknowledge that I at least somewhat employed techniques related to coding and analyzing fieldnotes taken up from grounded theory scholars (e.g., Charmaz, 2006, 2011). However, I add "modified" to my approach to grounded theory to trouble thinking of analysis predominantly in terms of coding and to disrupt ideas of original theory development.

I do not believe that researchers can "'discover' original theories" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 143). Some theorists of grounded theory research maintain that researchers should "avoid forcing their data into preconceived codes and categories" grounded in extant theories and that they "must guard against forcing [their] preconceptions on the data [they] code" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 67). However, St. Pierre (2011), again, reminds me of the futility of such endeavor, writing,

> However, words are always thinkable, sayable, and writable (in interviews and fieldnotes) only within particular grids of intelligibility, usually dominant, normalized discursive formations. What this means is that words we collect in interviews and observations, data, are always already products of theory.
>
> The researcher's first task is to recognize the theory(ies) that enabled others' words in interviews, and she can do that only if she's studied theory. Her next task is to theorize those already theorized words that reflect "experiences," living. Of course, the theory(ies) she uses determines whether those words even count as data because words (or anything else) become data only when theory acknowledges them as data. (p. 621)

For St. Pierre (2011), "It is impossible to disentangle *data*, *data collection*, and *data analysis*. Those individuations no longer make sense" (p. 622). Instead for her, not coding but "writing is analysis" and "what we think with when we think about a topic...*during* analysis" are data, too (p. 621). She writes,

> I imagine a cacophony of ideas swirling as we think about our topics with all we can muster—with words from theorists, participants, conference audiences, friends and lovers, ghosts who haunt our studies, characters in fiction and film and dreams—and with our bodies and all the other bodies and the earth and all the things and objects in our lives—the entire assemblage that is *a life* thinking *and, and, and*. ... (p. 622)

What St. Pierre writes about writing as analysis deeply resonates with me and I find it incredibly empowering related to my own research endeavors and the tensions that I feel around the rigid boundaries that encompass scholarly writing. While I did code my "data," many of the insights that I present in this dissertation developed out of my thinking with and through the "data" in the process of writing when I let the "cacophony of ideas swirl[]" through my mind. And in recognizing that this type of work represents "the entire assemblage that is a *life* thinking," I also acknowledge that I can neither separate myself from my preconceptions grounded in my life experiences nor from those that stem from my intellectual engagement with the scholars that inform my thinking. Moreover, I recognize that the input of others – my conversations with my wife Wendy, my advisor, the members of my committee, my friends, colleagues, members of my writing groups, and the feedback that I received from reviewers of conference proposals and submitted manuscripts – constitute crucial additional layers that impact this dissertation research. As St. Pierre (1996) points out, "these others…provide researchers with

response data which may never be officially mapped and accounted for but which can produce significant reconstructions of meaning as the research project progresses" (p. 535). Reflexivity is, therefore, an integral part of my research.

Moreover, such assemblage of thoughts also means for me that the analysis of empirical materials is always already deductive *and* inductive, and not just one or the other. For this project, this means that I used inductive processes that draw from the data to derive themes (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as well as deductive processes through which I considered the manifestations of dimensions of the theoretical framework of queer literacies – a framework that I developed in response to existing theories – in Sara's classroom. In this sense, I used the dimensions of queer literacies as "sensitizing concepts" that focused the analysis as it offered me "ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 259). In addition, I constantly reflected on my own positionings not only in personal but also intellectual terms, for example, by considering my own shifting position in relation to the notion of queer.

Viewing the analysis of empirical materials as ongoing and part of a cyclical or recursive research process, I used an emergent design which recognizes that processes of analysis and interpretation begin during the work in the field (Emerson et. al, 1995). As I observed Sara's classroom, writing fieldnotes, audio- and video-recording classroom interactions, and collecting student work, I constantly reviewed the materials by reflecting on emergent insights, potential themes, methodological questions, and links between themes and theoretical notions by writing asides, commentaries, and analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Rossman & Rallis, 2011). After the field work ended, I further developed these emergent insights through four phases. First, after the classroom observations ended, I personally transcribed all the audio-recordings of classroom conversations and interviews (see the following section on my reflections on my transcription decisions and processes). Next, I used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA during the process of open coding as I named and labeled data pieces with words and

phrases and sorted them into coded categories for easy retrieval. In so doing, I fully coded all of my transcripts. Such full transcribing and coding allowed me not only to relive the class in a way and go deeply back into it, but it also provided me with ideas and understandings that I might have otherwise missed. Charmaz (2006) has noted how coding full transcriptions of interviews and fieldnotes (or in this case fieldnotes expanded by transcribed audio-recordings) can generate new and diverse ideas and enhance deeper levels of understanding (p. 70). At the time of this open coding, I also created what I call a 'data analysis journal' in which I recorded my thoughts and ideas in response to the emerging patterns and themes, connections to theories and my own positionings in relation to what emerged, and specific excerpts from the data set for deeper analysis. I then re-read selected data excerpts again, this time reading more closely and using focused line-by-line coding on the basis of already identified categories and themes but also adding new categories and themes. Throughout the coding process I wrote theoretical and analytical memos that helped me think about emerging ideas and issues. Again following Emerson et al. (1995), I finally selected fieldnote excerpts and created excerpt-commentary units, which build the framework for my thematic narrative.

Reflections on my Transcription Decisions and Processes

Christina Davidson (2009) reminds us that commentary about transcription is essential in the reporting of research and that researchers need to be explicit about their transcription decisions and processes because transcription as a practice is central to qualitative research and because data can be transcribed in many ways. In the following, I, therefore, describe those choices and processes that I made in the context of this dissertation study.

Thinking about the transcription of the classroom conversations and interviews that I recorded began even before I began observing Sara's classroom. As Davidson (2009) points out, "Recordings of classroom lessons present particular challenges for transcribers due to large numbers of coparticipants in the setting" (p. 47). Knowing about the complexities of trying to capture the multiple and oftentimes overlapping discursive interactions in a classroom, I decided

to not only audio-record every class session in its entirety but also to video-record selected classroom events so that I would have an additional visual element to aid in the interpretation of what was going on in the classroom.

However, the difficulties of transcribing multiparty talk were considerable for me. After the first few class sessions that I attended, I realized that the quality of the audio-recordings was an issue. I had only used one digital audio-recorder that was placed on my desk next to my laptop on which I typed up my field notes during the class session. Since I was seated at the front of the classroom, close to the teacher, her talk and that of the students sitting close to me was easily decipherable. However, talk by students who sat far away from me was sometimes unintelligible. In addition, background noise, such as the running air conditioner or the noise from my typing on the laptop, also interfered with the recording. To remedy this situation, I placed a second digital audio-recorder across the classroom from where I was sitting during many of the subsequent class sessions. These multiple ways of recording, through multiple audio-recorders as well as video-recording, allowed me to cross-check what participants had said during the process of transcribing.

The actual transcription of the recorded materials began after I had finished the field work. Since my research questions very broadly explore what emerged from the teacher and her students' engagement with the curriculum, I decided to transcribe fully all the audio-recordings (Charmaz, 2006) which allowed me to relive what I had observed as I listened to the recordings. Due to the sheer volume of such full transcribing and my interest in broad-level interactions, I further chose to transcribe using a naturalized approach, paying more attention to what was being said than how it was being said. Davidson (2009) describes naturalized transcription as "written down talk that exhibits many features of written language that do not actually occur in spoken talk" while denaturalized transcription tries to "retain[] the features of spoken language" (pp. 38/39). In other words, in my transcription and in the representation of excerpts from my transcription in the following chapters, I use commas, periods and paragraphs to organize the

written down talk while mostly omitting idiosyncratic elements of speech, such as stutters, pauses, intonation or nonverbal elements of communication. I did this for several reasons. First, due to the sheer volume of materials to be transcribed (48 class session plus interviews), I did not have the time to engage in the recursive and repeated processes of transcribing that a more detailed approach would necessitate. Second, as said before, I decided not to engage in a critical micro-level analysis of particular utterances or instances of talk, a project that might develop out of this one at a later point, but broad-level meanings and themes. Finally, with this dissertation I want to tell a story about Sara's and her students' engagement with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum and I feel that readability of the transcribed excerpts included in the story is important.

Choosing this approach means that I did not follow any standardized approaches using a notation system to transcription but that I wrote the recorded words as I heard them, which often is referred to as transcribing as verbatim as possible. However, I retained some elements of spoken language, such as pauses and silences, some "ums" and laughter when these appeared meaningful to me. For example, in Chapter 9, I reflect on silences and laughter during a particular classroom conversation as signifiers of students' discomfort when reading a troubling scene in the novel *Giovanni's Room*. In this way, I recognize that my transcription practices reflect a "representational and interpretive process" (Davidson, 2009, p. 39). In addition, my process of transcription proceeded in tandem with the examination of the information from my field notes. In fact, I integrated the field notes into my recorded transcriptions, creating a multi-layered representation of the classroom events and discursive interactions. Therefore, as I was hearing and transcribing the silences and laughter during the afore-mentioned classroom conversation when I listened to the recording, I read these silences and absences against my field notes in which I had jotted down the feelings of discomfort that I perceived when this talk occurred. In other words, what became meaningful for me during the process of transcription was highlighted by the text of my field notes.

Going About Collecting the "Data"

As mentioned before, in my research methodology I drew on ethnographic practices engaging with what Denzin (2013) calls "empirical materials" through participant observation, audio- and video-recordings of observed class sessions, fieldnotes, interviews, and the collection and analysis of documentary materials, such as Sara's master's thesis (curriculum guide), the course texts (focal novels, additional texts, class handouts), and student-generated work to provide a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the classroom discourse and interactions around the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum. In particular, I engaged in the following research activities:

1. Participant observation: I observed three to four class sessions per week during the spring trimester of the school year 2012-2013, starting on March 13, 2013 and ending on June 19, 2013. During this trimester the class met five times a week from 8:58 a.m. to 10:05 a.m. on Monday, Tuesday and Friday, from 10:06 a.m. to 11:38 a.m. (with a lunch break from 10:36 a.m. to 11:06 a.m.) on Wednesday, and from 10:35 a.m. to 12:05 p.m. (with a lunch break from 11:08 a.m. to 11:38 a.m.) on Thursday. In total I observed 48 class sessions, taking copious notes on my laptop while also digitally audio-recording all of the observed class sessions. In addition, I video-taped some segments of class sessions, generally when students presented projects but also some whole-class discussions. I transcribed all of the audio-recordings and wrote up extended fieldnotes that integrated the original fieldnotes with the transcription. In these fieldnotes, I focused primarily on the classroom events in the form of interactions and classroom conversations.
2. Interviews: In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of how the course came to be, what the teacher's rationale was for developing this course, and about her experiences teaching the class, I conducted multiple interviews with Sara. The first two interviews took place as part of my mini-study in February and March 2011 and focused on the development and implementation of the course. The third interview took place on May 29, 2013 in which

our conversation revolved around Sara's pedagogy, her specific teaching approach for each unit of the course, and certain classroom activities, The final interview took place at the end of the trimester, a day before the last day of school, on June 18, 2013, and focused on how Sara views her teaching practices and the students' learning in this class. While I wrote up some interview questions beforehand, interviews were conducted rather informally and followed more a conversational pattern to allow for the spontaneous development of themes and topics.

I also interviewed individually two of the participating students for between 30-40 minutes. One of these interviews took place in an empty classroom during a time when students worked individually on projects. The interview with my son Dominik took place at home. The student interviews did not followed a set interview schedule but were based on a set of questions that was expanded in response to the students' answers. In addition, I conducted four 20-minute group interviews with the remaining students, usually with five students per group. In this way, I was able to interview almost all of the students (Appendix A: Student Interviews – Guiding Questions). However, unfortunately, all of the boys were absent during the day of the group interviews and I did not have an opportunity to interview them afterwards. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed fully.

3. Material artifacts: In order to establish the material context of the course, I collected documentary information about the curriculum in the form of teacher-generated documents, such as Sara's master's thesis, the novels and class handouts. Especially Sara's master's thesis (Barber-Just, 2002), in which she develops the Gay and Lesbian Literature class and provides the rationale and theoretical framework for her curriculum design, proved to be an invaluable resource for gaining a deeper understanding about this course. In order to gain insight into students' learning and their responses to the curriculum, I also gathered student-generated artifacts, which exist in original format or as photographs or photo copies, throughout the trimester. This set of materials includes artifacts that the students created

individually or as a group during in-class activities, such as posters, essays, and reflective writing journals. I also made note of the various resources, such as documentary films and links to Youtube video clips that Sara used throughout the semester. While I read through these artifacts during the process of data analysis, I did not conduct a detailed content analysis of these materials. However, they do inform my analysis and interpretation.

4. Student questionnaires: During the first week of the trimester, I asked the students to complete a brief questionnaire in which I asked some basic demographic information and inquired about their familiarity and comfort level around LGBT issues, their exposure to LGBT-themed texts/media, and a brief assessment of the school's climate for LGBTQ students (see Appendix B: Initial Student Questionnaire). Toward the end of the semester, I asked the students to complete another questionnaire in which I asked them to reflect on their experiences with taking the Gay and Lesbian Literature course. More specifically, I asked them about shifts in their familiarity and comfort level around LGBT issues, shifts in how they think about sexuality and gender, and whether or not they consider themselves to be allies for LGBTQ people. Open-ended questions invited them to reflect on new understandings and learnings, what learning experiences were the most powerful for them, and their experiences with the mindfulness practices and creative projects in which Sara engaged them. Finally, I wanted to know how important it was for them to have an openly 'out' teacher and why a course such as Gay and Lesbian Literature should be available to students (see Appendix C: Final Student Questionnaire)

All of these research activities together form a rich tapestry of empirical materials that inform my understandings of the Gay and Lesbian Literature class and how Sara and her students engaged with the curriculum.

Gaining Access and Consent

I learned about the Gay and Lesbian Literature class through my son who enrolled at WRHS as a sophomore in 2010. In the spring 2011, I took a qualitative research methods course

for which I had to conduct a mini-study. Knowing about the Gay and Lesbian Literature class and wanting to build on my prior work around LGBT issues in schools, I decided to contact Sara and ask for her permission to observe her class a few times. Initially, I established a first contact through email, which was followed by a brief introductory meeting in February 2011 during which we talked about my research interests. During the following two years, Sara and I kept in loose contact and I proposed the idea to conduct my dissertation research in her classroom. Initially very reluctant to this idea, Sara finally signaled her willingness to participate in the research study. Drawing on my connections from a previous study at another school in the district, I contacted the administrators in the school district to have them grant me permission to conduct research in Sara's classroom. This consent was granted without any problems. After obtaining approval through the university's Institutional Review Board, I was able to begin the study at the start of the third school trimester, in March 2013. Informed Consent was obtained from the teacher (see Appendix D). Parent permission, student consent (for students 18+) or student assent (for underage students) were obtained for all of the students enrolled in the course (see Appendix E, F, G).

Critical Reflection on Trustworthiness, Credibility and Rigor

Based on my discussion so far, I hesitate to use the terms of trustworthiness, credibility and rigor because they imply that the complexities and messiness of qualitative research can be smoothened out. While I certainly used several strategies that are generally considered to enhance the credibility and rigorousness of a qualitative research study – triangulation through the use of multiple sources of data, data collection through an extended time period, member checking to validate my findings, and peer debriefing with my community of practice (Rossman & Rallis, 2011) – I want to resist labeling my project credible and rigorous. This implies that as a researcher one can get it right.

Denzin (2011) provides a compelling critique of "the politics of evidence" that continue to plague qualitative research despite the complex literatures that trouble questions of trust,

quality of research and use of evidence. Criteria, such as trustworthiness, rigor, validity, credibility, transferability, confirmability, transparency, and warrantability (etc.) that are used to evaluate research are grounded in positivist understandings that assume the possibility of objectivity and truth. However, as Denzin (2011) emphasizes "ways of knowing are always already partial, moral, and political" (p. 654). In other words, there is no getting it right, there is only telling a story that hopefully makes sense and provokes thinking. Denzin (2011) writes,

> We have stories, narratives, excerpts from interviews. We perform our interpretations and invite audiences to experiences these performances, to live their way into the scenes, moments, and lives we are writing and talking about. Our empirical materials can't be fudged, misrepresented, altered, or distorted because they are life experiences. They are ethnodramas. (p. 651)

These words deeply speak to me. I want this dissertation to be understood as a thought-provoking, complex story without a finite, given meaning that would foreclose uncertainties, contradictions, and different readings. The empirical materials that are part of this story as well as the dissertation story itself are texts that are always already open to multiple interpretations. As St. Pierre (1996) reminds us, "meaning does not reside in the text itself but in the transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978)" (p. 535). Therefore, as each reader enters into this story with their own experiences, beliefs, values, and theoretical frameworks that produce a response to these texts, I not only invite but encourage multiple readings and meanings.

After contextualizing this project through a critical reflection on the methodologies employed, I now want to expand the readers' understanding of the study by setting the context for the study as I reflect on the places and people involved.

Setting the Sociopolitical Context: Places and People

Places: the Town, the School District and the School, and the Classroom

Williamstown

Williamstown is located in an area of New England that is known for its liberal, progressive orientation, both historically and contemporary. Many known women suffragists, abolitionists, transcendentalists and other free thinkers have lived in this area and contributed to

its liberal spirit. The area is home to several colleges and offers rich opportunities to engage with a wide variety of current topics that are often considered controversial through college lectures, events at independent book stores, theater performances, independent films, and the like. The area is also known for its large population of LGBTQ people. A significant number of students in Williamstown and the surrounding towns have lesbian, gay, or bisexual family members or grow up in families headed by LGBT parents. The annual Pride Parade in a nearby town draws large crowds every year. Almost all of the schools in the area have Gay-Straight-Alliances or similar student clubs who offer support for LGBTQ youth.

Williamstown School District and the School

The Williamstown School District, which educates a diverse population of approximately 4,000 students, including native speakers of more than 25 languages, is committed to social justice and actively pursues multicultural education. The school district's mission is "the academic achievement of every student learning in a system dedicated to social justice and multiculturalism." The Williamstown School District has developed a "Vision of Multicultural Education"[22] through which the District affirms its commitment to becoming a multicultural school system which is "built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity," in which school community members "actively interrupt all manifestations of racism, classism, religious intolerance, heterosexism, ableism, sexism and all other forms of injustice," and in which "curricula across all disciplines and the instructional strategies employed by teachers are actively anti-racist/anti-bias." The Williamstown School District with this document acknowledges that "schools are essential to laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of oppression and injustice."

[22] The documents referenced in this section are all publicly available through the school website.

In addition, the District has established the "Social Justice Commitment," a document that outlines amongst other things pedagogical strategies that can be used to meet the District's social justice goals, including the "incorporation of appropriate curriculum content, … the presentation of activities designed to deepen student consciousness about justice and injustice, and the provision of opportunities for students to create and participate in actions that can make a difference in the world" (p. 16). This document also charts administrative actions, for example, "Encourag[ing] teachers to incorporate social justice themes that are relevant to their curricula" and "Support[ing] teachers in the implementation of social justice curricula" (p. 54), teacher actions (i.e., "Uses project based learning and inquiry based learning to foster social action plans."), and students' development of values and attitudes (i.e., Develop a commitment to social justice and equity. Embrace the realities of inequities currently in existence and deepen empathy towards others. Deepen their understanding of various factors defining their racial, ethnic, class, cultural, gender, physical size and ability, religious, academic, linguistic, and sexual orientation identity, as well as areas of special need. Express concern about injustice and inequality.).

The research itself was conducted at Williamstown Regional High School (WRHS) which serves approximately 1,000 students[23] in grades 9-12. The student population at WRHS is diverse, especially considering its location in a suburban/rural area of the state: 12.2 % of students are Hispanic, 10 % Asian, 8.3 % African American, 61.2 % White, and 8.4 % identify as Multi-Race/Non-Hispanic. 26.8 % of the students are considered low-income, receiving free or reduced lunch. 17.6 % of the students speak another language than English as their first language. During the school trimester when I observed the Gay and Lesbian Literature class, this diversity of the student population was not quite reflected in the class; only 9 out of 25 students were students of color.

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[23] All statistics taken from the school profile section of the state's Department of Education webpage.

At WRHS, students are not tracked by ability in the subject area of English Language Arts (ELA). In other words, ELA classes are heterogeneously grouped with students of all ability levels attending the same classes. However, students can opt to complete additional independent projects for honors or Advanced Placement (AP) credits. In Sara's words, this "has eliminated the existence of the 'dungeon class,' filled with unruly students with low self-esteem, all of whom feel that they are together because they are 'stupid'" at the same time as it encourages intellectualism among all students (Barber-Just, p. 59). Sara appreciates such heterogeneous grouping because she feels that it allows different students to contribute different things: "high-level, ambitious thinkers and learners bring a level of responsibility and seriousness to any course, while outspoken and even silly students bring a level of honesty and joy that is necessary for us to be fully open with one another" (p. 59).

The ELA department's vision statement and philosophy[24] reflect the school district's commitment to culturally responsive teaching with a specific focus on the inclusion of diverse literature:

> Our English language arts curriculum is guided by culturally responsive instructional practices that include a rich selection of diverse literature, writing traditions, and themes that value students' experiences and broaden their global perspectives and attitudes.... When students engage with and respond to a variety of literature, they develop an awareness of the human condition, gain empathy, and discover a sense of personal empowerment that allows them to become active participants in society.

It is within this context of general liberal, progressive orientation and commitment to social justice and multicultural education that the implementation of the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum must be understood. Within an institution that pledges to value diversity and social justice, this course is an opportunity for representing those values and commitments. It is a very specific context and it needs to be acknowledged that the implementation of such a curriculum would be much harder, at the very least, if not impossible in some areas of the United

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[24] Retrieved from school website.

States. The specificity of this context was very apparent for Sara who characterized her school as "a haven for freethinkers and progressives," adding "If this is true, then it is essential that I, and other teachers like me, attempt change. In so doing, we will be modeling what is possible (even far-off in the future) for our less free colleagues" (Barber-Just, p. 14).

Sara's Classroom

Even before entering Sara's classroom one can see her commitment to LGBT issues. The bulletin board right next to the door invites students to join the school's Gay-Straight-Alliance, of which Sara has been the teacher advisor for the past decade. Upon entering the classroom, the first thing you notice is the proliferation of student work all around the classroom. Student art work, excerpts from magazines, and photos decorate the room. There are plants on the window sill, a photo that shows Sara with her wife and her two sons and a vase with a rose are displayed on Sara's computer desk, and another photo of Sara and her wife taken at her wedding sits on her desk – all of this giving the room a homey feeling. You can tell that this is Sara's room in which her private with her public life merge in unobtrusive yet visible ways.

The set-up of the room itself is rather traditional with students sitting in a big 'U' with rows in between. It is a set-up that allows most students to see each other but it is not a perfect set up to engage in conversations with each other because it still provides mostly frontal teaching in which the teacher directs class activities from the front of the room. In the front of the room to the left is Sara's desk, which is not in use during class sessions. To the right is her computer desk which she uses when showing films, video clips or other online resources. In the front of the room is a large whiteboard, which becomes a central station during classroom interactions. It is here that Sara holds information related to homework and assignments; but most importantly Sara uses the board to jot down relevant information from class discussions in the form of jotted notes (see Appendix H: Whiteboard Notes). In this way, the board becomes a visual representation of the conversations in which Sara and her students engage. Sara most often teaches from the front of the class, often with the book that the class is reading in her hand so that she can find relevant

quotes. When students are engaged in individual or small group work, Sara circulates the room, checking in with her students, providing advice, asking questions, or offering her own opinion.

In the following section, I will introduce the study participants – Sara and her students – and reflect on my own subjectivities and roles as the researcher in Sara classroom.

The People: the Teacher, the Students, the Researcher

The Curriculum Designer and Teacher 'Sara'

"You can do this! Not only can you do it, but you must" (Barber-Just, p. 4). Sara is a veteran teacher who has been teaching as an English teacher at WRHS since 1999, teaching the Gay and Lesbian Literature class since its inception in 2002. In her Master's Thesis in which she developed the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum, she describes herself as: "I am so many people – I am a lesbian who is passionate about social justice education; I am an artist, writer, dancer, gardener, and avid reader…. I am enriched by my ability to fuse my activism and my love of literature in a career" (Barber-Just, p. 1). As an 'out'[25] teacher, perceived as lesbian because of her same-sex marriage, yet self-identifying as bisexual, and founder and advisor of the school's Gay-Straight Alliance, Sara performs important anti-homophobia and anti-heterosexism work at her school. Her lesbian/bisexual identification has, of course, influenced the development of the curriculum and her teaching of the Gay and Lesbian Literature class. As Sara says, "my personal voice is [] very much a part of ...the curriculum" (Barber-Just, p. 4). When interviewed, she added, "*You know more about things that affect your life. ... It's like all the gay issues, I'm like the most on the pulse of those issues because they affect me the most. I just naturally take in all that information. If there is a new book about it, if there is a new movie. I'm gonna see it.*" (Interview 2, 2013)

[25] I define being 'out' as having publicly disclosed one's sexual orientation/sexual identity.

As someone committed to a social-justice based multicultural education, Sara views herself as "a proponent for a socially just, liberatory curriculum and pedagogy" (Barber-Just, p. 36). For her, "curriculum is [] about teachers fully educating their students – intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally ... [and] since this is the case, teachers must constantly push the boundaries of curricular norms and expectations in order to satisfy their students' true curiosity" Barber-Just, p. 3). Creating and teaching the Gay and Lesbian Literature class presents such boundary pushing. That this kind of work poses risks as well as possibilities becomes evident when she writes, "I want nothing more than to be pushed off that proverbial cliff or to do the pushing, so that my students and I might watch ourselves ultimately take flight" (Barber-Just, p. 39).

Dialogue is central to Sara's teaching and she views it as integral to her students' intellectual and emotional development. She says, "I love to facilitate deep, difficult discussions – to guide students as they venture into unknown places" (Barber-Just, p. 29). What Sara brings as a facilitator to such dialogue is great comfort with talking about difficult and controversial issues, her willingness to be open within set boundaries, and her ability to establish a safe, respectful and trusting relationship with her students. When asked about her strengths, Sara replied:

> *My strength would be, I'm really comfortable talking to people. Very few things make me nervous or uncomfortable. But I have really clear lines that I would never cross. I think teenagers are like wolves. They can sniff out fear and they can sniff out discomfort, you know, they just know. And so, they know they can trust me and they know they can be open and that they can ask anything and then we can talk about anything. But we won't really cross the line. And that it's gonna be safe and they'll be respected and that there's like a purpose.* (Interview 1, 2011)

For Sara, participation in this dissertation research is an opportunity to make her curriculum and her work public and to provide a vision for other teachers and schools who want to create and implement LGBT-inclusive curricula. Already in her master's thesis, Sara voiced her hope that her curriculum "might pave the way for similar curricular reform" elsewhere (Barber-Just, p. 5).

The Students

As described before, WRHS is a diverse school community with students coming from many social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds – diversity which was partially reflected in the students enrolled in Gay and Lesbian Literature course during the trimester that I observed. At the beginning of the trimester, I asked students to complete a brief questionnaire to collect some basic demographic information and gauge their initial knowledge about, familiarity with, and comfort around LGBTQ topics. During this particular semester, the girls far outnumbered the boys in the classroom – out of 25 students only 5 were boys, one of whom dropped out of the class after a few weeks. This is not always the case but gender dynamics can influence classroom interactions and while two of the boys very actively participated during class discussions, the other two boys remained mostly quiet. As to the racial/ethnic identifications of the students, 6 students identified their ethnic background as Chinese (3), Vietnamese (1), Korean (1), or Guatemalan (1), and 3 of these students are adopted by lesbian parents. Three more students who identified as U.S. American acknowledged during class discussions their Asian or Hispanic heritage. This racial/ethnic make-up of the class does not quite reflect the school's demographics but almost. However, noticeable is the almost complete absence of Hispanic students (with the exception of the student who identifies his Guatemalan heritage but is adopted by white lesbian parents) and the complete absence of African-American students. I do not know if this is in general representative of the demographics of the students who tend to take the Gay and Lesbian Literature course or if this was an exception for the trimester when I observed the class. Two of the boys had immigrated with their families to the United States from Vietnam and Korea, which impacted their engagement with the curriculum as they wrestled with their native cultures' relations to same-sex sexuality, making frequent references to their home countries as being 'homophobic'.

Most of the students in the class identified as heterosexual or straight; however, three of the girls identified as bisexual, one girl identified as pansexual, and three girls chose not to

answer this question. All of the boys identified as heterosexual. This is significant because much of the literature focuses on the impact LGBT-inclusive curricula have on LGBT students while "straight" students are often framed as homophobic or resistant (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). On the other hand, almost all of the students mentioned that they had LGBT friends and a considerable number of them had LGBT family members: 3 students had lesbian mothers, 2 students had bisexual mothers, 3 students had lesbian/gay siblings, 1 student had a transgender cousin, and 3 students had lesbian aunts or cousins. In other words, almost half of the students in the class had deeply personal connections to LGBT issues through the experiences of their family members. While the high percentage of students with LGBT family members may be considered an outcome of the area in which they live, this still shines a light on the relevance an LGBT-themed curriculum holds for large numbers of students beyond the smaller number of students who identify as LGBT themselves.

In response to the questions about their comfort and familiarity with LGBT topics, 7 of the students replied that they were very familiar with LGBT topics and felt very comfortable talking about them. Another 9 students also felt very comfortable talking about LGBT topics but thought they were only somewhat familiar with them as they recognized gaps in their knowledge. The remaining students felt somewhat comfortable and somewhat familiar with LGBT topics. These responses are significant because they show that even within a region that is considered "gay-friendly" and where almost all the students have personal connections to LGBT people, not even 1/3 of the students feel very comfortable talking about LGBT issues and very few of the students (less than 1/3 of the class) actually thought that they had considerable knowledge of LGBT issues. Students recognized their gaps in knowledge even though many of them shared that they had been exposed to LGBT people through the media: through TV shows with gay characters, talk shows where these topics were discussed or political/satirical shows, such as the Daily Show, that took on these topics. On the other hand, very few students had ever watched

LGBT-themed documentaries and only one student said that she had read lesbian-themed books prior to taking the class.

Since the course is offered as an ELA literature class elective – an option that is only open to juniors and seniors who have completed the ELA requirements for graduation – most of the students during the trimester that I observed were seniors. This impacted the class because the seniors had their last day of school on May 31, after which only 5 juniors remained in the class for the remaining days of the trimester until June 18, 2013.

The Researcher - Subjectivit(ies)/Roles

In qualitative research the researcher is often conceptualized as "the instrument of the study" because it is "through the researcher's unique ways of seeing the world" which are rooted in "the researcher's personal biography" that data are filtered and interpreted (Rossman & Rallis, 2011, Chapter 2, pp. 6/7). Many scholars have noted that the researcher's subjectivities inevitably shape every aspect of the research process: the questions we ask, how we connect with our participants, what we see, hear, or notice during our data collection, how we make meaning of this, and how we react to it (e.g., Peshkin, 1988; Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008). Particularly within the critical research paradigm, the roles and subjectivities of a researcher are an important aspect to consider. Madison (2005), for example, reminds researchers to consider the following questions:

> We must ask – "What are we going to do with the research and who ultimately will benefit? Who gives us the authority to make claims about where we have been? How will our work make a difference in people's lives? What difference does it make when the ethnographer him/herself comes from a history of colonization and disfranchisement? (p. 7)

Part of my reflective and reflexive work (turning both inward and outward) therefore involves thinking about the effects of my own positionings in this research, both in terms of personal identities and political stance.

My research is closely connected to who I am as a person and as an educator, and I acknowledge that my personal experiences and my theoretical commitments permeate my research. My observations and interpretations of what I saw going on in the classroom were

shaped by my own life experiences as a lesbian, non U.S. citizen living in a bi-national unrecognized marriage, mother and parent of one gay and one straight son. As a doctoral student and educator committed to multicultural education grounded in social justice, I draw on particular theories and use my understanding of multicultural education, social justice education, antioppressive education, feminism and queer theory to make sense of what I saw and experienced in Sara's classroom.

While I generally visibly occupied the position of the researcher, taking notes on my laptop, audio- or video-recording classroom conversations and interactions or taking photos, I got more involved in class discussions as the trimester progressed, especially during the last month of the trimester when the Seniors had left and there were only a few students left in the class. When conducting classroom research, I generally try to remain an observer rather than a participant because I fear that my contributions might alter classroom conversations or impact how the teacher and/or students present themselves or their values and beliefs. In addition, in a class of 24 students, I did not feel that it was my place to take up speaking time that would take away from students' opportunities to insert their voices. However, even being a mostly silent observer I need to acknowledge that my physical presence alone, but maybe more importantly my actions of taking notes on my laptop and audio-or video-recording class discussions, presented intrusions into the space of Sara's classroom and the impact of this is not known to me. This "consequential presence" does not need to be seen as "contaminating" (Clarke, 1975, p. 99 as cited by Emerson et al., 1995); however, as a researcher I need to be sensitive to and perceptive of the possible impact of my presence (Emerson et al., 1995). While I cannot know how students perceived me, I did record some indicators of my presence. Some students told me that they were excited about the study because it will publicize and hopefully promote curricula that are similar to the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum, while on the other hand, I also noticed instances where students seemed to hold back or remain quiet, for example, when I video recorded some class discussions or placed the digital audio-recorder with groups during small group work. Was it because of my

camera or because of the topic that students were more engaged when I only audio-recorded a class session?

This research project has allowed me to interrogate and complicate my own perspectives about teaching LGBTQ topics in schools. Issues of identity intersect with the research in multiple ways: who we are and how we present ourselves are inextricably linked with what we do and how we do it and discussing these connections is a part of a self-reflexive process that must be part of critical social research. In researching LGBTQ topics in schools, I found it particularly important to explore how my own sexual identity positions me with respect to the project. When I introduced myself to the class, I mentioned that I identify as lesbian. Many students in the class also knew my son, a senior at the school himself at the time of the study, who also identifies as gay. How knowing this shaped students' perceptions of me, I do not know and I do not want to make assumptions. There were a few moments when I drew on my experiences as a lesbian to add something to a classroom conversation. For example, once, I told students about the cultural differences in perceptions of presentation because women with short hair are generally not assumed to be lesbian in Germany, which I feel is different from the United States. In another example, I provided books that I had at home when a student researched the topic of children with lesbian or gay parents. In other instances, I could have contributed to a classroom conversation and, in retrospect, think I might have been able to add a productive perspective (i.e., related to immigration issues for bi-national lesbian/gay couples), but I did not do so. In addition, through my presence in the classroom, the students had the opportunity to interact with two female out lesbian teachers; and, while Sara and I both present the 'married with children' type of lesbian, we certainly differed in other aspects (for example, the students learned that my children are from a previous heterosexual marriage while Sara's children were conceived through in-vitro fertilization). In that sense, the students might have gotten a richer experience as they learned from our different stories.

Finally, as a researcher and educator working for social and cultural change within a social justice framework and committed to working for educational equity, I am aware that my work is by no means neutral: "Research with an explicit ethical or political commitment needs to defend itself against the charge that it is biased and suspect from the start" (Griffiths 1998, p. 45). Research that focuses on sexualities and more specifically on LGBTQ topics in education is particularly controversial, even more so when the study addresses issues related to sexual orientation within the school context and with students. Oftentimes this kind of research has been called subversive, risky, and problematic and some researchers have faced obstacles in doing such work (e.g., Atkinson and DePalma, 2008; Donelson and Rogers, 2004). However, unlike these researchers I have been surprised by the openness and acceptance with which my research endeavor was embraced by everyone involved in this project. I was extremely fortunate to gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the university and the school district without meeting any resistance or problems, and I have always been able to talk openly within my private and professional environment about my research agenda. I realize that this is not a common experience for many researchers whose research focuses on LGBTQ topics particularly within the field of education. Atkinson and DePalma (2008), for example, talk about "the layers of silence" they encountered regarding their research around sexualities in education. I feel privileged to have found so much support for the work that I do.

In closing this section in which I used a reflexive approach for looking into my subjectivities and roles related to this project, I want to address a caveat of reflexivity, that of the assumption that reflexivity can be used to legitimize and validate qualitative research. I want to emphasize that I do not intend to use reflexivity as truth or to present my research as getting it right (Pillow, 2003). Instead, I view the critical personal narrative drawn from such reflexivity as an additional layer within the complex web of the narrative of this dissertation through which I want to forefront rather than downplay the complexities of this endeavor. Pillow (2003) further critiques the underlying assumption of a knowable self that we are able to disclose, asking us as

researchers to question if we ever really know who we are and to acknowledge and work with our fluid, shifting selves. When I think about my 'self' in relation to the notion of 'queer', I recognize a constant shifting from initial unknowing what it might mean, to being uncomfortable with the term, struggling and wrestling with it, rejecting it, bringing it into my research to trouble my understandings, and back to myself who still does not identify as queer. How have my shifting 'selves' in relation to queer impacted this dissertation project? What might I have missed in the moments when I rejected queer? What might it have closed off when I adopted a queer lens? These are some of the questions that continue to remind me that reflexivity is not an end in itself but a process that pushes a researcher to always keep looking beyond that which seems explained.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an opportunity for me to contextualize this dissertation project by reflecting on the methodologies employed for the study and its sociopolitical context. Situated within a critical qualitative research paradigm, this study has an explicit orientation towards transformation and social change. As a critically positioned researcher, I purposefully adopt a research agenda with the purpose of transforming how issues around sexuality and gender diversity are addressed in schools. This is reflected in my research questions through which I seek to explore how a teacher and her students engaged with a literature curriculum that was focused on the stories, experiences, cultures, and histories of LGBTQ people, and it is reflected in my research design. The ethnographic practices and the case study approach that I used for this study allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the teaching and learning that goes on in a high school class on gay and lesbian literature. As a critical researcher, I seek to add another layer to this study as I reflexively examine my own roles, subjectivities and positionings in relation to the topic of the study, in relation to my participants, and in relation to the production of knowledge through this project. The critical personal narrative, which I weave at times into the narrative of this dissertation, provides a window into how my own subjectivities and positionings as a person and researcher inform further the analysis presented in the next chapters.

Chapter 7 presents an overview of the course: the rationale for its creation, the theoretical frameworks employed by Sara in her course design, choices she made related to texts and learning activities, and how the course was implemented. Chapters 8-12 then present the actual analysis based on the data that I collected as outlined in this chapter on my methodologies.

CHAPTER 7

BURSTING OPEN THE HOURS: A GAY AND LESBIAN LITERATURE COURSE

> *This curriculum model exists for me and my school district and also for those who could make use of it. It will not remedy the dire situations of teachers and students who will continue to struggle and suffer in the face of harassment, discrimination, and fear. But it might offer hope to them, might pave the way for similar curricular reform.*
>
> - Sara in the introduction to her curriculum (Barber-Just, p. 5)

In this chapter, I provide background information about the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, outlining how the curriculum was developed and implemented, the underlying theories that frame the design of this curriculum and Sara's pedagogy, and an overview of the course content. In so doing, I draw largely on Sara's Master's thesis titled *The Hours Bursting Open: Transforming the Classroom with Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Literature*, as well as on what I learned from her during our interviews.

Developing the Gay and Lesbian Literature Course

A Multicultural, Anti-Oppression Curriculum

Sara developed the curriculum for the Gay and Lesbian Literature class as part of her master's thesis in 2002 coming from an explicit feminist and activist stance committed to transformational education, developing the course specifically as "a multicultural, anti-oppression curriculum" (p. 2), one that is "socially just and liberatory" (p. 36). At the core of Sara's curriculum is her goal to guide students to "understand justice and equality through literature" (p. 3). As the introductory quote shows, Sara decided to design the curriculum in the hope of contributing to social change through curricular reform in response to the discrimination, exclusion and harassment that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students and teachers face in schools (at the time of her course design she did not address the needs of transgender students and teachers). The course has, therefore, an explicitly critical orientation toward revealing and challenging oppression. Sara notes that the project developed not only because of the personal relevance the topic holds for her own life but also as a result of her review of the research on the

educational experiences of LGB students and teachers, finding how many of them felt isolated and excluded. For Sara, implementing a lesbian-, gay- and bi-inclusive literature curriculum for high school students is a step forward in working towards schools that provide a safe, supportive and affirmative environment for LGB students and teachers.

In her curriculum development, Sara draws in particular on the theories of bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Sonia Nieto, emphasizing how her "own voice and practice were crucial as [she] worked to include sexual orientation into theoretical models that have focused almost solely on sexism, racism, and classism" (p. 3). In developing the curriculum, it was Sara's hope that her curriculum can be used "to empower teachers and students as it frees them and others from oppression" (Barber-Just, abstract). For Sara, there is the possibility that this curriculum creates a "transformative classroom" that can provide positive changes for the school climate at large.

Voice-Based and Performance-Centered

As mentioned before, Sara's curriculum and her pedagogical choices are grounded in the works of bell hooks, Paulo Freire and Sonia Nieto. Like these scholars, Sara believes in the transformative potential of a curriculum that does not seek to "implant knowledge" but that is "voice- and experience-based" and utilizes "performative classroom pedagogy" (p. 29). For Sara, this means "opening up" and "integrating personal voice and experience into the classroom" while also "moving beyond the self" through open dialogue. Since such "voice-centered learning" remains controversial, it is not just through the course content but also through the pedagogical strategies that Sara seeks to "transgress boundaries." She references hooks (1994) who writes:

> Once again, we are referring to a discussion of whether or not we subvert the classroom's politics of domination simply by using different material, or by having a different, more radical standpoint. Again and again [I am] saying that different, more radical subject matter does not create a liberatory pedagogy, that a simple practice like including personal experience may be more constructively challenging than simply changing the curriculum...One of the ways you can be written off quickly...by colleagues who are suspicious of progressive pedagogy is to allow your students, or yourself, to talk about experience; sharing personal narratives yet linking that knowledge with academic information really enhances our capacity to know...One of the most misunderstood aspects of my writing on pedagogy is the emphasis on voice. Coming to voice is not just

> the act of telling one's experience. It is using that telling strategically – to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects. (p. 148)

Reflecting on hooks' thoughts, Sara writes, "Introducing even highly radical subject matter is not an act of liberation in and of itself. It requires the insertion of personal voice by students" (pp. 32/33). Integrating students' voices into the curriculum happens in many ways throughout the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, sometimes planned in assignments and projects and often spontaneous during class discussions. Sara begins her Gay and Lesbian Literature class by asking students to share their own perceptions and existing knowledge about sexuality and sexual orientation in an introductory essay. Students are asked to draw upon their education, upbringing, and personal experience as they reflect on the following prompts:

> How have you learned about sexuality and sexual orientation? More specifically, what are some of the positive and/or negative messages you have received about gay, lesbian, or bisexual people? Where did this information come from?
>
> Also, what is socially expected of you (by friends, family, and the wider world) in regard to sexual orientation? Who holds these expectations? Feel free to talk about how you feel about your answers to these questions.
>
> How would you describe the climate in this country and the world at large for LGBT people? What facts or experiences inform this description?
>
> (See Appendix I: Introductory Writing/Perceptions - Handout)

Throughout the course then, students are encouraged to offer their "voices, memories, responses, and fears in writing, class discussion, creative projects, and in private conversations" with Sara (Barber-Just, p. 33). For example, the critical media awareness project *Gay Notions* that students complete towards the beginning of the course allows students to draw on their knowledge of and interest in media texts (see Chapter 8 for a further discussion of this assignment). The final project in response to reading the novel *Giovanni's Room* lets students use a medium of choice to creatively engage with the text (see Chapter 9 for a further discussion of this assignment). Some of the journal entries that the students write in response to reading the novel *The Hours* encourage students to relate the themes that emerge from the text to their own

lives. For example, students can choose the “Personal Response/Connections to Your Life” prompt that asks them to:

> Choose a section of the reading and a quote or two to support it. Now, respond personally. What do you think about what you’ve read? Why? What feelings does it bring up for you? Do you sympathize with the character(s)? Are you frustrated? Consider sharing an experience in your own life that connects to something the characters have experienced. How does the text make you think of your life? Yourself? Your relationships?

The research projects that students conduct towards the end of the class provide an opportunity for students to explore in depth an LGBTQ topic that they can choose based on their personal interest. And, at the end of the class, Sara asks students to write a final reflection “about what they have gained from the course, as well as an assessment of their initial perceptions, taking into account what they learned through course literature, videos, related materials, and class dialogue” (Barber-Just, p. 33).

For Sara, such a voice-based curriculum is not only important for the students but it also means for her that she feels empowered to teach in “self-actualized, embodied, and loving” ways that work against the “mind/body split in academia” (Barber-Just, pp. 37/38). Sara believes in "the importance of educators bringing a whole self into the classroom, thereby teaching students to respect and celebrate diversity" (p. 4). In her master’s thesis, she writes, “For me, coming out is one way to immediately deny that split – to say publicly that my academic, intellectual life is influenced by my emotional, personal life and also by the person I love” (p. 38). More than just coming out to her students, Sara enacts her self-actualized, embodied, loving self consistently throughout the class as she shares personal experiences and relates course topics to her own life.

Paulo Freire’s work, especially his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has influenced Sara on multiple levels. Like Freire, Sara believes that “a rise to consciousness must be led *by* the oppressed, *for* the oppressed” (Barber-Just, p. 39), a belief that contributed to her investment in the development, implementation, and teaching of the Gay and Lesbian Literature class, which

she views as a revolutionary piece of curriculum development. Sara reflected on this in her master's thesis:

> *I have chosen to bring about revolution through the implementation of a socially just literature curriculum which I hope will transform my classroom; however, students in the room, equal contributors to this liberation, will bring their knowledge and passion to others, creating a cycle of change.* (p. 41)

That such a cycle of change can be initiated in a transformative classroom like Sara's shows when students move towards becoming supportive allies and advocates for LGBTQ family members, friends, peers, and people in general (see Chapter 12 for a further discussion of this).

In addition, Sara views the chronological design of the curriculum as Freirean in nature because "it will optimize the unveiling of a world of oppression, laying a foundation for understanding past struggles before analyzing present ones" (p. 65). Sara, therefore, chose a historical approach to her curriculum by selecting the literary texts from five different time periods, each of which reflects the thinking of its time and marks significant changes in how lesbian and gay lives were understood and, consequently, represented in literature. In so doing, students can develop an understanding of how the oppression of LGBTQ people developed historically and continues to work through discourses and practices related to norm-disruptive sexualities and genders that get repeated but also shifted over time (e.g., exclusion and silence, medicalization and pathologization, liberation, normalization).

Lastly, Sonia Nieto's work, and here especially her book *Affirming Diversity*, provided Sara with another rationale for creating and implementing this curriculum as Nieto advocates for education that validates students' cultures and identities while at the same time addressing systemic oppression in the form of institutionalized racism, sexism, or heterosexism (to name just a few). This is what Sara wants to accomplish with her curriculum. For Sara, it is important to recognize that "a curriculum which aims to transform the classroom through literature must therefore recognize that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are not just of a 'sexual orientation,' but are members of a diverse cultural group" (p. 53).

Implementing the Gay and Lesbian Literature Course

My own school district is ....a haven for freethinkers and progressives. If this is true, then it is essential that I, and other teachers like me, attempt change. In so doing, we will be modeling what is possible (even far-off in the future) for our less free colleagues.
(Barber-Just, p. 14)

This is, in many ways, the final frontier; only the most liberal and progressive school districts are able to even broach the inclusion of gay studies into the mainstream curriculum.
(Barber-Just, p. 24)

More important than developing a new curriculum is the actual implementation of the curriculum. That a new curriculum in the form of a new class cannot be offered without jumping through several administrative hoops becomes clear when Sara describes what she had to do to get her new course into the official school curriculum. Even though Sara described her school as a "haven for freethinkers and progressives," it required courage and perseverance for her to implement her curriculum. Although she did not have to fight opposing forces, she knew that it would take time to get the class approved as an official course by the school committee before students could earn English credit for enrollment. Therefore, she decided to initially offer the course as an "Alternative Learning Project" (ALPS) to interested students for general credit. After Sara received approval from her department head, she began to recruit students for course enrollment. As the school's advisor of its Gay-Straight-Alliance, she knew several students who were interested in taking such a class. In addition, several of her students from other classes chose to take the course on top of their 'regular' English classes. A caveat of this approach was that Sara had to accept a decrease in her paid workload – "ALPS advisors are paid nothing for their work but do it out of passion for the study alone" (Interview 2/14/2011) – which meant that she volunteered to teach the course "for free" for two years:

> *I was like, I have this great product. Now I'm gonna try it. I was the GSA advisor and I asked a small group of students to apply to take the course as an independent study. So, it was 10 students and we decided that it would meet every single day for an hour. It would be just like any other class and I would test it out. But they weren't going to pay me like for a real English class because it was not approved. … I actually got a reduction in my teaching load. So, I was technically teaching 90%. I shaved a class of my schedule so I could do it. And then I put into place this extra class that I taught every day for free. …. And I did that for two years. Because I was, who cares. I don't have time for all this crap.*

> *I don't want to be going to the school committee. I'm just gonna do it and see if it works.* (Interview 2/14/2011)

During these two years, Sara documented her work and then submitted a proposal to the school committee for approval to full course status. Knowing that she had received requests to call her class Gender and Literature instead of Gay and Lesbian Literature, Sara expected a "big ugly fight." In her thesis, she notes, "I have prepared myself for the reality that even within my 'liberal' school district, I will face opposition for curricular inclusion as word of my project spreads and as it increases in size and popularity over time" (p. 18). However, surprisingly the school committee approved the course without much debate during a meeting at which she was not even present.

> *I submitted student work. I was under the impression this was gonna be a big ugly fight. I had to revise the title many, many times. They wanted me to call it "Gender and Literature," take out the word "gay". But eventually it was allowed to be called "Gay and Lesbian Lit." And the school committee approved it in a meeting that I wasn't even at. It just happened and the next day they were like, 'Oh, yeah, your class is approved.' And I'm like, 'What, but [laughs] but nobody even told me that they were meeting!' It was a quick item on the agenda.* (Interview 2/14/2011)

Many teachers and administrators are afraid of backlash from students, families, or the whole community when thinking about queering the curriculum – a stance that can prevent important anti-oppression work from being done in schools. In Sara's case such fear was fortunately unfounded. For one, Sara recognizes that within her department she "found an incredibly supportive group of colleagues" who were "excited by the possibility of it eventually becoming a full course offering at the school" (Barber-Just, p. 55). In addition, Sara attributed the quick approval of this revolutionary course to her standing in the school community and a school committee that was very supportive at that time:

> *This committee was great. …. They were so supportive of education and teachers. They just were like, 'Good. She's good. We know her teaching. This looks like a great product.' Pass it, sign it, done. It was no argument at all. Um, and then the next year …. in 2003 …. it was a full course offered.* (Interview 2/14/2011)

Since then the course has developed into the most popular elective literature course offered at the school. Not only is it a popular course but it also is a highly unique course. In fact,

as far as Sara and I know, it is the only comprehensive Gay and Lesbian Literature course offered at a public high school in the United States. While a similar class is now being offered at a nearby small charter school for the performing arts, it is important to recognize the sheer amount of students that Sara has been able to reach with her curriculum. At this public high school with a student body of around 1,000 students, between one half and three quarters of each graduating class takes this course during their junior or senior year depending on how many sections are offered per year. Sometimes the course is offered each trimester for consecutive school years and sometimes it is offered each trimester during alternating school years. Some trimesters, one section of the course is offered, other trimesters, two sections are offered, and each section can enroll up to 25 students, which means that up to 150 students per year take the course. Sara as the original curriculum designer is the main teacher for the course but when the class is offered for two sections another 'out' lesbian teacher teaches the second section. As Sara commented during the interview, "It's the most popular lit course. ... You're hitting like a huge mass of the student body. So, I think it has radically transformed the school." Sara then elaborated how she feels that the course has changed the school climate for the better:

> *It has changed the climate of our school. It's changed everything …. It's amazing. It does affect the way [students] behave. Like, if they know all this information, they don't run around in the halls being like 'You're so gay. What a fag.' They just don't do it anymore.* (Interview 2/14/2011)
>
> (See Chapter 11 for a further discussion of the impact of the course on the school's climate from the students' perspectives.)

In creating a course that would have such an impact on the students and the school, Sara very thoughtfully designed a curriculum that pushed boundaries in multiple ways.

Pushing of Boundaries: The Curriculum

Curriculum is more about teachers fully educating their students – intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally – then it is about educators following a script…
Since this is the case, teachers must constantly push the boundaries of curricular norms and expectations in order to satisfy their students' true curiosity.
The curriculum I came to design reveals my own pushing of boundaries, not only in its controversial subject matter but also in its corresponding activities that ask students to insert

personal voice again and again, to design projects of interest to them, and to attempt to better understand justice and equality through literature.

– Sara (Barber-Just, p. 3)

Modeling the course after two courses that had already been well established at her school – African-American literature and Women in Literature – Sara took a historical approach to her curriculum design, tracing "gay, lesbian, and bisexual history and collective sexual identity through four historical time periods, charting paths of severe and institutional homophobia and heterosexism; conformity and self-loathing; anger, activism, and radicalism; and, finally, pride, acceptance, and wholeness" (Barber-Just, p. 60). Organized around five focal novels, students in the Gay and Lesbian Literature course encounter the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people through a literary journey from the early 1900s to the 1990s. The course begins by challenging students to read queerly Willa Cather's 1923 *A Lost Lady* as they are asked to deconstruct the novel's lesbian subtext. This novel is followed by the reading of *Giovanni's Room* written by James Baldwin (1956) through a psychological framework. Students then encounter in Rita Mae Brown's (1973) novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* a groundbreaking work of feminist-lesbian fiction that provides a disruptive counternarrative and radical rethinking of female sexuality and gender. Michael Cunningham's (1998) Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Hours* moves students to reconsider the defining status of same-sex desires and relationships. Finally, *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai (1994) brings a transnational perspective to the course, allowing the students to develop an understanding of how sexuality and gender intersect with race and ethnicity (see Appendix J: Syllabus Gay and Lesbian Literature).

Explaining how she chose the course materials, Sara stressed that the course had to be rigorous in academic terms. When asked why the course does not include LGBTQ-themed young adult literature to which students might relate more easily than to the chosen novels, Sara pointed out that all the literature courses at the school have to provide a solid college level foundation in

literature. Sara emphasized, how the "primary texts themselves would fit easily into any university course" (Barber-Just, p. 58) and that they all have great literary merit:

> *All these books - Rubyfruit Jungle, A Lost Lady, Giovanni's Room, The Hours - they're great books. They're great, great pieces of literature. Rubyfruit Jungle is an example of the kind of book that was like, someone who read it, they give it to their friend, their friend reads it, they give it to their friend, and before you knew it, a million people had read this book about this radical lesbian who's like, I don't care if people think I'm gay and I'm proud. It's the perfect example of one of those rebellious pieces of literature that just got passed from friend to friend to friend. And I like them to have that example in this class.* (Interview 2/14/2011)

Choosing high-quality literary texts was particularly important for Sara because she felt that because of the "controversial" nature of the course "the pieces had to be justifiable both 'despite' and 'because of' their gay themes [and] had to have universal appeal for gay and straight audiences," which meant that the books had to "move beyond the 'coming out/coming of age' genre to address more complex themes" (Barber-Just, p. 62). In addition, Sara felt she needed to pay attention to how "sexually explicit" the novels were, measuring her choices against the school's "general standards of acceptability" that require that "sex is not gratuitous but is instead integral to character development and plot – and is written with dignity" (Barber-Just, p. 63). Reflecting on her book choices, she comments, "Nothing here gives me reason to feel uneasy, especially since it is so positive and encouraging when compared to the often negative and explicit sexual imagery students have seen in films, television, music videos, and advertising" (Barber-Just, p. 63).

While the five focal novels provide the anchor points for the course, the students' engagement with the multiple other texts of the course – films, video clips, magazine articles, or internet resources – as well as the varying learning activities and course projects add other critical layers to their learning. Each unit around one of the focal novels "begins with background materials aimed at contextualizing literacy study with historical information" and includes "learning tasks – papers, projects, journals, quizzes, and group work – all aimed at raising student consciousness through the advanced study of literature" (Barber-Just, p. 61). As Sara emphasizes,

this curriculum "reveals my own pushing of boundaries, not only in its controversial subject matter but also in its corresponding activities" (Barber-Just, p. 3).

In selecting the books, crafting lesson plans, and envisioning the curriculum as a whole, Sara relied on five guiding principles that are integral to her teaching based on her personal teaching experience and critical educational theories as advanced by hooks, Freire, and Nieto:

1. Literature should be meaningful to students, and it should address themes of importance in their lives.
2. Courses should be rooted in multicultural and anti-oppression education.
3. In addition to learning about themes, characters, and literary devices, students and teachers should be able to respond personally to what they are reading, drawing upon their own experiences to come to conclusions and to find their voices.
4. Students should learn to appreciate the richness and complexity of literature. Even if they don't necessarily "like" certain books, they should be able to identify and appreciate books that make magical use of language or ask them to ponder some of life's important questions.
5. Teachers should LOVE what they're teaching.

(Barber-Just, pp. 61/62)

As these five guiding principles show, which Sara laid out as a framework for her curriculum design, her multicultural and antioppressive literature curriculum is built on the premise that students can learn to examine and work towards justice and equality through literature. Such a literature curriculum is meaningful and relevant to students and teachers alike because it addresses "themes of importance" and asks them to "ponder some of life's important questions," allowing them to connect personally with the texts and to "find their voices" (Barber-Just, p. 62). For Sara, this is the work she loves to do.

Sara's work, described in this chapter, speaks to the importance of teachers being involved in the development of the curriculum that they teach. Based on the notion that teaching is a political act (Freire, 2000/1970), critical education scholars recognize that teachers have the potential to function as agents for social change in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Oftentimes, it is individual teachers who courageously take on controversial issues and engage with their students in what some consider dangerous conversations that inspire a movement against oppressive practices in schools and beyond. The development of innovative multicultural

curricula is a form of teacher activism that contributes significantly to changes in the larger political landscape of education and to changes within local school cultures. This study tells the story of such a teacher. However, in inviting me to her classroom for this dissertation study, it was Sara's hope that her story not remain a single story but become one of many stories. In her thesis, Sara writes, "Though this curriculum is primarily for me and my colleagues, as I have poured myself into this project I have also come to envision an *even wider* audience for it, possibly spanning New England or other parts of the U.S." (p. 56). However, even though more than a decade has passed since Sara created and began to teach her innovative curriculum, it still remains the only course of its kind that is taught at a public high school in the United States. Maybe with this dissertation study such work can become less revolutionary and more possible across schools in the U.S.?

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a description of the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum and course, providing information about the curriculum design and the course implementation based on Sara's master's thesis and interviews with Sara. I laid out how Sara grounds her curriculum in the educational theories proposed by bell hooks, Paulo Freire and Sonia Nieto as she created a multicultural, antioppressive curriculum through which she envisions transformative, liberatory education. I outlined the birth of the course through its initial implementation phase, showing Sara's sacrifices and determination in making her curriculum a full course offering at her school. Finally, I provided a snapshot of the content of the course, giving the reader a broad understanding of the curricular and pedagogical choices that Sara made as she pushed the boundaries of what is considered relevant teaching in schools.

In Chapters 8 through 11, I demonstrate how the dimensions of queer literacies were enacted through queer moments in the Gay and Lesbian Literature class by analyzing and featuring examples from the curriculum, classroom micro-interactions, and student projects. Such

queer moments will be analyzed through the lens of the six dimensions of the queer literacies approach that I proposed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 8

DECONSTRUCTING SUBTEXT: BEGINNING TO READ QUEERLY

Did you read Niel as kind of a girl?'cause it's not gonna feel gay if people do not.

– Sara in reference to *A Lost Lady*

How can the dimensions of queer literacies manifest in the high school literature classroom? When I set out on this study I had no idea how to apply queer theory to what would emerge out of my research. I knew that Sara had not created her curriculum drawing on queer theory so I did not expect to notice queer elements in her teaching or the students' engagement with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum. As the title of the course suggests, I expected a focus on gay and lesbian-themed texts but nothing queer. When Sara, during one of the class sessions, mentioned how she finds people who are "too radical to embrace gay marriage...really annoying" because they simply dismiss marriage as a conservative institution, I felt sure that Sara would want nothing to do with a queer theoretical framing of her course. In addition, I wanted to honor her invitation to observe her class and not impose a queer framework on a curriculum that was not designed as a queer curriculum. However, as I observed the class and later listened to the audio-recordings and re-read the transcripts I began to notice that what was happening in the classroom was queerer than I originally thought. It was through these naturally occurring queer moments that I began to think about a queer literacies framework and its different dimensions. In the following chapters, I will present, analyze, and discuss examples from the curriculum, classroom micro-interactions, and student projects that demonstrate how queer literacies manifest in the Gay and Lesbian Literature class. Each chapter will focus on one of the curriculum units based on the focal novels for the course, with the exception of the last unit on *Funny Boy* because the class did not engage with this novel at all. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the first unit of the course around the reading of *A Lost Lady*, which was accompanied by watching a documentary and then engaging with a media awareness project.

Reading Beneath the Surface and Deconstructing Subtext: *A Lost Lady, The Celluloid Closet* and *Gay Notions*

Queer literacies is itself a form of discourse analysis that uses the method of deconstruction to explore how "texts are constructed by interrogating and denaturalizing the text's manifold assumptions" (Giffney, 2009, p. 7). When engaging students with a text through a queer literacy approach, the focus of analysis becomes the construction of sexuality, sex and gender through textual presence as well as absences, silences, secrets and exclusions. In other words, through a queer literacies approach readers read beneath the surface, uncovering a text's hidden subtexts and, thus, uncovering new and different meanings. It means stopping to read straight (Britzman, 1995) and to open up the queer potential of texts. A queer literacies approach, therefore, lends itself to the deconstruction of texts that might not appear to be 'gay'-themed at all.

The Gay and Lesbian Literature course begins by challenging students to "dig beneath the surface of the text" (Sara) and to read queerly through the intersecting texts that students encounter during the first unit of the course: reading the focal novel *A Lost Lady* written by Willa Cather in 1923, viewing the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (Hefner, 1995) and engaging in the *Gay Notions* project. Linking these texts is the deconstructive work in the form of a literary and social analysis of discourse and texts that students are asked to perform during this unit.

Lesbian Subtext: *A Lost Lady*

Willa Cather's (1923) novel *A Lost Lady* can certainly be read 'straight'. Told from the perspective of Niel Herbert, a young man, whose love for Marian Forrester remains unrequited, the novel seemingly depicts heterosexual desires and life. However, read against the author's personal background and the historical context in which open literary representations of 'queer' life were taboo, the novel can also be read having a distinct lesbian subtext. One literary strategy

that authors have used to hide same-sex desire and relationships was to perform a gender switch of one of the characters in a text. Sara explains,

> *One way to tell the homoerotic story was to change the gender of one of the characters, to create a heterosexual façade to mask homosexual desire. In Cather's A Lost Lady, the soft, sensitive male character, Niel – who loves Mrs. Forrester but can never consummate his love for her – could easily represent a woman, even Cather herself.*
> (Barber-Just, p. 89)

Considering how Willa Cather herself often posed as a man or publicly referred to herself as William and that every book that Cather wrote has a male narrator who tells the story of another woman through his male lens, lends itself to a queer reading of the novel, which then in turn opens up spaces for new imaginings through the reinterpretation of the rich symbolism of the narrative.

However, for the students this literary gender switch was not self-evident and without Sara's guidance students would have done a 'straight' reading of the novel. Sara scaffolded students' developing deconstructive reading work by engaging them in whole-class close readings of selected passages focusing on the novel's rich symbolism to reveal the hidden lesbian subtext, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> Sara: *Did anyone notice anything not boyey? Did you all think he's a boy? 'Cause it's not gonna feel gay if people do not.*
>
> Male student: *He likes school.*
>
> Sara: *He likes school*. [laughing lightly] *Boys don't like school. Anything else?*
>
> Female student: *He wanted to put the bird out of its misery.*
>
> Sara: *He's like a bird saver. Anything else?*
>
> Female student: *On page 16 he says it's female.*
>
> Sara: *Okay, so this is so interesting. .... It's such a weird line. Niel says .... 'Miss Female' So, he says,* [reading from the book*] 'It ain't a he, anyhow. It's a female. Anyone would know that.' .... And then Ivy says, 'All right. Miss Female.' And then he's grabbing the bird. He's talking to the bird. But how many people thought he was talking to Niel?* [A few students raise their hands.] *Cool trick. Very cool trick. Is he talking to the bird or is he talking to Niel? Um, what's Niel's last name?*
>
> Female student: *Herbert.*

> Sara: *Herbert. Hm, interesting last name choice. Why? He's got her in his last name* [circles it in the name she wrote on the board]. *He also has really nice manners. Do you remember that? He says, they tell him that he has good manners. And he says, 'hush' at one point. He's like 'hush, you boys.' Telling people to hush. Physically anything. A little bit more girly. Do we have the long eye lash description yet? ...So in the next chapter we're gonna find out that this nice mannered, school-loving husher* [some laughter] *has long eye lashes, too. And he also likes to have his apartment really clean. He's into cleaning. Okay, so lots of clues to like understand. She could never be a little girl or even a masculine little girl, so she's made him more a feminine little boy.*

Here, Sara initiated the deconstructive work by challenging students to rethink the gender of one of the characters: "Did you read Niel as kind of a girl? 'cause it's not gonna feel gay if people do not." She then asked students to look for textual clues that might indicate a literary gender switch, focusing her students' attention not just on certain physical attributes and behavior that 'Niel' exhibits but also the author's use of language (i.e., referencing the bird as 'Miss Female' or choosing the last name 'Herbert' for Niel).

Once Sara opened the door for students to imagine Niel as a girl/woman, the heteronormative frame of reference for reading Niel's expressions of desire and love for Marian Forrester unraveled: what appeared to be heterosexual desires turned into same-sex desires. Students found this alternative reading practice of deconstructing hidden textual meanings "eye-opening," stating how it made the reading "much more interesting" and "cool" because it allowed them "a whole new level of reading." Deconstructive reading practices also encouraged students to think about how writers' intent in using particular language: "*it made me think twice about the language she used and what I thought it meant versus I think she wanted it to mean*." Other students noted how this shifted their reading practices more generally, saying "*It's making me question the things that I took for granted*," and "*It's making me question a lot of the books that I have read. Could that be, is that? It's opening my mind to a lot of things*." Some students made connections to the oppression of lesbian and gay people at the time of Cather's writing, being struck by the hidden struggle for expression that lesbian and gay writers faced, remarking, for example, how "*she* [the author] *is using that subtext because it's too early in the time to talk*

about it openly," or saying how "*it's really interesting to see how oppressed she was that she couldn't even talk about her as a girl, but making him* [Niel] *as the male character*." (All quotes are excerpted from the interviews with the students).

One might argue that such a reading-against-the-grain may be (mis)leading because it relies on making assumptions about the writer's intent that cannot be verified. Such altering of the meaning of texts has indeed been critiqued. For Sara, however, such doubts about what a writer might really be saying are less important than offering students alternative readings:

> *If we are going to study literature written by gays and lesbians of the past with students, we must present it to them in all of its confusing glory, despite their doubts about what it might really be saying. None of us can know without question, yet it is our responsibility as educators to illuminate some of the possibilities*. (Barber-Just, p. 89)

It is this illuminating of possibilities through which new imaginings open up that is an act of reading queerly and represents an aspect of queer literacies.

Unpacking Media Representations: *The Celluloid Closet* and the *Gay Notions* Project

Another venue in which to examine not merely the sexuality of LGBTQ people but the politics of sexuality are the media. Today, media culture is one of the most dominant forces in U.S. society; it contributes significantly to how we define our sense of self and it drives our understandings of those who are different from us. Students appropriate representational resources from the languages of popular culture and everyday life, and in particular from the language and images of television, videos, movies, magazines, the Internet, popular music and more (Comber, 2001). In fact, the media are part of the cycle of socializing (Harro, 2000) through which we are taught about the roles, values, belief systems, norms and practices that create inequitable social systems related to categories of difference (Hardiman & Jackson, 2007).

A queer literacies approach takes as its point of departure recognizing the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQI people as legitimate bodies of knowledge and making these the focus of inquiry. As such, a queer literacies approach engages students in the study of non-canonical texts, drawing not only on literary texts but also on media texts and

popular culture. Such an approach recognizes youths' knowledge and appreciation of popular culture and the media as important resources for building queer literacies lessons. Texts that are available through the media offer great opportunities for critical examination, and promoting critical media literacy is essential to excavating social inequalities. In other words, students' engagement with media is rich material for the deconstructive work sought out by queer literacies. In the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, the use of media texts not only contributed significantly to develop, deepen and broaden students' understandings of LGBTQ issues in ways that could not have been accomplished by just reading the novels but it also provided students with numerous opportunities to engage in deconstructive analytical work.

Just like for any other social group, the media provide abundant sources of information about what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer in today's world, often perpetuating stereotypes, negative messages and myths about these cultural groups. These messages are often hidden and unquestioned because they work on a subconscious level. Integrating visual media texts (films, documentaries, commercials, Youtube clips, etc.) adds therefore another dimension to a queer literacies approach. In their introduction essays, many of Sara's students reflected on how the media influenced their existing understandings of 'gay' people and the issues surrounding them, as the following excerpts show:

> Sandra: *I suppose a large portion of my ideas about gay people come from the media.*
>
> Brianna: *My impression of the climate towards gays is mostly based on what I have heard through the media – the news and social media.*
>
> Meryl: *I first learned about the idea of different sexualities and orientations when I was about 11 years old. Most of this information came from things I had seen on TV as I was flipping through channels.*

One of the students, Mara, sums it up nicely, writing, "*The broader media slipped its messages into my conscience*." Part of a queer literacies approach involves troubling students' partial, often misinformed and harmful, existing understandings about LGBTQI people. This can be accomplished by introducing students to deconstructive reading practices that allow them to

recognize, analyze and question the overt messages as well as the hidden subtexts of media that operate on a subconscious level. A starting point for students can be to recognize and analyze stereotypical representations of LGBTQ people in film, TV, Internet, or advertisements.

Recognizing Gay Stereotypes in Film: *The Celluloid Closet*

Media representations became a focus of inquiry during the first weeks of the trimester as the class watched the 1995 documentary *The Celluloid Closet* and students were engaged in *Gay Notions*, a media awareness project. Based on Vito Russo's groundbreaking 1981 work of film history, *The Celluloid Closet* traces the history of representations of gay men, lesbians and queer people in Hollywood films from the 1920s to the 1990s. The film illustrates how media representations of LGBTQ people are frequently steeped in stereotypes, revealing how movies implicitly dealt with same-sex desires and love through veiled subtexts that were often only intelligible to insiders. Watching this film not only offered a historical frame for students to understand how the representation of LGBTQ characters in film developed over time (queer literacies dimension 1) but it also allowed them to critically analyze how movies as cultural texts construct same-sex desires, love, and relationships and transgressive gender performances (queer literacies dimension 3 and 4), and how these constructions function to marginalize LGBTQ people (queer literacies dimension 2). Students were surprised to discover the hidden queer subtexts of many films and they began to realize how movies contribute to the oppression of LGBTQ people by perpetuating negative stereotypes that either ridicule or demonize them (e.g., through the image of the campy caricature of the “sissy,” the “creepy misfit” or the “twisted villain/predator”) (see Appendix K: The Celluloid Closet/Notes – Handout). During the post-viewing class discussion, students analyzed these stereotypes and they recognized how these stereotypes have effects in real life as they reflected on current events (e.g., the Sanduski

scandal[26], gay teen suicides[27]). Students also demonstrated an emerging understanding of the intersections of sexuality and gender. During the post-viewing discussion, students remarked that "*Being masculine is perceived as being powerful*" and how "*Gay or lesbian people lose their masculinity or femininity and are less powerful. So, less masculine men* [effeminate gay men] *are less powerful"*. Students then applied such deconstructive readings to other movies, as the following segment illustrates in which students analyze the representation of a gay character in the James Bond movie *Skyfall*:

> Student 1: *When I saw him I was like wow it's kind of impressive that they made a gay guy have so much power and be so violent. I guess before in movies I saw only the sissy who doesn't have much control over others.*
>
> Student 2: *I was gonna add on to that. He like shot someone straight in the head without blinking. And he challenged James Bond being not masculine anymore. You're weak, you're not masculine anymore. He was challenging like his, thinking about it right now, he was challenging his heterosexuality.*

Students' analyses of this movie scene demonstrates their developing understanding of representational politics in film that construct powerful characters in ways that are sexualized and gendered. Their surprise that a gay man was depicted as having power and being violent, which threatened the masculinity and heterosexuality of the straight character, helped them realize how sexuality and gender are intersecting relations of power. Sara pushed her students' thinking even further when she asked them: "*He's so powerful. What do you want to do with the villain?"* When students said, "*Kill him*," and Sara further emphasized this by exclaiming, "*Kill the villain. Right*," students realized how the old stereotypes about gay people were still at work as a subtext. The seemingly powerful gay character still remains the villain who gets killed at the end.

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[26] In 2011 Pennsylvania State University football coach Jerry Sanduski was indicted on 52 counts of sexual assault of underage boys; in 2012 he was found guilty and sentenced to a minimum of 30 years and maximum of 60 years in prison. The scandal also involved accusations that the university tried to cover up the incidents or failed to notify the authorities.
[27] In 2010 a series of suicides of teenagers who were bullied because they were gay or because their peers suspected that they were gay shocked the United States.

Through their discussion of the representations of LGBTQ people in movies and by deconstructing media as cultural texts, students recognized the hierarchical power relationships in relation to sexuality and gender. Sara further elaborated on this by explaining to the class how homophobia and sexism are connected oppressive systems, saying,

> *When it comes to the root almost all real bad homophobia is rooted in sexism ... There's all this sexism and what it is to be a man or what it is to be a woman. Feminine lesbians might be more socially acceptable than really butch lesbians because they don't threaten what people think women are supposed to look like or act like. So, that's what we're gonna look at, the feminine man and the masculine or butch woman as like those are the biggest threats.*

In the ensuing conversation, students realized that it is problematic to label people based on stereotypical physical markers or behaviors: "*It's not just that black and white in real life. It kind of makes you kind of realize there are things in between*" (Jonas). In her response, Sara not only affirmed Jonas' comment but extended it by pointing out to her students that gender expression, gender identity, and sexual identity are different things, saying: "*Absolutely. So, now you're looking, there's your gender identity, which may or may not be linked or connected to your sexual identity. How you express your gender is one thing all on its own."*

As these excerpts from classroom conversations show, watching a film such as *The Celluloid Closet* performs important work in a queer literacies classroom. It brings students up close to a medium that greatly shapes how they view LGBTQ people; it begins to trouble students' understandings of LGBTQ people by making visible the damaging stereotypes that operate in oppressive ways through cultural texts such as film; and, as the film deconstructs stereotypes and subtexts, it serves as a valuable model for the deconstructive analytical work students are then asked to do on their own.

Becoming Critically Conscious: The Media Awareness Project *Gay Notions*

Continuing the deconstructive work undertaken as a class through the reading of *A Lost Lady* and viewing *The Celluloid Closet*, the major assignment of this unit asked students to conduct a media awareness assignment called *Gay Notions*. The purpose of this assignment was

for students to increase their awareness of images and ideas they encounter about LGBT people in their daily lives and to think consciously about what they may be subconsciously learning about LGBTQ people. As Sara explained in class,

> *You're just gonna try to increase your awareness, open your eyes and your mind, and be tuning in to the things that you see or hear. So, before you may have been watching a movie and there's a gay subtext. You've seen it and let it go away but now you're actually going to pay attention to it and think about what's going on in this movie and what am I seeing.* (Transcript Observation 3/18/13)

Students had to collect four observations, describe and interpret these in an essay, and present one example using a visual to the class. While the assignment prompt did not focus on media representations of LGBTQ people and allowed other options (e.g. looking at housing patterns, examining what happens at their school or in their neighborhood related to LGBTQ people), students almost exclusively focused on the media, mainly examining LGBTQ representations in TV shows, movies, comedy, music videos, and commercials. Students were so engaged with this project that class presentations took up three class periods. Students looked at clips from shows like *Mean Girls*, *Happy Endings*, *Ray Gay*, *My So Called Life* or the children's cartoon *PowerPuff Girls*; film scenes from the Disney movie *The Little Mermaid* and the Oscar-winning *Brokeback Mountain;* video clips such as Lady Gaga's music video to the song "Born This Way" or Wanda Syke's stand-up comedy "I'ma Be Me: Gay vs. Black"[28]; campaign advertisements like Wanda Syke's "That's so gay"[29] or "Stand Up! Don't Stand for Homophobic Bullying"[30]; and a recent Kindle/Amazon commercial that showcases a gay couple[31]. Representations of 'gay' people in foreign countries were shown through an Orangina (soft drink) commercial that aired in France which had homoerotic undertones featuring a 'gay' cougar-

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[28] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_wWJ-_4uSY
[29] part of GLSEN and Ad Council's thinkb4youspeak.com campaign: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWS0GVOQPs0
[30] Irish anti homophobic bullying advertisement, created as part of BeLonG To Youth Services annual Up! LGBT Awareness Weeks: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrJxqvalFxM
[31] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY1UIES9wx8

man[32]; a South Korean music video featuring a gay character; and a South Korean cartoon featuring a lesbian character.

While it was powerful for the students to see how many LGBTQ-themed media examples they were able to find, students' critical deconstruction of the media texts allowed them to develop a more nuanced understanding of how the media represents and constructs LGBTQ people. Students identified some clearly negative and troubling representations. For example, students identified one of the characters in the children's cartoon *PowerPuff Girls* as "*a cross-dressing devil thing and he's a really bad guy and he's really gay"*. While this cartoon character is called "Him," signaling that he is male, the gender presentation is very ambiguous as "Him" sports a black beard but wears a lady's red jacket and skirt with pink tulle at the collar and hemline and black, thigh-high boots. Not only his visual appearance but also his voice and clothes add to the gender transgressive image. To have a gender-transgressive character be a devil-like creature who is "so sinister, so evil, so scary, so horribly vile that his real name can never be said, lest fear be struck into the very hearts of men[33]," be a read as gay is indeed troubling, especially since it sends a strong message to the young audience who might come to associate gender transgression with gayness and gayness with evilness.

Students recognized many stereotypes attached to lesbian women in the character of Ursula in the Disney movie *The Little Mermaid,* based on her appearance (husky, deep voice; stereotypical lesbian haircut, purple clothing), life choices (living alone, separate from any community), and her attempts to seduce Arielle. As one of the students commented, "*I mean…this whole scene…she's like trying to seduce Arielle and she, I don't know, she makes a lot of comments about like Arielle's pretty appearance…It seems like she's clearly into her."* Again, a highly popular film aimed at a young audience sends a sublime message that equates a

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[32] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKK37G-ZWvk
[33] http://powerpuff.wikia.com/wiki/HIM

norm-disruptive way of appearance and behavior, which is then read as "lesbian," with the villain character.

Students also displayed a sophisticated understanding of the often ambiguous messages of media texts and troubled seemingly positive representations. For example, students recognized the homonormative approach of the Kindle[34] commercial that features a gay male couple. Although students saw the commercial as "*proof that society in general is more accepting of gay rights and gay equality*," they critiqued that this only happens in the context of "*big companies like Amazon and ...Apple [] now recognizing a new consumer category.*" Moreover, students identified that commercials, such as the Kindle one, only represent a specific part of the LGBTQ population: white and married and "*just like straight people*." As Elena said, "*It's like family-oriented. It's like they're married, they're wholesome.*" These students' comments hint at how students began to apply a deconstructive lens as they analyzed media texts, which enabled them to see how issues of race and social class intersect with issues of sexuality (queer literacies dimension 2 and 4).

In another instance, students wrestled with the ambiguity of what might be understood as stereotypical representations of lesbian or gay people. After watching a scene from *Mean Girls*, during which many students laughed out loud, Brianna troubled the humor of the scene, saying:

> *This movie is funny so it makes it okay for people to laugh at people who are gay or people who act like sissies. Because the sissy is like, you know, the gay best friend everybody laughs at. But, yeah, it's not funny*.

Another student, Stephanie, however, pointed out that the representation of a gay character as 'funny' may be positive because some gay people act in ways that are perceived as stereotypical:

> *It might feel that it's stereotypical, but some people might actually act that way and for those that do act that way, it could be positive because Damien is like clearly everyone's favorite character. He's so funny and awesome. So, it's actually really good in some ways even though it's stereotyping.*

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[34] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY1UIES9wx8

Stephanie's comment prompted Elena to share how everyone at her work place loves a gay colleague because he is so much like Damien on this TV show:

> *I have like a really gay co-worker. And he is so like Damien. Like he is so flamboyant, like girly and gay and he like he is so proud of that. And everyone at the diner like loves him. He's my favorite co-worker ... And it's like everyone loves him almost because he's gay. Like we love that he's gay. And we love that he's like that flamboyant, Damien-like. It's almost like every girl is like, oh, I want him as my gay best friend. It's like you want that gay guy.*

When Sara asked the students what they think of the image of the flamboyant, gay best friend, Mara commented that such flamboyance not necessarily means the enactment of a negative stereotype if it represents who the person is: "*I think if he is happy and his identity is this flamboyant gayness and people like him for that, I feel like it's a good thing because he proud of himself. Even if it is like a stereotype, that's who they are*." Yet, another student pointed out that enacting stereotypical behavior might be an imposed role that gay people adopt because it is expected of them: "*It's the role that they take on. It's what people expect of them."* These varied student responses show how students grappled with trying to make sense of the underlying ideology in media representations while also making connections to their personal life experiences. Rather than seeking complete answers to the questions that the deconstructive analysis of the media texts brought up, Sara allowed her students to explore different perspectives – an important aspect of working within a queer literacies framework.

As these examples from the classroom show, the intertextual approach of reading a literary text alongside media texts through a deconstructive lens as well as taking a historical approach that showed students similarities and shifts in LGBTQ representations in texts, allowed students to develop more critical and queerly informed reading practices.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed how students began to develop queer literacies skills as they engaged with literary and media texts in this first unit of the Gay and Lesbian Literature course. I illustrated with examples from the classroom how Sara and her students deconstructed the lesbian

subtext in the novel *A Lost Lady*, which opened up spaces for reimagining the story and reading it queerly. Other classroom examples showed how the students learned to deconstruct the representations of characters with norm-disruptive sexualities or gender expressions in various media texts, first by viewing the film *The Celluloid Closet* and then applying a deconstructive analytic lens as they completed the media awareness project *Gay Notions.* Even though students came into the class acknowledging that many of their assumptions about LGBTQ people come from the media, through this first unit students learned to engaged with such media representations in a critical way that allowed them to become more critically aware of the overt, subtle, and often hidden messages. As students became more aware, they also became more able to analyze stereotypical representations and to understand how these contribute to the oppression of LGBTQ people. This first unit, therefore, performed important work in raising students' critical consciousness concerning the representation of LGBTQ people and in apprenticing students to use a deconstructive analytical lens to read queerly for subtexts and hidden meanings. In Chapter 9, I examine how students engaged with different dimensions of queer literacies as they moved from the exploration of subtext through a deconstructive analytical approach to a unit that further pushed boundaries as students encountered their first explicitly gay novel.

CHAPTER 9

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES: EXPLICIT ENCOUNTERS AND COUNTERNARRATIVES

"This book was so controversial when it was published
because of its explicit homoerotic content.
So, now we're out of subtext. It's much more explicit."

– Sara in her introduction to the novel *Giovanni's Room*

During the second unit of the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, the class moved from a deconstruction of lesbian and gay subtexts in literature and media to a deeper engagement of issues around sexuality and gender through a discussion of relevant terminology, the reading of the novel *Giovanni's Room*, and the making of creative projects. After reading Willa Cather's (1923) novel *A Lost Lady,* the class encountered the first explicitly gay novel *Giovanni's Room* written by James Baldwin, a "literary masterpiece" (Sara) published in 1956. During this unit, queer moments during which dimensions of queer literacies manifest took the form of familiarizing students with oppression related to norm-disruptive sexualities and genders as the class defined and discussed key concepts such as heterosexism, heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia (queer literacies dimension 2); of challenging existing harmful understandings about norm-disruptive gender expressions and providing spaces for students to work through moments of discomfort as the class engaged with troubling moments in the novel (queer literacies dimension 3 and 6); and producing counternarratives that opened spaces for new imaginings about same-sex desires, love and relationships as the students responded to the novel in the form of creative projects (queer literacies dimension 5).

Addressing Oppression: Defining and Discussing Key Concepts

I was watching a French movie last night and I had a little moment in it [laughs]
where this guy was at this café with this other man who had murdered his wife's boyfriend...
So, this guy is questioning him 'Who are you? Do you have a wife?'

And he's like, 'no, I've never been married. [whispers] *'cause I murdered my wife's boyfriend.*
And then the guy is like, 'What are you? A faggot?"
And then he's like, 'oh, hahaha. Have I offended you?'
And he's like, 'No. It's okay.'

And I was thinking, that is what we were just talking about yesterday.
That whole assumption about heterosexuality.
And then you have to say if you aren't.
He's like, 'NO, I'm a murderer!' [laughs]
He didn't say that. [Students laughing]
I'm not gay, I'm a killer.

- Sara speaking to the class (observation 4/2/13)

While reading LGBTQ-themed texts is central to a queer literacies approach (queer literacies dimension 1), just reading such texts cannot be enough. The theoretical framework and the pedagogical practices in which such reading is embedded matter. Antioppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000, 2002) provides a framework and pedagogical practices that align with queer literacies (queer literacies dimensions 2, 3, and 6). Students need to be able to recognize, describe and develop an understanding of different levels of oppression (i.e., individual, institutional, cultural/social) and of oppressive processes and practices that normalize and privilege dominant sexual and gender identities while othering and marginalizing subordinate identities. In addition, engaging in antioppressive education also shifts the focus from teaching 'new' knowledge to engaging with and, if necessary, disrupting the partial harmful knowledges that students already hold around LGBTQ issues when they come to classrooms (Kumashiro, 2000, 2002).

Written and published within a historical and sociopolitical context in which same-sex love and desire were not only marginalized but pathologized, in *Giovanni's Room* readers are confronted with the internal struggles of a gay man of that time who goes through feelings of shame, guilt, denial and avoidance in response to his homosexuality. As Sara said to the class,

> *The whole next book focuses on internalized homophobia, the shame or hatred or fear that LGBT people feel towards themselves. And it's really important to understand that that self-hatred is not 'I hate myself 'cause it's bad to be gay' but it's like you hate yourself because society hates you.* (Observation 4/1/13)

To provide the students with language that would help them make sense of the largely negative and painful depiction of same-sex desire, love, and relationships in *Giovanni's Room*, Sara set the stage for this the unit by introducing students to Troiden's (1989) model of gay identity development and familiarizing students with key concepts related to oppression referring to sexuality and gender. To begin, she handed out a sheet to the class that provided the students with definitions for key concepts (i.e., heterosexism, heterosexual privilege, homophobia, biphobia, internalized homophobia, sexual orientation, see Appendix L: Definitions Terminology - Handout), excerpted from *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007), a textbook that is used in many college classrooms. Sara then gave a mini-lecture on these terms, explaining, for example, that heterosexism refers to "*the idea that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, acceptable sexual orientation*" and the belief that "*it's normal to be straight*," and that heterosexual privileges "*are the direct benefits and advantages that straight people get and also the benefits that lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgender people might receive as a result of claiming a heterosexual identity*" (Observation 4/1/13). This was followed by a lively back-and-forth conversation where students generated examples and shared their own experiences with heterosexism and heterosexual privilege. Students had little trouble coming up with a list of practices, beliefs and ideas that reinforce heterosexuality as the natural and normal:

> Rachel*: He [James Dobson]*[35] *told people that like, he wrote books and stuff about how like homosexuality wasn't real and like abnormal.*
>
> Elena: *There's like a pressure to proclaim your heterosexuality.*
>
> Lara: *I think that like in movies...This guy was like, oh, are you like gay and he was like, oh, of course not. It's not natural.*
>
> Allison: *I was just gonna say, a lot of times, people they like ask you, do you have a boyfriend.*

---

[35] James Dobson is an American evangelical Christian author and founder of Focus on the Family (FOTF), which he led until 2003. Focus on the Family opposes LGBT rights, particularly same-sex marriage and LGBT adoption. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Dobson

Sandra: *The fact that you don't have to come out as straight.*

Jenny: *So, I had this girlfriend and she would be saying all the time, 'that's so gay'.*

Casey: *I don't know if this is a good example. But my mom told me a story yesterday about, she was on the bus from New York and she was talking with this woman and they talked like this whole way back and they bonded. And then they were talking about their daughters. And she was like, yeah, my daughter is kind of a tomboy, and like for a while I was worried, you know, like I thought maybe she'd be like, you know [laughs] but yeah. And then later, my aunt called who like is gay, and her partner had come and stayed with us a little while ago and she [mom] was like, oh, it was so great to see your partner or should I call her your fiancé. And the lady goes totally [laughs], she goes totally silent. Like didn't talk anymore.* [laughs]

Denise: *Well, this is different. But like I've just had relatives over for Easter...and you can tell their views and our views are very different. Um, and so, their daughter was a lesbian, but then she passed away. And they like, they never really talk about it. Uh, and so they now, they're kind of accepting of it but they're also like kind of hiding it in a way. And so if anything comes up, like I was talking about taking this class and they tried to change the subject really quickly. And yeah, it's just like kind of avoiding it.*

Brianna: *It was a long time ago. Um, I don't know but I was like in kindergarten, I think. Somebody in my class, you now, married and I was like, he could marry a guy too. And they were like, and you can marry a girl. It was a while ago but it's always been there.*

Stephanie: *I want to say something else about expectations and assumptions. My mom grew up in [the South] ... and so there were clearly a lot of expectations and assumptions. ...Then she went to [a liberal arts college] [laughter] and dated all these girls and then she'd come back home and everyone was just kind of like, eew. Her parents like didn't know, like they didn't talk, they didn't like really know what to do.*

As these abundant examples from the class discussion show, students experience a wide set of assumptions, expectations, and reactions pertaining to sexuality. Students acknowledged that people who are heterosexual do not have to come out about their sexuality while also recognizing that there is constant pressure to prove and perform their heterosexuality. On an individual level, students noticed how people felt a need to proclaim not to be gay and how their sexuality came under question if they did not have an other-sex girlfriend/boyfriend. Students alluded to the institutional and cultural levels of heterosexism, noting the existence of influential anti-gay organizations, such as Focus on the Family, and recognizing how the media produces homosexuality as deviant and abnormal when they create characters who vehemently deny being gay. Students also observed various negative reactions, anti-gay language, and silencing related to

same-sex relationships or non-conforming gender behavior by family members who expressed disgust or avoided talking about their gay relatives, or who ended conversations abruptly when 'gay' topics came up.

When the conversation moved to a discussion of heterosexual privileges, students were likewise able to generate many illustrative examples. Students were aware of the numerous benefits that heterosexual married couples receive, for example, in regards to taxes, issues of child custody/legal guardianship and adoption, or immigration. Students recognized the damaging effects of heterosexism when they discussed how social acceptance and the approval of one's choices related to sexuality and gender expression affect a person's social standing. When Sara asked, "*What do you benefit from being straight*," Elena responded, for example,

> *Just like basic social acceptance. Like when you hear a man and woman are getting married, you're like oooh. Okay, and then when you hear like a woman who's getting married to a woman and it's not like it's a bad thing but it's just like, there's just a different reaction.*

The class further discussed how heterosexism affects where LGBTQ people feel safe to live or vacation, the search for a church that is accepting, college choices, being in the military, job discrimination, and the personal acceptance by family and peers.

As illustrated by the many examples students generated, students are keenly aware of how heterosexism operates through a multitude of privileges that are afforded to heterosexual people. Students see and experience these privileges every day. However, while students might intuitively recognize heterosexism and heterosexual privileges operating in a situation, they also might resist naming it as such. This happened when Sara asked her students to reflect on their reactions to seeing public displays of affection by same-sex couples. Sandra immediately acknowledged that people would react differently compared to displays of affection by other-sex couples, saying, "*I think if there's a heterosexual couple doing PDA, you would just kind of pass. Whereas with gay people, you look."* Denise then shared a personal experience about observing a mother rushing her child away from a kissing lesbian couple:

> *One day, I was walking in town and there was like this lesbian couple kissing or something. And there was like a mom and her daughter walking by and the little kid was like, what are they doing? And then the mom was just like, uh, nothing. Trying to like rush her child away.*

Denise's observation indicates that this mother felt uncomfortable about the kissing lesbian couple. However, while her reaction may be interpreted as a clear example of heterosexism because it is doubtful that the child would have even commented on a kissing heterosexual couple, the students resisted such a reading of the situation. When Sara asked the class, "*So, what do you guys think about that? Do you see that? People like shielding their children,"* students came up with all kinds of excuses for the mother's negative reaction:

> Denise: *I think she just like, well like she was. But, um, it wasn't like she was really obviously trying to be negative. She seemed like a person who just didn't want to have that conversation with her kid at that point. But it was just, still it was just really uncomfortable.*
>
> Elena: *I might shield my kid even if it was a heterosexual couple. If they're like, if they were going at it. Oh, don't look at that.* [some students laughing].
>
> Sara: *I don't know if you would.*
>
> Elena: *Maybe if they were like going at it.*
>
> Sara: *Even if they were going at it.*
>
> Denise: *I don't know about that.* [laughter] *It wasn't that bad. It wasn't like really…*
>
> Justin: *I just remember being a little kid and seeing that kind of PDA, even like with straight couples, I would kind of always get uncomfortable just seeing it.* [multiple yeahs]
>
> Elena: *Yeah. I wouldn't even notice gay or straight*. [lots of overlapping talk]
>
> Justin: *I feel it was a little bit like maybe an element of two grown-ups doing that.*
>
> Sara: *Yeah. So, it's impossible to know…We could say that an example of heterosexual privilege is that you basically can have public displays of affection, um, within reasonable, reasonable expression of PDA. And then, mostly people just either ignore it or they're like, it seems normal. But that when you're gay, it's like people just really react to it.*
>
> (Observation 4/1/13)

Students' insistence that public displays of affection by anyone make them uncomfortable indicates a resistance to acknowledge how they might possibly be complicit with

heterosexist thinking. Interestingly, students positioned themselves as children witnessing adults' 'PDA', thereby refusing to engage with their own possible feelings of discomfort when seeing same-sex couples of their own age kissing. Students' verbal maneuverings during this class conversation indicate how learning about oppression can be very discomforting for students. Kumashiro (2002) writes that students' "desire for normalcy and for affirmation of their belief that they do not oppress others" is often strong, which "prevent[s] many of them from confronting and tolerating these new yet discomforting forms of knowledge" (p. 6). As long as Sara's students just brainstormed examples for heterosexism and heterosexual privileges, without further discussing the examples they generated, they did not have to engage with the discomforting realization that they too might be implicated in heterosexist practices. This changed when Sara asked her students to reflect on Denise's observation of a mother refusing to answer her child's question about a lesbian couple kissing. Clearly, Denise recognized this instance as an example of heterosexism because she shared this experience during the class discussion on heterosexism. Yet, in the ensuing conversation after Sara's questions, students quite vehemently resisted to interpret the child's and mother's reactions to same-sex intimacy as examples of heterosexual dominance. Indeed, Denise, in her interpretation, refutes any homophobic elements to what she observed, pointing out how the mother "wasn't really obviously trying to be negative…she … just didn't want to have that conversation with her kid at that point." Elena even went further, normalizing this mother's behavior, although she had to admit that only if heterosexual couples are "going at it" parents might shield their children from looking. Justin, likewise, normalized the observed reactions, this time from the perspective of the child who is "always [] uncomfortable just seeing" public displays of affection by adults; a notion that Elena affirmed. While this may be true, interpreting the scene that Denise observed on just an individual level, I think, prevented students from going to a deeper analysis. Unfortunately, this opportunity was missed because Sara closed this conversation; and, even though she explicitly labeled the ability to be affectionate in public spaces a heterosexual privilege, she allowed her students to disengage with their

discomforts generated by this exchange. Working within a queer literacies approach, it is important to recognize such instances when students become uncomfortable and resist deeper explorations of a topic as critical learning opportunities (queer literacies dimension 6). It might have been productive to ask Denise what exactly she implied when she said "that conversation" or why she felt "really uncomfortable" witnessing this incident. Students could have been asked to reflect on their own reactions to seeing same-gender affection in public (not just as children seeing adults), or how same-gender affectionate behaviors are regulated (e.g., by saying 'that's so gay' or 'no homo'). In this way, students could have begun to recognize their own complicity in heterosexist practices and discourse, a necessary step before they can take action to work against these.

Furthermore, raising students' critical awareness of the cultural and institutional levels of heterosexism is an important element of the dimension of queer literacies that engages with anti-oppressive teaching and learning. Often students recognize the damaging effects of individual level anti-gay behaviors and language but they are not aware of how heterosexism works systematically through social and cultural institutions to oppress LGBTQ people. The quote of Sara's remark to the class that opens this section reminded students of how the media shapes oppressive ideas and practices. With her recollection of the movie scene, she provided students with an example of how heterosexism implicitly operates on the cultural level, for example, through the representation of ideas and beliefs that define normalcy and deviance. By using an exaggeration, "NO, I'm a murderer...I'm not gay, I'm a killer," Sara makes visible how heterosexist assumptions work to produce the gay person, the 'faggot', as a subject even more deviant and undesirable than a murderer. To recognize such constructions of notions of normalcy and deviance is important for students, especially when reading a novel like *Giovanni's Room* that depicts non-conforming acts around sexuality and gender in many ways as deviant and abnormal.

One of the most troubling scenes involves David's, the novel's protagonist, description of drag queens in a French gay bar. This scene became the focus of a lengthy classroom conversation in which Sara troubled her students' internalized and subconscious oppressive thinking around norm-disruptive gender expressions. During the class discussion, the students' own reactions to what Butler (1990/2006) has called "subversive bodily acts," were placed under examination. It was a rare moment when students' discomfort around norm-disruptive sexualities and genders became palpable in Sara's classroom through their silences and nervous laughter. Sara engaged with the troubling moment in *Giovanni's Room* and the students' ensuing discomfort by offering alternative readings (queer literacies dimensions 3, 5, 6).

Troubling Moments: Subversive Bodily Acts

> There were, of course, *les folles*, always dressed in the most improbable combinations,
> screaming like parrots the details of their latest love affairs...
> they always called each other "she"....
> they looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard.
> I always found it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody,
> for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one
> and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of *them*.
> Perhaps, indeed, that was why they screamed so loud. ...
> I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy:
> perhaps in the same way that
> the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs.
>
> (*Giovanni's Room,* Chapter 2, pp. 26/27)

Baldwin's crude depiction of the drag queens in the French gay bar that his protagonist visits reflects the negative feelings gender transgressions evoke in many people. The following excerpt from Sara's engagement with this segment from *Giovanni's Room* demonstrates how reading queerly requires teachers to unpack and to resignify the meaning student readers make of such "subversive bodily acts" (Butler, 1990/2006). Echoing the repulsion expressed by Baldwin's protagonist, Sara opened the conversation by asking her students:

> Sara: *How many of you guys think you have that reaction to, sort of like these are good gay people and these are bad gay people? Gay men who wear high heels, and scream really loud, and have lipstick on or bare their tummies, they're monkeys. Do you have, maybe not like that disgust, but do you think about gay people being in categories of like socially acceptable based on how they act?*

Rachel [shrugging her shoulder]: *A little bit. Maybe*

Sara: *Will you talk about it?* [Rachel laughs but doesn't say anything] *Don't be shy. Who does? Come on. Who does? Anyone? Yes.*

Denise: *Well. I feel like in general drag queens are like really, I think people, yeah, either men or women who cross-dress are a little less socially acceptable. People feel a little more uncomfortable around because it's more extreme than like the gay best friend that everyone wants to be with. But, yeah, like, I think it's just more extreme.*

(Observation 4/10/13)

As this excerpt from the class discussion of this scene shows, students experienced considerable discomfort when they began to realize that David's repulsion, expressed through his crude depiction of the drag queens, is not so different from their own reactions in response to gender transgressions. Students' responses during the class conversation were characterized by silences, hesitations, nervous laughter, and verbal maneuvering that hint at students' discomfort when having to engage with their own internalized prejudices. The students' reluctance to voice their personal response hints at the unacceptability of such thoughts in this gay and lesbian literature classroom – but it is still there! Though Denise sought to lessen the impact of what she thinks about drag queens by using the modifier 'little' – "men or women who cross-dress are a little less socially acceptable" and make "people feel a little more uncomfortable" – her double use of "more extreme" classifies drag as clearly outside the norm in opposition to the assimilated "gay best friend that everyone wants to be with." Denise's response makes visible the students' attachment to 'normalcy' in the form of normative gender expressions even for norm-disruptive sexualities. The dissonance caused by the break-down of bodily coherence (man-male, woman-female) is evident in Denise's response. However, instead of allowing this response to stand unchallenged in the classroom, Sara engaged with her students' discomfort by offering them a different kind of reading of gender transgressive performances:

I actually think people tend to go into two, um, categories where when they are greeted with extreme flamboyance and gender play, they're either like this is so awesome, wow, this is like really pushing the norms of gender. I love that man who came by with his leather pants. And other people are like, that is really uncomfortable, I can see his butt

> *crack.* [Students laugh] *That is disgusting or whatever. You know, that's people's reaction when they go to Provincetown and they've never been there. And people are either, this is such a party. I love it here, I want to move here. Or they're like, this is not like appropriate, you know. Those lesbians with their shaved heads riding motorcycles without a shirt on. No, this is not good. And other people are like, you go, girls. You go on your bike.*

In a powerful move, Sara flips 'disgust' into how "gender play" and "pushing the norms of gender" is "awesome." Without condemning either reaction, she offers different readings of such gender play as "inappropriate" and "uncomfortable" versus "awesome" and "fun." Students' reaction of silence and laughing is a clear expression of their own hidden discomfort around boundary crossing related to sexuality and gender. However, by naming cross-dressing as "gender play," Sara provides an alternative meaning that emphasizes the playful, performative aspects of non-conforming gender behaviors and expressions; thus, speaking back against the image of grossness that Baldwin's metaphor of drag queens as excrement-eating monkeys evokes. In so doing, Sara troubles her students' thinking and pushes them to admit their own internalized prejudices, which opens up the possibility for unlearning such thinking. This is in line with Kumashiro's (2000, 2002) thoughts on antioppressive education in which he emphasizes how students not only need to learn new knowledge but they may have to unlearn old damaging knowledge. Sara then continued by inviting students' personal responses to provide them with an opportunity to wrestle with their own internalized prejudices:

> Sara: *What do you think? Anybody ever had that experience?* [Some laughter, some students quietly saying 'yes'.] *You're just laughing but, have you ever had such an experience?*
>
> Casey: *Sometimes the difference for me is that I'm not disgusted or anything by it. But like, if someone is just gay, it's more like, I'm, if, if they're really out and flamboyant about it and like really dressed differently, that's what's on my mind. Like, you know what I mean. It's not, I'm like, it's fine, another part of them, it's not the main thing about the person for me. And it's not really a bad thing but it's just like, not just like, I don't know, not like a regular person who happens to be gay.*

Casey's response clearly shows how much she struggles with reconciling her own discomfort with non-conforming gender expression with this new reading of gender play. Although she positions herself as different from protagonist David's reaction by saying, "I'm not

disgusted or anything by it," she implicitly acknowledges that norm-disruptive gender expressions make her uncomfortable. Despite Sara's attempt to frame norm-disruptive gender expressions in positive ways by using the term "gender play," Casey seems caught in discourse that equates non-conformity with "bad" and " not regular" (in other words, not normal) when she says, "it's not *really* a *bad* thing *but* it's ...not like a *regular* person who happens to be gay." By juxtaposing "someone who is *just* gay" with someone who is "*really out* and flamboyant about it" because of "really dress[ing] differently," Casey reinscribes homosexuality as socially acceptable only when expressed through gender normative behavior.

Again, Sara did not respond in a judgmental way to what Casey said, instead sharing a personal experience: "*In Provincetown, there's this guy with the pants with the open butt. And I'm like, oh, my god, that's so crazy. ... I was like completely not surprised, I had no uncomfortable reaction. I just thought it was funny*." Even though Sara admits that this man was pushing the boundaries by characterizing his appearance as "so crazy," she emphasizes that she was not surprised or uncomfortable but "just thought it was funny," again providing her students with a different reading. Sara then moved the conversation from personal reactions to gender-non-conformity to an analysis of the liberating aspects of non-conformity:

> Sara: *What's the opposite of that person who's so free they can be out in public and they don't care what people think and they're doing it to get attention?* [brief pause] *Yeah.*
>
> Denise: *Hiding it all and being depressed.*
>
> Sara: *That's the exact. There's like a spectrum. One is over here and the total opposite is like deep closetedness. Deep, deep closetedness. So, you could make a spectrum, just like a sexuality spectrum and you could have little like marks all the way along. Like there's people who are deeply, privately, miserably closeted and then there are those who are totally happily, flamboyantly, crazily out.*

Once again, Sara tries to offer an alternative reading as she juxtaposes the misery of "deep closetedness" with gender transgressers who are "totally happily, flamboyantly, crazily out." Here, Sara reads non-conformity in a different way, queerly, through the use of the metaphor of the "spectrum," a metaphor that the class has already explored in relation to

sexuality. Being "flamboyantly out" is cast in positive ways as a liberatory stance of "that person who's so *free* they can be out in public and they *don't care* what people think." After encouraging students to shift their thinking in these ways, Sara then returned to a discussion of the scene in the novel:

> Sara ...*And what just happened ...In the bar what happened?*
>
> Sandra: *He's basically freaked out about people.*
>
> Sara: *Yeah, those two opposite extremes just met. They just got together. So, there. He's like, you, you disgusting monkeys! What are they saying to him? They go right up to him.*
>
> Rachel: *They're like constantly, you're so gay.*
>
> Sara: *You're so gay! You're gay for that guy over there! Aren't you? You love him!* [speaks with exaggerated voice, slight laugh]. *I see you looking at him. They get right up in his face to make him uncomfortable.*

Here, Sara directs the students' attention to how the drag queens take their power back as they turn David's dehumanizing gaze back onto himself, making him the center of attention as they poke fun at him. In a reverse-discourse the 'deviants' are liberated and take power: "They get right up in his face to make *him* uncomfortable." Which is basically what Sara did with her students when she asked them if they felt the same disgust as David when encountering people who are pushing gender boundaries.

Using students' discomfort as a moment of learning is a queer subversive strategy (queer literacies dimension 6). Sara takes notions of 'social acceptance' and 'normalcy' and destabilizes them by countering the literary description of drag queens as 'crazy', 'dirty', 'grotesque' and 'undesirable' with images of 'fun' 'party', 'free' and 'carefree'. Such juxtaposition is potentially subversive as it opens up new spaces for students to think about variability and non-conformity. Her use of the metaphor of the 'spectrum' disrupts commonsense binary thinking (queer literacies dimension 3). Through this vignette we can see how students wrestle with the intersections of sexuality and gender and their personal reactions to "subversive bodily acts" in the form of "gender play." Even though the students clearly position themselves as non-homophobic, as

evidenced by references to a gay best friend or the repeated emphasis of not feeling disgust when encountering someone who behaves in ways that are viewed as flamboyant, they clearly struggle with letting go of the notion of 'normal'. Surely there could have been a more explicit deconstruction of notions of 'normal,' 'normalcy' and 'social acceptability,' and how these constructs create arbitrary boundaries with damaging effects because they exclude and dehumanize those who are seen outside the boundaries created by norms, but the discussion of this scene in the novel opened a space where students could at least begin to recognize their own internalized bias. It is important to note Sara's non-judgmental way of engaging with students' responses. In this scenario, Sara opens the door for her students to acknowledge some of their own internalized subconscious homophobia by reframing feelings of disgust (as David in *Giovanni's Room*) in terms of social acceptability. Had students' personal responses to this scene in *Giovanni's Room* been left unchallenged, dominant notions of non-conforming gender behavior as 'deviant', 'bad' and 'repulsive' would have been reinforced. Sara's deconstruction of this narrative and offering of alternative readings opened up a space for students to rethink normalcy. A more explicit queer literacies approach could have taken this even a step further.

The deconstruction of the image of the 'drag queen' with its dissolution of a coherent, signifying subject provides ample opportunities for reading queerly. For example, students could explore the intersections of sexuality and gender or they could analyze the scene using the concepts of heteronormativity and homonormativity. The break-down of bodily coherence in drag performance opens up spaces for rethinking the conflation of sex/sexuality/gender and disrupts notions of 'normal' (Butler, 1990/2006). Butler (1990/2006) in *Gender Trouble* writes about the possibilities of "parodic practices" (such as drag) that through their "very exaggeration" of gender performance expose gender as an "act": "Just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself" (p. 200). In other words, what Sara called "gender play" troubles the idea that any gender expression and presentation is natural or normal. It effectively

dismantles the notion that girl/woman = female/feminine and boy/man = male/masculine. Hence, it shows subversive gender performances as constituting agency in the form of subversive practices that have the potential to alter meanings attached to gender. As Butler argues, "...'agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (p. 198). While the class' engagement with this troubling segment in *Giovanni's Room* did not go to the depths of Butler's argument, Sara's move to juxtapose students' reactions with her personal reaction and experiences did challenge and, at least momentarily, disrupt students' thinking. Her repeating differently opened up a space where students could begin to rethink their own bias. In my opinion, it became an important queer moment in this class.

The next section focuses on the creative projects that students created in response to *Giovanni's Room.* These creative projects allowed for more queer moments as students created their own counternarratives that opened spaces for new imaginings about same-sex love, desire, and relationships.

Telling Another Story: Creative Projects that Present Counternarratives and Open Spaces for New Imaginings

Figure 2: Example of student work:
David and Giovanni – Drawing created by Allison

That mask. That was Allison for Giovanni's Room.
She's an amazing artist. It's like this incredible use of her talent but it also captures like all the creepiness of the book, the masks and the skeletal and the death grip. So, it's like this gay image but it's so amazing because it shows what is beneath the surface of that book.
And if you said, write a piece, write something about it, and she'd write, well, they wore masks and they were just gripping at each other. And it wouldn't be like that.
It tells a whole other story.

– Sara (Interview 5/29/13)

The main assignment for this unit was for students to engage with the themes and symbols or a specific aspect of sexual identity development that is reflected in the novel *Giovanni's Room* through a creative project. The options for this project were endless as students were able to choose from creating a painting, drawing, collage, dance, song, poetry, film, drama, or a piece of creative writing (see Appendix M: Giovanni's Room Creative Final Project – Handout). As Sara said to the students, "*There are many avenues you may choose for this project. So try to pick something you can have fun with!"* (Observation 4/29/13). For Sara, such projects extend bell hooks' (1994) notion of "teaching to transgress" because she believes, "that a curriculum can [only] transform and liberate if based in multicultural and performance-centered pedagogy" (Barber-Just, p. 4). For Sara, it is important that "*students feel the classroom is not just an institutional place where you come to produce work for your teachers*" (Interview 5/29/13). Following hooks, Sara writes, "Introducing even highly radical subject matter is not an act of liberation in and of itself. It requires the insertion of personal voice by students" (Barber-Just, pp. 32/33). bell hooks (1994) encourages teachers "to think seriously about pedagogy in relation to the practice of freedom" (p. 6) and emphasizes that there should be "pleasure in learning" with the classroom being "an exciting place, never boring" (p. 7). hooks also speaks back to those who propose that academic learning cannot be pleasurable, saying how "this excitement could co-exist with and even stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement" (p. 7). Such transformation of the classroom into an exciting place of learning – where "students come alive" (Barber-Just, p. 30) – coupled with deep academic engagement is a hallmark of Sara's classroom

and it became especially visible as students completed their creative projects. Sara explained her observations,

> *What I noticed from creative projects like this is [the students] love to do this. ... Look at these collages. And these paintings. It's like, when you say you can do a collage, they could do the crappiest thing, right. But then they go home and they spend their entire weekend drawing something or writing a story that they made up. ... It's like there's something in it for everybody. So, even if you're terrible at art, maybe you can sing, or even if you're terrible at art and you can't sing, maybe you can dance. Or if you like music, you can make a mix tape. ...There's something that just makes your experience come out in a different way. ...They take those projects as seriously as they take analytical writing. In some cases more seriously. ... And also it takes them to a different place. ... When you read a book for the first time, you're really just looking for like the plot and basic understanding. But then once you start analyzing the symbols or you start thinking about the deeper meaning, you can sort of apply it to another reading of the book.* (Interview 5/29/13)

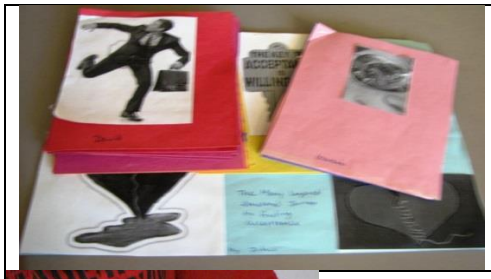
The creative element of this project changed how students engaged with *Giovanni's Room* and how they made meaning of the issues around same-sex sexuality that the novel brought up, particularly related to the psychological dimensions of heterosexist oppression. Instead of a focus on analytical writing, these creative projects allowed students to engage in queer literacies in a different way by "telling a whole other story" through art, performance, and creative writing that then opened up spaces for reimagining same-sex love and desire. While *Giovanni's Room* can be "a painful read, as it depicts gay men as predatory, self-centered, and overly sexualized" and because Baldwin employs anti-gay rhetoric from the gay characters themselves (Barber-Just, p. 111), reflecting internalized homophobia stemming from the dominant discourse of the time of homosexuality being a sin and a disease, the students in their projects offered counternarratives that spoke back to such discourses.

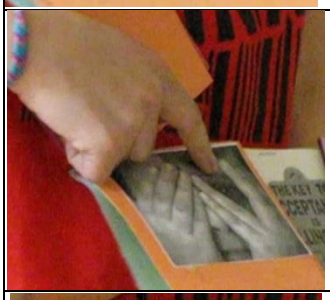
In addition, the creative act is a queer act within the restricted space of schooling. It is a critical act and can be an act of liberation because it shakes up how we make meaning and allows new ways of thinking to emerge. As such, a creative act is a "social, political, intellectual, aesthetic and personal process" (Rifa-Valls, 2011, p. 3). By creating learning opportunities that are multimodal (e.g., through poetry, drawings, performance, technology-based visuals, etc.), teachers can provide their students with explorative spaces that allow them to think differently,

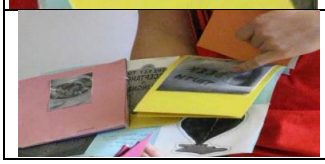
especially when engaging with difficult and controversial issues. Cartwright and Noone (2006) call these kinds of learning experiences “imaginative moments” (p. 6) that create free spaces for “reconsideration/reformulation/renaming” (p. 8). In other words, through creativity students can access the dimensions of queer literacies in a different way. It is through such reconsidering/reformulating/renaming that students deconstruct texts and discourse (queer literacies dimension 4), trouble their understandings of sexuality (queer literacies dimension 3), and create counternarratives for new imaginings about sexuality (queer literacies dimension 5). It is creativity which “enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries” and “It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994, p. 12).

The class became witness to the power of creativity as students presented their various projects in class through which they “*moved beyond the self to begin to see life from others’ eyes, to feel for those they only thought they knew*” (Barber-Just, p. 31). No one did this more thoughtfully than Lara who created a multi-layered flip book that visually represented the multiple, intersecting psychological and emotional layers of *Giovanni’s Room* and its main characters. Lara titled her project “The many layered emotional journey to finding acceptance” with one side of her flip-book representing David and the other side representing Giovanni. As Lara flipped through her book, she explained each page.

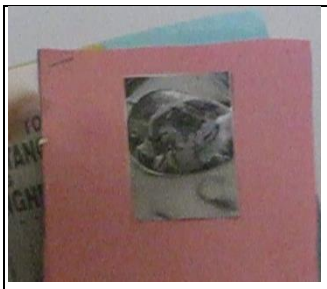
David’s side:

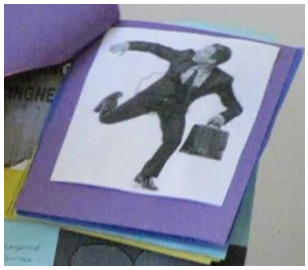
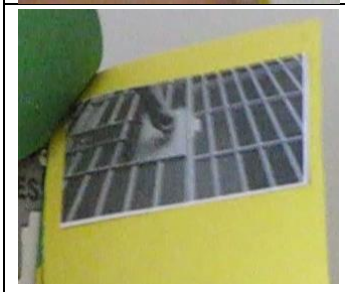
	... In the beginning ...he’s running and running and running. ...Underneath that is like his fear. And like this other guy is like trying to keep him, hold him in a way. No, I can’t do that. And then it’s all about blame.
	...And then, women are the monster. You know we talked about that and how that’s why he’s gay and stuff. And why he’s scared of women. And then it’s about like alcohol.

	And then it's about denial. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. And then the lies that he tells.
	And then...he has all these sort of different personalities and he's controlling other people and he's like impacting other people's lives by being different people with different people. Impersonating different people sort of.
	And then he has this mask with Hella and Hella is also wearing a mask and they're kind of trying to be together but it's not working. So underneath that he's realizing that it's not gonna work out and that he's, well, as Hella is trying to help him and stuff, he's like, no, I'm just gonna do it myself sort of. But he really can't.
	And he's like hiding. This is more of him, where here he's wearing a mask. So, he's hiding.
	And then Giovanni makes him kind of peek through the hiding, I guess, he's sort of looking out a little bit, I guess. But he's also very hesitant. Like, oh, no, no.
	And there's like a guard in front of his heart.
	And then he realizes in his jail, he's like all alone and in the dark and he's like, oh man I totally messed up.

	Inside his body is like a person trying to escape...A hand is coming out. This is sort of the idea of him trying to escape from himself, from his body. ‘cause he is his own jail.
	And then seeking the truth which is on his skin similar to the jail thing, you know.
	And then he’s looking at his past, there’s a glass, mirror or something. And there’s two people and it’s like shattering.

Giovanni’s side:

	...And so then here’s Giovanni’s side. The first image is of sunglasses...and someone trying to ... in to see himself. So to me it was sort of like Giovanni is trying to zoom in to David. But in his zooming in, he sees himself.
	And then kind of optimism in his room. Even though it’s so dark, even though he’s trying to not have windows at all, heterosexual and stuff, he has a window into his soul, like, who he wants to be.
	And then, there’s the wall we were talking about, too. And he’s, it’s the wall between them but it’s also a wall within himself too. And then there’s like little cracks, so he’s exploring where that’s from, I guess.

	And then he tells David that ...my wife, find the neutrality. There's a picture of this one too.
	And then fighting for love.
	And then some of David wounded him....You made me love you but then you leave.
	And then the wall breaking.
	And then the heart is at last shattering
	And then he has the key to help him, help himself, he thinks he needs to help David, but actually he needs to help himself too.

	And then freedom.
	And then the idea that underneath all of that is the key to acceptance is willingness. And a picture of them together. Yay.
	And then, one more really cool thing, it's this side is all rainbow with like red, orange and yellow and this side is yellow at the bottom and pink, purple, blue, green . So, it's like two sides of the rainbow but they can't be like by themselves but have to be together. Kind of corny. But.

Table 1: Example of student work: Lara's flip-book

With this project Lara created a powerful visualization of a narrative through which "characters unfold psychologically and emotionally, layer after delicate layer, in excruciatingly dazzling prose" (Barber-Just, p. 107) by using the technique of a flip-book that takes up the revelation of the multiple layers of the novel. In her review of *Giovanni's Room*, Sara wrote that the emphasis of this novel is on the process of self-discovery which "allows readers not only to witness homosexual desire, but also to understand it, to feel the weight of acknowledging it" (Barber-Just, p. 107). Lara's project demonstrates this understanding, and the powerful images and metaphors she chose to represent the characters' process of self-discovery – the running, the torment, the jail, the hands trying to claw its way out of the cell of self-imprisonment, the hiding behind a mask juxtaposed with the desire to look out, the wall in the heart that separates but is

able to crack, the shattered heart, the crumbling wall, and finally the key to freedom – speak to how she felt the weight of oppression that gay and lesbian people face. Her nuanced representation is an example of reading queerly, of enacting queer literacies by offering a different reading of same-sex love and desire that allows for positive self-actualization. While David in the novel remains trapped in a self that he cannot accept – "... I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching...how I can save [my troubling sex] from the knife....Yet, the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh" (Baldwin, p. 223) – Lara recognizes that self-definition is a necessary step in achieving self-acceptance, saying, "he has the key to...help himself...The key to acceptance is willingness." Her final move to choose the colors for her flip-book's pages in a way that each side represents some of the colors of the rainbow – adopting the most prominent symbol of the LGBTQ community – but only brought together the rainbow is made complete, can be read as another queer affirmative move. Unlike Baldwin who does not allow his main protagonists to find self-acceptance and fulfilled love, instead depicting the self-destruction caused by same-sex love (i.e., Giovanni's execution), Lara refuses such trajectory and imagines a different, positive outcome in which the two sides of the rainbow come together; thus, creating a powerful counternarrative.

Other students chose to put themselves into the place of one of the characters, allowing them to develop perspective taking and empathy. These were risky choices as students adopted lesbian- or gay-identified personas in their projects. For example, Brandon wrote a poem in which he writes from Giovanni's perspective:

> *Sitting on the edge of my bed, the sheets still warm from David's body. For him it was just a game, nothing more. The nerve he had leading me on, just to run off. I fixed the room for us, for him. I feel no shame nor regret. I have found strength where he could not. He is a sailor lost at sea, trying to navigate the waves of his urges. I will not deny what we had. I will not deny that we briefly had a deep connection of love.* [stops reading] *So, I go on saying how David's like in his own jail. Like even though Giovanni is arrested, David has his own jail not coming to terms, not coming out as gay.*

One dimension of a queer literacies approach considers how counternarratives open up spaces for re-imagining issues around sexuality. Having a straight-identifying male student slip

into the role of a gay man, even if only momentarily, creates such a counternarrative in the classroom – not only for the student himself but also for those who witness his performance. Through these creative projects, students had some freedom to experiment with alternative identities in ways that are not available in other modes of learning. Even though acting or performing such alternative identities provides some protection because it is just an act, such performances must still be considered high-risk and subversive, especially within a context like a high school with its strict regulations of sexuality. Moreover, these performances of alternative identities allowed students to gain insight into and develop empathy for the experiences of gay or lesbian people, which has the potential to shift students' thinking. The erotic undertones of Brandon's poem, as the reader/listener envisions Giovanni/Brandon sitting on the bed with "the sheets still warm" from another man's body, further pushed the boundaries of what is usually allowed in a classroom. Often when "gay" topics are allowed into the classroom, it is within a framework devoid of same-sex desire and sexual encounters. Significantly, Brandon adopts the position of Giovanni who is strong and does not "feel shame nor regret" unlike David who is "lost at sea" and living in his "own jail." Like Lara, Brandon chose the metaphor of "jail" or "prison" instead of the "closet" in speaking about David's struggle to come to terms with his sexual identity. Unlike the metaphor of the "closet" which stands for a space in which an LGBT person hides to conceal their identity, the metaphor of "jail/prison" conjures up an image of a space where someone is sent for doing something wrong. In addition, the metaphor of the "closet" implies more choice on the part of LGBTQ people as it carries the implication that people decide to keep their sexual identity a secret or reveal their sexual identity through the act of coming out. The metaphor of the "jail/prison," on the other hand, alludes to the oppressive forces that keep LGBTQ people imprisoned, often against their own will. It is thus a much more powerful metaphor that reveals how oppression works against LGBTQ people. Students' use of the metaphor of the "jail/prison"; therefore, shows their deepening understanding of how heterosexism operates as a system of oppression.

Another straight-identifying male student, Justin, likewise slipped into the role of Giovanni by creating a song called "Come home" that Giovanni sings after David has left him. Sitting at the front of the classroom, playing his guitar, Justin sang a love song addressed to another man with such sincerity and emotions that his words became absolutely believable:

> *Our life, my heart, broken right from the start but inside there's room. Your touch, forever. Why can't we be together? We used to be so close. Moments fading. Inside this dark just waiting. For a better end. One night. Too few. Hella can see right through you. Oooh aaah. I miss you so. Come home soon. Why can't it just be me and you? Constant sorrow. That door will open tomorrow. You'll walk in with that ...look on your face. You're one of a kind. Your image burned in my mind. It hurts. I can't see straight. Oh, you vanished too fast. You can't run from your past. David, I need you. Alone. Hopeless. Trying so hard to feel what I miss. I miss you so. Come home soon. Why can't it just be me and you? I miss you so. Come home soon.*

Like Brandon's poem, Justin's performance of this song represents another queer subversive act in a space – the school – where expressions of same-sex love are usually met with discomfort and resistance. However, in the space of Sara's classroom such queer enactments became not only possible but valued. Many of the other students in the class expressed how much they appreciated the song and asked if Justin could give them a recording. Through these two young men's poem and song, students were able to feel *with* David and Giovanni. Both the poem and the song provided counternarratives to dominant notions about male gay sexuality as deviant, abnormal, sick, and hypersexual through their words that allow listeners to feel the pain and hurt experienced by someone who has been left by the person he loves. The poem and the song deeply humanize what it means to be gay. In this way, both students enacted queer literacies through their creative projects.

Other students focused in their projects more on the differences between perceptions and emotions around society-sanctioned heterosexuality and unsanctioned homosexuality. Casey, for example, created a mask that shows on the outside black and white images and quotes pertaining to heterosexuality, such as families and men surrounded by women, and on the inside colorful images related to how David experiences being gay, such as sadness but also images of love and happiness.

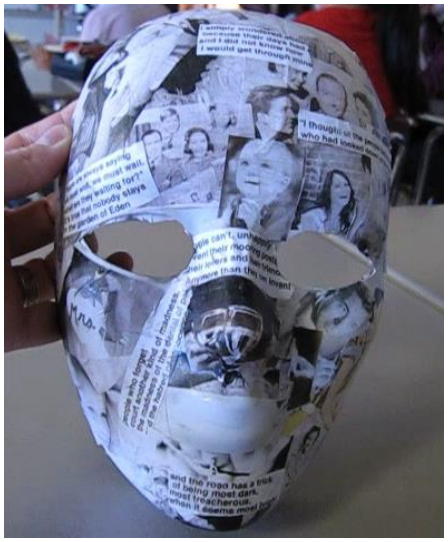


Figure 3: Example of student work: Mask created by Casey (front)

Um, on the front of the mask, it's like black and white photos, um, and it's kind of showing like what I felt David thought that the world was telling him he should want. But it was like keeping him from being happy. And so there's like happy pictures of families and like a lot of traditional images, sort of like 1950s housewives and like men surrounded by women. Um, and there's some quotes that were kind of, I don't know, I thought saying how hard it was to pretend that you're happy and pretend that you want the things that you feel everyone else wants to have. But you really don't. - Casey

Figure 4: Example of student work: Mask created by Casey (back)

And on the inside of the mask, it's in color and there's like all the different feelings that, uh, David, was feeling throughout the book. So, there's like sadness, there's like alcoholism, um, there's people crying. And then there's also like gay images, like love and romance, and it's also sort of like people just partying. He just wants to like explode 'cause he's keeping it all inside. Um, and then there's also like internalized homophobia. There's like little people with Westborough Baptist church signs. So, it's just like sort of a, sort of a mess on the inside [laughs] but like he's trying.
- Casey

Similar to the other projects, Casey troubles dominant notions about same-sex love and desire by choosing to represent heterosexuality in black and white, symbolizing how heterosexism leaves gay people unhappy and lifeless whereas homosexuality is represented in color, symbolizing how David only feels full of life through what is hidden.

As these projects show, students took up the opportunity to engage with queer issues through these creative projects in a variety of ways. What is common to the projects is that students disrupted dominant narratives about same-sex love and desire. Through their projects they created counternarratives that validated and affirmed same-sex love and desire. While all of

the students recognized and acknowledged indirectly how heterosexism oppresses lesbian and gay people, they also flipped the narrative and presented same-sex love and desire from a deeply emotional level. For me, these creative projects produced queer moments in the classroom that disrupted and destabilized, even if only for a moment, heterosexist boundaries and the conventions of normalcy related to sexuality. The stories that the students created through their projects worked to provide them with new ways of being, thinking, seeing and doing around LGBTQ issues.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a discussion of queer moments in the Gay and Lesbian Literature classroom that exemplify instances where dimensions of a queer literacies approach became observable. In particular, during this unit around the reading of the novel *Giovanni's Room* students learned about and discussed key concepts that enabled them to understand the oppression LGBTQ people face not just on an individual level but also how such oppression operates on institutional and social/cultural levels. Students were pushed to engage with their own bias and prejudices and had to work through some moments of discomfort as their commonsense understandings of sexuality and gender were troubled. Students' final projects demonstrated their deepening understandings of the experiences of LGBTQ people. By creating their own counternarratives that depicted same-sex love, desire and relationships in positive ways, they showed how new and alternative imaginings about sexuality are possible. In Chapter 10, I will explore how the class continued to trouble notions of normalcy as the class read *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Rita Mae Brown's proudly lesbian feminist novel.

CHAPTER 10

TROUBLING 'NORMAL': THE SUBVERSION OF FEMALE SEXUALITY AND GENDER

What is a lesbian?
A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.
She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society –perhaps then, but certainly later – cares to allow her.

These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with herself.
She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society – the female role.

The turmoil she experiences tends to induce guilt proportional to the degree to which she feels she is not meeting social expectations, and/or eventually drives her to question and analyze what the rest of her society more or less accepts.
She is forced to evolve her own life pattern, often living much of her life alone, learning usually much earlier than her "straight" (heterosexual) sisters about the essential aloneness of life (which the myth of marriage obscures) and about the reality of illusions.

To the extent that she cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself. For she is caught somewhere between accepting society's view of her – in which case she cannot accept herself – and coming to understand what this sexist society has done to her and why it is functional and necessary for it to do so.
Those of us who work that through find ourselves on the other side of a tortuous journey through a night that may have been decades long.
The perspective gained from that journey, the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women, is something to be shared with all women – because we are all women.

Manifesto "The Woman-identified Woman", Radicalesbians, 1970

Before students opened the first page of their next novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*, reading the manifesto "The Woman-identified Woman", written in 1970 by the group Radicalesbians of which Rita Mae Brown was a founding member, disrupted what students thought they knew about what it meant being lesbian. Being lesbian being a choice? A political statement? This introduction to the new unit set the stage for a reading that was markedly different from that of the two novels that the class had read before. Unlike the previous two novels where same-sex desire and love was either hidden (lesbian subtext in *A Lost Lady*) or was represented through the

internal struggle of the protagonist who is consumed by shame and denial (*Giovanni's Room*), *Rubyfruit Jungle* – "this explicitly gay, not afraid to be gay novel" (Sara, observation 5/1/13) – presented students with a counternarrative (queer literacies dimension 5) that troubles commonsense understandings around sexuality, sex and gender (queer literacies dimension 3), while revealing how heterosexism, sexism, and classism operate as intersecting systems of oppression (queer literacies dimension 2). As Sara explained to the class,

> *A Lost Lady was all about subtext...It was written in the 1920s in this time when there was really no explicit gay or lesbian literature. Giovanni's Room, that's the first gay book that was published in the United States and that had a reputable publisher. That was a piece of literature, that people could actually take out of the library and read.*

Unlike *Giovanni's Room* which was all about "shame and depression and pain and angst and anger and everything else" (Sara), *Rubyfruit Jungle*, while still addressing the discrimination directed against gays and lesbians, gives the topic a different spin. As Sara pointed out, "It gives explicit and fun and engaging attention to lesbian themes....It's a book about just like this strong, cool, fun, happy, confident lesbian. She's so strong and confident. She loves women. She just wants to be who she is." (Observation 4/29/13)

Reinscribing New Meanings to Female Sexuality and Gender: *Rubyfruit Jungle*

Rita Mae Brown's novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*, originally published in 1973, is a book significant for its status as groundbreaking in the development of specifically feminist-lesbian fiction. *Rubyfruit Jungle* has sold millions of copies, and is one of the best-selling gay-lesbian books of all time. Rewriting traditional notions of gender, gender roles and sexuality, this novel can be considered a subversive reinscription long before such deconstructivist lingo entered academic work. Written well before the advent of queer theory, in *Rubyfruit Jungle* we find a re-writing of sexual politics related through a new language that reinscribes new meanings to female sexuality and gender. Indeed, *Rubyfruit Jungle* has achieved somewhat of a cult status because of its radical breaking with the literary traditions of the time which represented lesbians and gay men overwhelmingly as deviant, sick, mentally ill and not meant to survive in the heterosexual

world. Some have called the novel "a good and true account of growing up Un-American in America" (Gloria Steinem, remarks reproduced on the back cover of the 1973 publication of the novel), viewing the protagonist as the 'outsider' who exists on the margins of society.

Rubyfruit Jungle tells the story of Molly who grows up as the adopted child of a poor, working-class family in the South of the United States. At an early age, Molly realizes that she is different from those around her, not only because she is adopted but also because she consistently defies social norms related to gender, class, and sexuality. Set in the 1950s to 1970s, the narrative follows Molly from childhood through her coming-of-age. Split into distinct sections which represent significant segments of Molly's life, the narrative chronicles her experiences and relationships during childhood, in high school, college, and finally in New York City.

In the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, *Rubyfruit Jungle* provided students with opportunities to engage with multiple dimensions of a queer literacies approach as they read an explicitly lesbian novel, encountered the complexities of diverse sexualities and genders through additional readings, and engaged in an activity that allowed them to experience the fluidity of sexuality. Through these various texts and learning experiences, this unit encouraged queer literacies by troubling students' commonsense understandings of sexuality, sex and gender (queer literacies dimension 3); it invited students to consider how various systems of oppression intersect in Molly's life (queer literacies dimension 2); it provided a counternarrative for the students that opened spaces for new imaginings about sexuality, sex and gender (queer literacies dimension 5), and it had the potential for learning through discomfort/crisis as students encountered a narrative that flips understandings of normalcy (queer literacies dimension 6).

Troubling Commonsense Understandings – The Radicalesbians Manifesto

Acknowledging how our readings are always embedded in context, Sara took great care to introduce her students to relevant background information about the novels that the class was reading. At the beginning of each new unit, students received a handout, which Sara read aloud, that provided biographical information about the author and relevant information about the

historical and sociopolitical context of the novel (see Appendix N: Introduction to Rita Mae Brown and the Radicalesbians – Handout).

When introducing Rita Mae Brown to the class, Sara emphasized Brown's involvement in the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the gay liberation movement, and finally the radical lesbian movement, pointing out how many of these liberation movements overlapped but also pursued goals that were distinct from each other. Part of this introduction to Rita Mae Brown included a class read aloud of the Radicalesbians manifesto "The Woman-Identified Woman" – a classic document in lesbian-feminist history that espouses the idea of lesbianism as a choice and political stance in response to patriarchy, stating, "What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion." Reading this manifesto and discussing the Radicalesbians' stance engaged students with the following two questions – 'who is a lesbian' and 'is sexual orientation a matter of biology or is it a choice' – that already began to disrupt students' understandings of sexual identity. At a time when the idea that sexual orientation is natural and determined by genetics is adopted by more and more people and actually used as a tool in advocating for LGBT rights, introducing the notion that women could choose to be lesbian was indeed troubling to the students. The following excerpt illustrates how the class wrestled with this idea:

> Sara: *And so the Radicalesbians formed this group and it wasn't just all people who were really lesbian. It was a choice where people said if you want to free yourself from the shackles of male domination, you have to join up with us. And we are making the choice to not only just spend all our time with women but actually love women. ...They tried it out as a political experiment, to be lesbian. What do you think about that? ...You're just gonna be a lesbian as a political experiment.*
>
> Student 1: *I don't think of it too positive.*
>
> Student 2: *I don't think that's a good idea.*
>
> Student 3: *I feel like it's de-legitimizing. Like it's saying that it's a choice but it's not. Sexual orientation isn't really a choice. Your political views are a choice. And they should be different.*
>
> Sara: *Yah. Yah. I mean. Okay. Yes. ...Although, who is it a choice for?*

Student 4: *What do you mean?*

Sara: *Like is all sexual orientation a matter of biology? Is it a choice?* [pause, silence] *You don't think it is?* [pause, silence]

Student 5: *I don't think so.* [pause]

Student 6*: I think like sexuality is not defined. There's a lot of gray area. And I think most people are in the gray area and it kind of depends like where you are or who you want to be and you like.*

Sara: *Yes. ... the choice comes in where you, let's say that you have fluidity and sometimes you like men and sometimes you like women, ... basically like allowing yourself to be with that person, that is a choice. ... Fully embracing all your options, you could say that might be a choice. 'Cause there's some people who won't do that. They just can't do it. They shut out all other options 'cause they don't want to be in that gray space, you know. What were you thinking?*

Student 7: *I was thinking if we are talking about like a spectrum, it's not, you can be a little bit less, um, less sure.*

As we can see in this interaction, students initially rejected the idea that being a lesbian, or choosing your sexual orientation, is a choice, even saying that framing it as a choice is "de-legitimizing." Here students are echoing a narrative that currently dominates, especially the discourse related to demands for civil rights for LGBTQ people where scientific knowledge is used to argue that homosexuality is natural and unchangeable, and should be understood as just another variation in human characteristics. For students in this class, this narrative made sense and they readily embraced it as an argument that allowed them to take a positive and affirmative stance in relation to LGBTQ issues. The Radicalesbians' call to women to choose lesbianism as a political move in opposition to male patriarchy appeared therefore quite incomprehensible to the students. When Sara continued to push their thinking, "Although, who is it a choice for?" students were puzzled ("What do you mean?" followed by silence). However, when one student introduced the idea that "sexuality is not defined" and that there is a lot of "gray area" around it, another student connected this to the idea of sexuality operating on a "spectrum." This idea that sexual identity is not a fixed, unitary, essential category but rather a relational construct that is experienced in fluid, shifting ways is a central element of queer theory. In foregrounding writer

Rita Mae Brown's stance on lesbianism in her introduction to the novel, Sara already began the process of troubling commonsense understandings of sexuality and gender (queer literacies dimension 3). Students' realization that there is a "gray area" or a "spectrum" of sexualities challenges the binary of hetero/homo-sexuality and opens it up for critique.

The class built on what had begun during this class discussion as they further explored the complexities of sexual identity/identification and sexual orientation/desire through the reading of an article titled "Generation LGBTQIA" and their engagement in an activity called "Beyond Binaries."

Questioning Terminology: "Generation LGBTQIA"

The article "Generation LGBTQIA," published in the New York Times in January 2013, raises issues around the intersections of sexuality and gender, expanding definitions of queer identities, in particular, gender identifications, and identity politics. The article suggests that a "new generation of post-gay gender activists" exists who "forg[e] a political identity all their own, often at odds with mainstream gay culture." According to the authors of the article, "this generation is seeking something more radical: an upending of gender roles beyond the binary of male/female. The core question isn't whom they love, but who they are — that is, identity as distinct from sexual orientation." Focused on the experiences of a group of University of Pennsylvania freshmen students, the article introduces readers to current challenges to the boundaries and exclusionary practices around identity politics and the desire for more flexibility in defining one's self. The article, for example, cites Professor Jack Halberstam, a transgender activist and professor at the University of Southern California, saying, "When you see terms like L.G.B.T.Q.I.A. ... it's because people are seeing all the things that fall out of the binary, and demanding that a name come into being." However, the authors point to the existing limits of a language that always already fails to include everyone:

> At one point, Santiago, a curly-haired freshman from Colombia, stood before the crowd. He and a friend had been pondering the limits of what he calls "L.G.B.T.Q. plus." "Why do only certain letters get to be in the full acronym?" he asked.

> Then he rattled off a list of gender identities, many culled from Wikipedia. "We have our lesbians, our gays," he said, before adding, "bisexual, transsexual, queer, homosexual, asexual." He took a breath and continued. "Pansexual. Omnisexual. Trisexual. Agender. Bi-gender. Third gender. Transgender. Transvestite. Intersexual. Two-spirit. Hijra. Polyamorous."
> By now, the list had turned into free verse. He ended: "Undecided. Questioning. Other. Human."
> The room burst into applause.
> (Excerpted from the article Generation LGBTQIAA)

This article could have provided the basis for a rich discussion; however, for Sara's students the focus remained on trying to make meaning of the various terms used throughout the article. When Sara asked the students "*What do you guys think about it? Do you, does anyone think it's interesting, identify with it? Any thoughts you have*," students responded with silence or found it simply "crazy." The questions that students raised showed that for many of them the various terms people use to describe or identify themselves in relation to their sexuality or gender were unknown ("What's intersex? What's androgyne? What's a third gender? What's a Hijra? What's the difference between transvestite and transgender?" – Observation 5/2/13). Throughout the reading, therefore, Sara provided examples from her personal experiences to illustrate certain concepts:

> *So, I have a friend who is, um, technically intersex who, back in the day people would say that you're born a hermaphrodite. Which is like literally between both, um, both genders. So my friend is like, looks biologically female and has like, she has breasts, she has a vagina, but she has no internal, um, female organs.*
> …
> *I ran into this girl ... at this conference. And, suddenly, since going to college, um, she has, she looked very gender-ambiguous, so she cut off all her hair and was wearing a bow tie and I ran into her and her mom. But then later I found out that she had put on the name tag that identified her another name and a male pronoun. Um, and that she's changed her pronoun on Facebook. But, she still goes by her birth name, which is a female name. And her parents don't appear to know.*

Sharing her personal experiences helped to illustrate for the students how the identifications used by the people in the article connect to the experiences of real people. However, since students did not respond directly to Sara's stories, it is not clear what meaning the students actually made of it. Another strategy that Sara used to accommodate students' thirst for

knowledge was to invite them to look up some of the terms, like Hijra[36] or pansexual,[37] on their cell phones, which they eagerly did. The students' focus on the terminology could suggest that they first need to gain an understanding of the current language that is used when talking about identifications related to sexuality and gender before they can engage with the deeper issues underlying such shifting and increasingly complex language. With its focus on the experiences of university students, the authors of the article similarly seem to suggest that "LGBTQIA" people primarily exist in privileged academic spaces, such as prestigious universities and liberal arts colleges. Sara pointed this out to the students, noting, "*it's interesting because almost all of it is about college campuses*...," and even though she made the connection to her students, saying, "... *and a lot of you are gonna be there soon*," her students did not appear to be ready to engage with the debates around identity politics or having a more complex discussion about the intersections of sexuality and gender. The article could have provided a wonderful opportunity to connect these college students' demands for self-identification, their choices of gender identification and how that shapes their political identities back to the Radicalesbians re-definition of lesbianism. However, Sara's students' lack of vocabulary took center stage during the class discussion.

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[36] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijra_%28South_Asia%29: Hijras are males who have a feminine gender identity from South Asia. Hirjas adopt feminine gender roles and wear female clothing.

[37] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pansexuality: Pansexuality or omnisexuality is sexual attraction, sexual desire, romantic love, or emotional attraction toward people of all gender identities and biological sexes. Self-identified pansexuals may consider pansexuality a sexual orientation, and refer to themselves as gender-blind, asserting that gender and sex are insignificant or irrelevant in determining whether they will be sexually attracted to others. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines pansexuality as, "not limited or inhibited in sexual choice with regard to gender or activity".

More productive in engaging students with the notion of fluid identifications and the differences between sexual orientation, attraction, desire and identity was a student-facilitated experiential activity.

Experiencing Fluidity: Beyond Binaries

Created by bi-activist and educator Robyn Ochs, "Beyond Binaries: Seeing Sexual Diversity in the Classroom" is a lesson that provides participants with an opportunity to actually experience the diversity and fluidity of sexual experiences, desires, and identities in the classroom; thus, disrupting binary thinking about sexualities. Participants in the lesson experience this diversity and fluidity both kinetically and visually as they move their positions on a line in response to the answers on a questionnaire. As a result, the activity makes visible those marginalized or non-normative, often hidden or covert, sexual identities, experiences and desires that might be present in the classroom. The activity further complicates commonsense understandings of descriptors like gay or straight which suggest a straightforward way of labeling people's sexual orientation. By asking participants to respond to questions around attractions, fantasies, sexual experiences, and romantic/emotional attractions, the complexities and various dimensions of what we call sexual orientation are revealed. In addition, the activity allows participants to see how sexual orientation is fluid and changeable over time and also context-bound by asking them to consider where they would place themselves on the scale at different points in their lives (overall, before age 14 and in the past month), how they would be placed by close family members or friends, and where they would choose to be if they could be anywhere on the scale (see Appendix O: Beyond Binaries Questionnaire). The workshop is described in detail in the book *Activities for Teaching Gender and Sexuality in the University Classroom* where Ochs and Murphy (2013) outline the following learning goals for this lesson:

- to understand the complexity and diversity of sexual experiences, desires, and identities.
- to realize that sexual experiences, desires, and identities do not always correspond and can change over the life course.

- to increase student awareness and understanding of identities and experiences that differ from their own (p. 62).

At the beginning of the school trimester, Sara had taken a group of students from the school's Gay-Straight-Alliance to the True Colors conference in Connecticut, a large LGBTQ youth conference, at which Robyn Ochs presented this workshop. Mara, one of the students in the Gay and Lesbian Literature course had attended this workshop and offered to facilitate the workshop with the class. Mara began the lesson by distributing to the class a handout which shows the Kinsey Scale, the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, and the Storms scale (Ochs & Murphy, 2013, p. 69) and giving a short lecture through which she familiarized the class with these models for measuring sexual orientation. In her lecture, Mara troubled her peers' understandings of sexuality on multiple levels. First, Mara challenged her peers' understandings of the notion of identity, explaining, "*The truth is that identities are words. They take their meaning relative to other words ... The truth is that, um, every person is different, every person is unique, even within the same identity, there's a lot of variation.*" Mara's words reflect queer analytical thinking which recognizes identities as constructed through language and as significant in relation to other social constructs. In responding to the questionnaire, Mara extended a further critique of identity labels and categories when she emphasized,

> *It's important to keep in mind, if you don't feel like you can identify with any of these things, that it's a problem with the tool, not a problem with you. Um, all identities are correct. They're all, all self-identifications are normal and healthy and whatever.*

Her choice of language, moving away from the term 'identity' to 'self-identifications' is significant because it emphasizes self-determination, choice, flexibility through the act of identification rather than being placed or placing oneself into a bounded category. Mara then introduced the class to the notion of "intersectionality," explaining that:

> *People have a lot of different identities based on race, religion, geography, gender, class, age, political orientation, sexual orientation, all of these different things and all of those together form our identity in all of its multiple facets. ... It's the sort of the compilation of all of our different identities that makes us individuals.*

This concept of intersectionality is central to queer feminist poststructuralist theorizing, troubling essentializing categories of identities and it is an element of queer literacies (Dimension 2). Mara continued to expand her peers' understandings by also troubling binary thinking in regards to sexuality and gender. She explained, "*even though [all these scales] allow for a lot of variation, they all make the assumption that gender is a binary also. They all assume this strict division male versus female, same-sex versus opposite sex.*" Here, Mara takes up queer critiques related to scale models that continue to rely on binaries as opposite ends on a spectrum. Drawing on Ochs' use of the language of 'other sex' rather than 'opposite sex', Mara then explained to the class that "*the sexes aren't necessarily opposite and they are not necessarily discrete ....um, so, we're gonna use same sex and other sex.*" Connected to this, Mara explained the difference between sex and gender – two terms that are often conflated as one – as "*gender is what's between your ears, sex is what's between your legs*," an analogy that is frequently used to provide an easily accessible way to understand how gender and sex are different concepts.

We can see that Mara in her introduction to the lesson drew on several key principles of queer theorizing that trouble commonsense understandings of sexuality, sex and gender (queer literacies dimension 3) and open up spaces for new imaginings of sexuality, sex and gender (queer literacies dimension 5): identities are understood as relational constructs instead of essential categories of being; binaries are being pulled apart and it is revealed how thinking of gender and sex in binaries keeps a binary of homosexuality/heterosexuality in place even when placing sexuality on a continuum; and the sex-gender distinction is opened up for inspection.

After this introduction, Mara segued into the activity, handing out the questionnaires and explaining its purpose. She informed the class that students should not put their names on the questionnaire to keep all answers confidential. After providing about 10 minutes for the participants to complete the questionnaire, Mara collected, shuffled, and then re-distributed the sheets among the participants. Usually, numbers corresponding to the scale on the questionnaire (0-6) are taped in a straight line on the floor, however, since the classroom was not big enough to

do this, Mara placed the numbers around the room. She then proceeded to read the questions one by one, asking the participants to perform the answers on the questionnaire in their hand by moving to the number that corresponded with the number on their sheets. After each question, Mara shared her observations. In response to question 1 (Where would you put yourself on this scale, taking into account your sexual orientation overall), the majority of participants placed themselves on the scale from 0-2, signaling predominantly heterosexuality. However, four people placed themselves on numbers 3 or 4, signaling bisexuality, and four people placed themselves on numbers 5 or 6, signaling predominantly homosexuality.

Mara: *And so you can see most people are very straight but there's ...*

Sara: *You both are '4'* [two students nodding]

Someone: *I'm '5'*

Sara: *That's cool.*

Mara: *Um, okay. But a lot of 1's and 2's.*

Interestingly, in response to question 2 (Where would you put yourself on the scale, taking into account your sexual orientation before age 14), almost all of the participants placed themselves at number '0', signaling complete other-sex attraction. Only one person chose '6' on the scale and two people chose #3 or #4. Mara commented on this, "*So, a lot of people were straight as kids. That is, our society just sort of assumes that as a kid you're straight and you have to come out as being gay. That's interesting to see.*" On the other hand, quite a few participants acknowledged that they had romantic/emotional same-sex relationships (8 participants chose # 3-6) and 4 participants had same-sex sexual relationships. Most interesting perhaps was that 10 participants chose same-sex romantic/emotional relationships as the ideal, 9 participants chose same-sex fantasies and attractions as the ideal, and 8 participants were open to same-sex sexual relationships as the ideal. Mara commented, "*That's interesting. People have an overall identity but then what they see in their future is different.*" When Mara asked, "*So, raise your hand if you have a different ideal for romance than for sex*," multiple participants raised

their hands, about which she commented, "*That's interesting too. 'Cause it isn't necessarily just who people fall in love with, it's also about who you are attracted to. .... The difference between sex and love.*" In response to the question 'What would your family identify you as,' three participants responded with number 5 or 6 and two participants with number 3, about which Mara commented, "*Okay, um, family... Interesting. So a fair amount of people are open with their families.*"

The final question on the questionnaire asks participants to write down word(s) that they use to describe their sexual orientation (i.e., gay, straight, etc.). Mara asked the class to return to their answer to question 1 (Where would you put yourself on this scale, taking into account your sexual orientation overall) before calling out identity words:

> *Raise your hand for female, male, straight, gay, or lesbian, um, bisexual, pansexual. Um, let's see, what other words do we have. Um, questioning, asexual. Um, some of the words people used when I did this activity in the workshop were, um, heteroflexible, homoflexible, um, lesbro, um, there was just sexual, there was human, genderfluid, um, queer. Anybody have queer? ... Okay, well my person said, um, without gender standards. I thought that was cool.* [laughs]

The responses to the questionnaire indicated that a sizeable number of the participants did not identify as exclusively heterosexual, that the greatest variability or movement was happening before and after age 14, and that many participants appeared open to further explorations as they considered same-sex sexual and romantic relationships as well as same-sex fantasies and attraction an 'ideal': 9-10 participants responded by choosing # 3-6 on the scales and 11 participants responded by choosing # 0-2. Knowing that some of the students identify as bisexual and that some students have lesbian or bisexual mothers, this might explain the greater willingness of these students to embrace sexual variation and fluidity. In addition, all three adults who were present in the classroom during this lesson (Sara, a paraprofessional, and myself) participated in the activity. One could argue that this skewed the results somewhat; on the other hand, it allowed students to experience how sexuality can shift over time. For example, the

student who performed my questionnaire moved from 0 to 6 in response to questions that addressed sexuality before age 14 and during the past month.

However, during the post-activity discussion an interesting conversation developed that illustrates how much the class wrestled with the notion that sexuality is fluid and changeable. Mara opened the conversation by using the metaphor of "journey" to reiterate how sexuality "changes over time," emphasizing how there is no "ultimate answer" and implying that several shifts in one's sexuality can occur throughout one's life time:

> *Sexuality is... a journey, continuous, um, it changes over time. We have to sort of live with the question of we don't really know what the ultimate, the ultimate answer is of what your sexuality is until you come to the end of your life. And you're like, well, I was this and this and this.*

Justin while suggesting that he was open to engaging with this idea – "I'm not like disagreeing with you" – questioned Mara's suggestion, proposing himself that people at some point do know who they are "sexuality-wise." In fact, he argued that people need to know who they are because they cannot always question themselves. Here, his argument resembles theories of identity development that posit that while people may move through various stages, it is healthy to eventually achieve one's identity.

> Justin: *I'm not like disagreeing with you but like isn't there some point along your life where you're like trying to say I am this, like sexuality-wise. Like you can't always have questions about what your future may be.*

Mara conceded that people classify themselves but she put this into perspective, pointing out how people do this because they respond to social norms ("being told to classify yourself") and they want to avoid difficulties that come with ambiguities ("It's a lot easier to just sort of say I am this and stick with it"). Here, Mara recognized that identification and presentation of self are sometimes at odds with a person's desires or behaviors ("Some people identify with one thing and present themselves as that but actually have different fantasies or behaviors").

> Mara: *I think, yeah, I think a lot of people do. I mean in terms of living in the world and being told to classify yourself, it's a lot easier to just sort of say I am this and stick with it. Um, and a lot of people do. Um, and that is your reality for that present. But there is sort of the question of changing over time. Um, which is ...trying that out. But it's true*

> *that a lot of people just put it out there. Okay, I'm this or that. And live that way and present themselves as that. Um, and some people identify with one thing and present themselves as that but actually have different fantasies or behaviors.*

For Justin, however, someone's unwillingness to classify oneself signals either curiosity or being "unsure about who they are." Rather than viewing non-identification as a choice, he continued to see it as an inability ("when you say like I am this but you're not sure").

> Justin: *Yeah. My question kind of came up like, if someone was like curious or like unsure about who they are, maybe they would get a sense of like, um,...when do you say I am this?... So, like when you say, I am this but you're not sure.*

It was at this point that Sara entered the conversation, invoking some authority on the topic based on her age and personal life experiences:

> *Well, I think, just personally, because I'm older... I'm twenty years older than you. At least for me, it's weird 'cause I'm just, kind of what this survey revealed, it's I'm all over the numerical map. Um, but one of the things it's like, like now in my life, I've been with the same person for 20 years and we're married. And so to everyone, in my family, to all my friends, to all my students basically I have a lesbian identity. But my, but I wouldn't place myself at all as a '6', I'm only at a '3' or '4'. I just fell in love with this person and that's who I married. But I think, so for identity, I would identify as bisexual. But I think, um, part of why it's important almost to have like, I guess the public identity, I don't care what other people call me but personally it's good to be honest about where I am. ...It's like naming and acknowledging it.*

By confiding that her responses to the questionnaire were "all over the numerical map," Sara let her students know that shifts in sexuality do not necessarily mean that someone is "unsure." Even though she has been together with her wife for twenty years, Sara stressed how she identifies "now" in her life, leaving it open to how she will identify in the future. However, what probably disrupted students' understanding of sexuality even more profoundly might have been her revelation that she does not identify as a lesbian, which she calls her "public identity" in relation to her family, her friends, and her students, but as bisexual ("I wouldn't place myself at all as a '6', I'm only at a '3' or '4'). For Sara, "naming and acknowledging" this tension between her public identity and her internal self-identification, which she made public in this moment, is about "honesty." What Sara said actually built on Mara's statement that people sometimes identify in certain ways not because they completely align with a specific identity but because it

makes life easier to conform to the constant demands for categorizing. Despite Sara's personal sharing, Rachel still questioned that one's sexual orientation could completely change and Stephanie wanted to know if people could "develop attractions."

> Rachel: *Are there really people who are only attracted to like one sex and then later like forty years or whatever thirty years later they're only attracted to the other sex? Like does that happen?*
>
> Stephanie: *So what about, what about not just, what if you're, can you develop attractions?*

In her response, Sara suggested that if we accept that sexuality operates on a continuum and that most people would be placed anywhere between the "opposite ends," then people "can really float around in that inner section a lot." In trying to explain this to her students, Sara used the scientific model of the Kinsey scale to provide authority to this argument:

> *Yeah. I think. I think you can. Yes. I totally think you can. Didn't, did she talk about this in the Kinsey Scale? One of the things he found is that people on the opposite ends only made up 10 % on each end. So, 80 % of people were somewhere between the 1 and the 6. And only 10 % on each end were totally gay or totally straight. All the action was in the middle. For men and women. So, that would mean that you can really float around in that inner section a lot.*

The conversation then took a turn through which the class considered the question of monogamy. Sara opened this strand of the conversation:

> *What none of these deal with, what I always thought was so weird is the idea of monogamy. Because all these labels are so cool and they're so interesting but the reality is that we live in a society where almost all people, like way more people than not create a monogamous ideal and try to have monogamous relationships. And so, you look at how fluid the map was that we created. That's not like the coolest, most, I don't know, it's not, it doesn't really flow with monogamy that well. So even though I'm totally monogamous it's like we didn't ..., you know, the fact that we were all over that fluid scale, it's a little weird that, that would be hard because that means that all those people all over the room were gonna choose someone and stick with them. Maybe. But, that they're gonna have other feelings or ...needs or whatever throughout their lives.*

Here, Sara complicated her students' understandings of sexuality further as she pointed out how acknowledging sexuality as fluid and changing conflicts with the social norms that demand monogamous relationships and how this ideal of monogamy possibly prevents people from acting on their shifting sexuality. In response to Sara's thoughts on monogamy, Denise suggested that

how people practice their relationships might also be fluid, even though she recognized the social norms that prohibit polygamy ("it's not really good"). Acknowledging almost the impossibility of monogamy ("so hard," "it's hard to achieve lifelong monogamy"), the conversation reinforced that not being monogamous is "socially unacceptable."

> Denise: *Do you think that it, like how it's so fluid, sexuality, could it also be fluid for people, like some people are meant kind to have more than, like not be monogamous. Some people, like you can change that way too? Or is it just, it's not really good.*
>
> Sara: *I think the reason that monogamy is so hard for so many people is, is exactly what we're talking about. It is, it's hard to achieve lifelong monogamy without being like constantly honest about what, what that means in the face of all these different gender identity expression.*
>
> Denise: *Yeah, honestly, 'cause, you know how, let's say if there was like a scale with 6 for someone who really loved to be able to be with multiple people…*
>
> Sara: *I think it is socially unacceptable to be not monogamous. I don't know. What do you guys think?* [slight pause]
>
> Justin: *Yeah.*
>
> Sara: *I, I personally I feel like it's the ideal state, but I don't want to do it. And I don't know if I don't want to do it because I'm afraid of the social stigma. I feel like it's easier to be gay than not monogamous. I don't know. I have this stigma attached to it but I don't think it's healthy. I'm questioning it.*
>
> Denise: *Yeah.*
>
> Sara: *Like it's weird to me.*
>
> Mara: *I don't know. ... I think that monogamy is tough...straight. It's just...all of human history* [laughs] *um, I don't know. But it is, it is weird to like at this ...monogamy...um, I don't know.*

This interaction illuminates how participation in the *Beyond Binaries* activity opened up a conversation in which Sara and her students began to question other dominant notions about sexuality, such as the social demand for monogamy. Students began to realize that issues related to sexuality are far more complex than what commonsense assumptions seem to suggest. When I interviewed Lara later during the trimester, asking her what she took away from this activity, she said,

> *Um, that, that it's a fluid motion, you know. You're not necessarily gonna be starting out as gay or starting out as straight. And that it can change very quickly in different age groups. And that, um, it's okay to be either way. You know. And that, um, yeah, just like numbers versus like this is good, this is bad. I like that there's just a number sequence. You know. It doesn't mean like higher is better or lower is better or anything like that. ... I hadn't realized that there were so many people that were so consistent but that there's also so many people that moved from there to there in like two seconds, you know. Um, I don't know. Just like eye opening I guess.* (Interview 5/20/13)

Lara's response shows that participation in the activity was eye-opening for her on multiple levels. It shifted her thinking about sexuality as she embraced the notion of fluidity because she saw "so many people mov[ing] from there to there." And, it allowed Lara to distance herself from judging someone's sexuality because identifying yourself on these scales is not about "good" or "bad," which makes it "okay to be either way." These are important realizations that point to the potential of experiential learning activities for disrupting harmful understandings of same-sex sexualities. Reading the novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*, likewise, challenged students' thinking and disrupted their commonsense notions about sexuality, gender and sex. The novel accomplished this by flipping the narrative and thus providing a counternarrative in which commonsense notions of female sexuality, sex and gender are subverted.

Flipping the Narrative: The Subversion of Sexuality, Sex and Gender in *Rubyfruit Jungle*

Rubyfruit Jungle presents a subversive counternarrative both in its rejection of traditional gender roles and its deliberate flipping of what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or straight (queer literacies dimension 5). In her introduction to the novel, Sara already pointed her students' attention to this flipping of the narrative as she told the class:

> *The literary trend up to this point was really to demonize gay people. Um, to make them like shameful, miserable, shameful, monstrous people. And so she* [Rita Mae Brown] *completely inverts the trend. Okay, so instead of gay people being other or inferior, she completely flips it, and what she shows is that it is more, not just better but that it is more glamorous, more sexy, even more moral to be gay. And the picture that she paints of straight people is kind of boring, dull, and perverted. And even if you think it's offensive, in some cases I actually think it's funny. Like it's funny because you're so used to the idea of the gay stereotype of, oh you're this perverted figure and it's like all the straight people in the book are kind of perverted. You know, they have these weird sexual fantasies … It won't probably offend you if you identify as straight. But it is such an interesting thing 'cause it's really unusual for gay people to be portrayed as more moral and more sexually, um, healthy. And for straight people to be kind of really perverted in*

> *some ways. It is subtle. It's not like mean or anything. It's just a subtle thing to pay attention to. Um, the other thing that she does is she basically shows two kinds of gay people. They're, you're gonna definitely come into contact with the closeted gays, um, but they're pretty miserable. And then the people who are out are, are really happy. Like they're able to lead happy more successful lives. So that's something that is interesting.* Sara in her introduction to the book (Observation 4/29/13)

Such "flipping of the narrative" invites reading queerly as it pushes readers to consider how such a counternarrative troubles dominant notions, tearing away stereotypical generalizations of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, and in the process offering alternative ways of imagining norm-disruptive sexuality, sex and gender. By noticing and foregrounding how the novel represents a "flipped" narrative, as Sara did in her introduction to the novel even before the students had read the first page, the students' eyes are directed toward those instances in the novel where normative notions about sexuality and gender are troubled. As a counternarrative, *Rubyfruit Jungle* lends itself to a queer reading for multiple reasons: the novel highlights and dismantles gendered and heteronormative practices, challenging readers to question norms and stereotypes; it challenges categorical thinking, pushing for ambiguity and showing sexuality, gender, social class and race as relations imbued with power; and it troubles notions of normalcy.

Questioning Norms and Stereotypes

In *Rubyfruit Jungle*, readers encounter the image of a heroine who deliberately defies dominant norms and stereotypes about female sexuality and gender. Throughout the narrative, Molly embraces an outsider status, placing herself clearly and queerly in violation of all kinds of norms as she pushes back against socially imposed restrictions related to sexuality, gender, sex, and social class:

> I had never thought I had much in common with anybody. I had no mother, no father, no roots, no biological similarities called sisters and brothers. And for a future I didn't want a split-level home with a station wagon, pastel refrigerator, and a houseful of blonde children evenly spaced through the years. I didn't want to ...become the model housewife. I didn't even want a husband or any man for that matter. I wanted to go my own way. That's all I think I ever wanted, to go my own way and maybe find some love here and there. Love, but not the now and forever kind with chains around your vagina and a short circuit in your brain. I'd rather be alone. (Brown, p. 88)

Molly means gender trouble. Molly's rejection of traditional gender roles is revealed in several instances throughout the narrative. Molly wants to be the doctor during children's games of doctor-nurse (p. 28); she assumes tomboyish behavior; when Molly proposes to her childhood girlfriend she is shocked that "girls can't get married" (p. 43) even though she rejects marriage as an option for herself (pp. 81-82); and Molly gets a college education. Through all of this, Molly not only repudiates dominant social norms for women at that time but she knows how to secure positions of power that are usually closed to women, effectively inverting the power relationships between female and male subjects (e.g., in high school she becomes the first female student council president, in college she uses the power of sororities to become freshman representative). Already in the very first scene of *Rubyfruit Jungle* readers are already challenged to rethink what it means to be a girl when 7-year old Molly pimps out a classmate, enticing him to reveal his uncircumcised penis for money to the other school kids:

> After school about eleven of us hurried out to the woods between school and the coffee shop and there Broc revealed himself. He was a big hit. Most of the girls had never even seen a regular dick and Broccoli's was so disgusting they shrieked with pleasure ...Broccoli and I had a thriving business...Money was power. (Brown, p. 5)

Here, Molly presents herself as a knowing, taking-charge kind of child who engages in deviant and inappropriate activities and acts on prohibited desires. In so doing, Molly disrupts the image of the obedient child and the good girl, challenging notions of child/girlhood innocence.

That students did not simply acquiesce to such transgressiveness was illustrated during the class discussion of this scene when the students resisted a queer subversive reading, rejecting the notion that the children's actions were sexual. Instead, students pointed out the innocence of the children who "are not sexually interested" because "they are 7 years old" and that the penis was just an "object" of general but not sexual interest. However, Sara pushed back by emphasizing the flipping of the power relationship in this scene where the "woman" is in charge and "the pimp." Consequently, she disrupted the image of childhood innocence. The following excerpt illustrates this classroom exchange:

Sandra: *Um, it wasn't like sexual for them at all. It was just like an interesting like an object. It's like nobody knew. I mean they are 7 years old. They're not like sexually interested.*

Sara: *Well.* [overlapping voices]

Elena: *There's this one girl.*

Sara: *Yeah!* [laughing] *One girl. What's her name? Nancy?* [overlapping voices*] Nancy pays extra to touch it.* [laughs] *Okay, but you're saying it's not that sexual.*

Sandra: *Even though she wanted to touch it, it was just like more like an interest in an object not like sexual.*

Rachel: *Molly thinks it's just gross and is like uninterested.*

Sara: *Yes. Uninterested. He's being prostituted. Who is she? She is the pimp. And he is the victim. And she's like, let's just bring him out here…there's a lot of power involved. Is that good? …What's interesting about it?* [brief pause] *Yeah.*

Elena: *It's like a woman is in charge.*

Sara: *Yes, the woman is the pimp here. Okay, even if you think it's bad, it is a childhood venture, you have like, basically like a woman in charge, she's making money, she is, and then it is almost like a prostitute/pimp relationship but for 7-year olds.* [writes on the whiteboard: woman in charge, making $, prostitute/pimp*] I know it's not really sexual in nature but she's using him to make money. Yes. So, she is kind of a strong girl.*

(Observation 5/1/13)

In addition, students wrestled with having to question their own moral prejudices, born of social norms. For example, students expressed resistance to view Molly's subversion of norms related to sex as positive or liberating. In fact, Molly's sexual openness was not viewed as an act of female liberation at all but rather as an illustration of Molly's inability to truly love and build a relationship with someone. Lara, for example, offered the following interpretation:

I really liked Molly in the sense that she's like very proud and like very confident herself. Um, but she's also very conflicted, too. Um, I think that her, her obsession with just sleeping with whoever she's able to sleep with, um, is kind of taking away the magic of it, you know. And I think that she doesn't really feel like that she can love very much because she didn't receive it in childhood. Um, and I think that's a very sad situation and it's very real.

Allison even pathologized Molly's behavior as an "attachment disorder," commenting:

I feel like she just sleeping with whoever she wants to sleep with. Like I haven't seen anything where she actually has a relationship with the person. ...I think she has an

> *attachment disorder.... Basically she wasn't loved as a child and she never had any strong connections so she feels like she can't connect, like she can't be attached to anyone because she's afraid they're gonna leave her. So, she doesn't.*

Sara, however, pushed back:

> *Yeah. ...It's really unusual to read about female characters who are, that are not as emotionally invested in their sexual partners. It's like this whole thing, women are supposed to be so emotional and guys are supposed to be like, or they can be unemotional about it....But there's a lot of freedom about just like picking somebody up, having sex and maybe have sex with them again, but maybe not. Maybe you're in a relationship and you also have sex with other people.*

Finally, Rachel added:

> *I feel like when you're growing up, if girls are sleeping around, you're called a slut but for guys it's like fun. So you feel like you have to be like really involved, like emotionally involved or else you get called a whore.*
>
> (Observation 5/9/13)

Rachel's final comment shows how these students have internalized social norms that cast female sexual promiscuity as highly negative. Despite Sara's attempt to introduce the idea of "freedom," students rejected because they are living in and experiencing a culture of slut-shaming. For these students, in 2013, the idea of sexual liberation that runs through *Rubyfruit Jungle* has no appeal. Moreover, *Rubyfruit Jungle* not only challenges norms and stereotypes but it is also a narrative that allows and even pushes for ambiguity rather than telling a coming-out story in which a character comes to terms with being lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Challenging Categorical Thinking

Rubyfruit Jungle offers the opportunity to rethink categories of identities and to reimagine femininity/masculinity or lesbian/bisexual/straight through its focus on desire rather than identity. Most of the characters in the novel have highly ambiguous sexualities and do not neatly fit neatly into such categories as lesbian, gay, bisexual or straight. Rita Mae Brown once said, "I don't believe in straight or gay. I really don't. I think we're all degrees of bisexual" and we see this belief reflected in her representation of the characters in the novel. For example, Molly's male cousin has sex with a man, yet never identifies as gay. Molly's lover Polina not

only identifies as heterosexual but she has a sexual fantasy about being a man having sex with a man. And, in an interesting reversal of roles those who are assumed to be 'straight' seduce Molly to have sex with them. As Sara pointed out to the students in her introduction to the novel:

> *It's kind of like a lesbian romance novel. And so, what's weird about it, we're reading it like this is true, but the author does an odd thing where she makes every single beautiful woman we first think of as a straight woman and in some cases they are actively identified as straight, um, basically fall in love and have amazing sex with Molly. ... Like, are they even gay or is this just a trick that the author created that Molly is so powerful that every woman she meets starting in 6th grade will just fall for her and have sex with her. Even if they were straight, they basically almost become gay for her.* (Observation 4/29/13)

Additionally, Molly herself is not concerned with deciding whether she is lesbian or bisexual. Indeed, Molly evades sexual identity labels entirely, finds them constraining, and is seemingly being open to the possibility of loving people, not particularly gendered people. Such rejection of identity categories is liberating for Molly – for her, no bodies are prohibited from interacting with other bodies as she engages in sexual encounters with both women and men and both young and old throughout the narrative. More than once, Molly vehemently rejects any labeling:

> So now I wear this label 'Queer' emblazoned across my chest. Or I could always carve a scarlet 'L' on my forehead. Why does everyone have to put you in a box and nail the lid on it? I don't know what I am- polymorphose and perverse. Shit. I don't even know if I'm white. I'm me. That's all I am and all I want to be. Do I have to be something? (Brown, p. 107)

Despite students' previous opportunities to view sexuality as being fluid and existing on a spectrum, students resisted the ambiguity of the characters in the novel. Rather than allowing for fluidity and the rejection of identity categories, they wondered about the characters sexual identities and tried to fit them into the boxes of lesbian, gay, bisexual or even transgender. In other words, students struggled with changing their hetero- and gender-normative frames of reference. The following excerpt from a classroom discussion illustrates this. Rather than allowing Molly to live in that 'gray area' or somewhere along 'the spectrum', students did not even read Molly as bisexual but as struggling to accept her lesbian identity:

Sara: *Okay, so I have a huge question. A lot of people are like, Molly is a bisexual. Thoughts?*

Many students at the same time: *No. No. No!*

Elena: *No. She literally hates having sex with men.*

Casey: *She hasn't really giving it her best shot.*

Sara: *So you think, you think that she is not bisexual*?

Many students: *No, no, NO WAY.* [with increasing emphasis]

Sara: *No way?]*

Casey: *I don't think she's bisexual 'cause she's not attracted to the guys that she ends up with. But she also looks at really unattractive guys. Like that really old guy.*

Sara: *Okay. ... This is the whole thing. She portrays every guy as like gross, idiotic.*

Sandra: *Also, she could just describe them as unattractive because she's not attracted to them. I think like from a straight point of view.* [multiple overlapping voices, inaudible]

Stephanie: *At the end, you never know.*

Someone: *It's like she doesn't have a sexuality.*

Sara: *I think it's kind of a lie to pretend you're so fluid or open to everything when in reality you have clear preferences. And then you make it sound like having sex with men is so gross compared to having sex with women. As opposed to that you're just a lesbian and that's why you don't want to have sex with men. It's not really fair to men* [laughs] *to pretend that you like them both but in your evaluation they're just inferior. Sexually. That's not really fair.*

Lydia: *Well. I do agree. But, um, one of the things that's also interesting, she seems to want to think of like all relationships as like not putting her heart into it or anything. And so, I think truthfully, she just kind of like, she knows that she's just lesbian. She's not bi but she wants to like kind of trick herself into being like, oh, sex is just sex with everyone, like, I don't really care. I can just do it with anyone. And it's kind of like this thing to trick herself into. ... Like I think, I definitely think she knows. I think she knows that she likes sex with women much, much more than she likes sex with men. But I don't think she's ready to admit to herself that that's true. She's ready to tell other people that sex with women is better but she's not ready to be like, oh, admit it to herself.*

Both Sara's and Lydia's statements are revealing as they refuse fluidity and ambiguity of sexuality instead implying that Molly's behavior is a "lie," and a "pretending," or that Molly is just "tricking herself" into believing that she "can just do it with anyone" because "she's not ready to...admit to herself" that she is "just lesbian." These comments clearly show that it might

be easier to acknowledge the fluidity of sexuality intellectually than to actually apply such thinking to interpretations of someone's behavior. This indicates that students need additional experiences that can queer their understandings of sexuality and gender. And, *Rubyfruit Jungle* continued to challenge the students and produce resistance as it turned upside down commonsense understandings of normalcy.

Troubling Normal

Rubyfruit Jungle embraces queerness through its denial of conformity and breaking down of notions of normalcy. In *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Brown creates a "queer hybrid world" (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013), a borderland in which transgressions of gender and sexuality norms are at the same time normalized and powerful while heterosexuality and gender-normative behavior is presented as unfulfilling and boring. In fact, Molly's non-conformity saves her from the boredom, unhappiness and the secrecies/perversions of heterosexual life. Moreover, through Molly the hidden desires of those who conform to the outside world are revealed: cousin Leroy's sexual encounters with a much older gay man, the uptight chaplain-cheerleader Carolyn's infatuation with Molly, or her rich college roommate Faye's secret ventures to lesbian bars. What is more, it is through the other character's revelation of their secret desires that Molly's deviance increasingly becomes normalized.

In a memorable scene, Molly, upon her arrival in New York City, agrees to throw grapefruits (for money) at a naked man to arouse him sexually. In another scene, sexual fantasies become perversion. When 'straight' Polina and Molly first have sex, Molly is horrified to learn that Polina wants them to act out a fantasy in which they are two men having sex in a public restroom. Molly rejects Polina's desire to engage in such fantasizing during sex, saying:

> I just like to make love. It's the touching and the kissing and all that gets me turned on...Well, I do have one thing...when I make love to women I think of their genitals as a rubyfruit jungle...women are thick and rich and full of hidden treasures and besides that, they taste good. (p. 203)

Even the incest taboo is addressed when Alice, Polina's 16-year old daughter, confesses to Molly that she thinks that her mother wants to sleep with her, commenting that she would not be freaked out by this, "Incest doesn't seem like such a trauma to me" (p. 209).

By disrupting notions of normalcy, as in these scenes, the reader is encouraged to reject that a normal even exists. The reader must ask herself who is the one deviating from the norm? And, if so many people deviate from the norm at least secretly, what is the norm? This was no different in Sara's class as the following segment from a classroom discussion shows:

> Emily: *I feel like it's things that aren't considered normal and that it's all these different things that aren't officially acceptable. So, there's like this one like model of what everything is supposed to be and all these people have something different than that.*
>
> Sara: *Yeah, like, so it rears normal kind of on its head. Like here's normal. What's normal? What's supposed to be normal?* [looks questioningly at Emily]
>
> Emily: *Like heterosexual, safe age, non-fetish like, like vanilla.* [laughs] *You know, just like married*. [Sara nodding her head as Emily is speaking].
>
> Sara: *That sounds exciting* [with a very unexcited voice, laughs] *Right? So, it's like, same same. Right. Same age, and married, heterosexual, vanilla, consensual, non-fetishistic, non-fantasy based sexuality. That is normal.*
>
> Sandra: *It makes heterosexual sex so disgusting and boring.*
>
> Sara: *Every weird sexual thing, you could imagine. It started out with the grapefruit thing, right. Then it's in like everything that's on your don't do list is done. And then it looks so normal to be gay. Makes being gay not so bad. It's like every taboo in the entire universe, ooh, yukkie. And it's like Molly is so normal. She's the most normal.*
>
> (Observation 5/15/13)

As these examples from the class' engagement with *Rubyfruit Jungle* illustrate, this novel provides many opportunities for students to read queerly. However, since the reading was not framed by a more deliberate queer approach, the possibilities of the text to queer students' understandings of norm-disruptive sexualities, sex, and gender expressions were only touched upon but not fully explored. Students' readings of queer texts, as shown above, often support rather than disrupt normative assumptions and expectations in regards to sexuality and gender. In other words, students struggle with changing their hetero- and gender-normative frames of

reference. However, as the examples also show, there were moments in Sara's classroom when such shifting happened, even if momentarily and fleeting. It was in such queer moments that Sara and her students wrestled with notions of sexuality, gender and sex that troubled their thinking.

One of the dimensions of a queer literacies framework that could have been explored in greater depth when reading *Rubyfruit Jungle* is the dimension focusing on intersections of oppressive systems. Indeed, the novel invites an intersectional analysis as it addresses social issues on multiple axes: sexuality, gender, social class, and race. A Southern lesbian from a poor, working-class family into which she was adopted as a baby, Molly's story makes central the complexities of identities that elude neat answers to who one is. Most prominently, the narrative allows for a subversive exploration of the intersections of gender and sexuality. In Molly's narrative, gender transgressions align with issues of desire, making possible and leading into sexual transgressions. While transgressions are most explicit around sexuality and gender, they also occur in relation to social class. As a child from "The Hollows," growing up in poverty amidst a community where the lack of money means a lack of education, Molly is able to attend college and enter a professional field, film studies, that is traditionally reserved for men. In addition, Molly's racial identity remains ambiguous throughout the novel – at one point, she remarks, "I don't look like anyone in our house...They all have extra white skin and gray eyes" (p. 9) and when her cousin finds out that she is adopted, he says, "You don't look like any of us. ...You're the only one in the Hollow with black hair and brown eyes" (p. 35); later she muses "Since I don't know who my real folks are maybe they're colored" (p. 59). Therefore, the novel could provide for a rich exploration of the intersections of sexuality, gender, class and race. In Sara's classroom, some attention was paid to these themes; however, they were explored rather in isolation than looking at the intersections.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I examined how *Rubyfruit Jungle* invites a queer reading. Beyond the text's obvious focus on issues of sexuality and gender, it offers up an exploration of the subtext

through which a queer world is created in which non-conformity becomes a strength and position of power, something to be envied because it is interesting and fun whereas conformity weakens and diminishes the self. The value in using queer, counter-hegemonic and irreverent texts, such as *Rubyfruit Jungle*, with high school students is that in disrupting the usual reader expectations these texts trouble commonsense notions of identities and foreground how identities are discursively constructed and therefore can be altered through processes of resignification. In *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Molly's complete disregard for established gender and sexuality norms and expectations marks her acts as queer and transgressive as they trouble the binary categories that keep in place what Butler (1990/2006) calls the "heterosexual matrix" – the "hegemonic discursive/epistemic model" of "a grid" in which "a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) [] is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (p. 208). For Sara's students such disruptive thinking was unsettling and they at times rejected the imaginary possibilities that a "flipping of the narrative" opens up. This is especially captured by students' reactions to the novel, expressed during the interviews, who found it "weird," "unrealistic," "over the top" and "unbelievable." However, even if students resist anti-categorical queer expressions of sexuality and gender, reading a queer text requires them to try on this worldview, even if only for a moment, and, in so doing, this creates the possibility of returning to such a view. In Chapter 11, I explore how the class engaged with the novel *The Hours*, another text that presents a counternarrative, but that does so in a very different manner – in effect downplaying the significance of its characters' lesbian or gay sexual orientation.

CHAPTER 11

NOT NOTICING QUEERNESS: THE NORMALIZATION OF LGB EXPERIENCES

It's just a part of who they are but not a book about them being gay. They're just living their lives. – Sandra

The final book that the whole class read together was Michael Cunningham's (1998) Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Hours*. *The Hours* presents a re-writing of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* in which Cunningham draws together three narratives centered on three women of different generations whose lives are interconnected by Woolf's novel. One is Virginia Woolf who is writing Mrs. Dalloway; another is Laura Brown, a pregnant 1950s housewife in American suburbia who is reading Mrs. Dalloway; and the third is Clarissa Vaughn who is the living modern embodiment of Mrs. Dalloway in 1990s New York City. All of the characters appear to be trapped in largely unhappy lives characterized by unfulfilled desires and dispassionate relationships (Virginia, Laura, Clarissa), and/or by mental illness or disease (Virginia, Laura, Richard). Virginia Woolf is trapped in the rural countryside in an asexual relationship with her husband battling mental illness that finally drives her into suicide. Laura is trapped in 1950s suburbia, struggling with depression as well as the societal expectations of the time that only allow the gendered role of a loving mother and wife, roles that she feels she cannot fulfill. Clarissa is trapped in a dispassionate relationship with her long-term partner/wife Sally and her hopeless love for her gay best friend Richard with whom she had a brief affair as an 18-year old. Finally, Richard is literally trapped in his decrepit apartment, slowly succumbing to AIDS until he commits suicide in front of Clarissa's eyes.

Same-sex desire and sexuality enter the story in multiple, yet subtle, ways. There are same-sex kisses and unacknowledged desires in Virginia's and Laura's lives. One of the central characters is Clarissa, an upper class lesbian who has been living in a committed relationship with her 'wife' Sally for many years. Clarissa's best friend Richard is gay and dying of AIDS. And, Clarissa's daughter Julia is in a relationship with Mary, a radical feminist-queer butch lesbian.

Despite such centrality of same-sex desires and relationships, issues around homosexuality seem to be incidental in the novel. *The Hours* is written in a way that presents its characters as complex human beings whose identities do not revolve around their same-sex attractions. Rather than focusing on what same-sex sexuality, desire, and relationships mean for the various characters, Cunningham develops themes of failure and success; questioning of self, choices made, and crisis; happiness and depression; and suicides as the last way out for mentally and physically debilitating illnesses (allowing people to preserve their dignity). In her introduction to the novel Sara pointed this out to her students:

> *What's different about this book than any book you've read is, we went from hiding your sexuality to hating yourself because you're gay to being proud and everything is like I'm a proud girl. And now, it's like, alright, there's sexuality in it. It's part of the book. There's no secret code. You don't hate yourself. You're not gonna try and prove it's better. It's just a fluid, single part of their identity. It's not the big thing. Because now it's 1998, when he wrote it, and you don't have to make a big thing out of it.*
> (Observation 5/15/13)

Engaging with *The Hours*

Flipping the Narrative: Naturalizing Homosexuality

In fact, Cunningham seems to naturalize homosexuality as he flips the *Mrs. Dalloway* narrative. Unlike in the Woolf's original story in which Clarissa is married to Richard and her thoughts revolve around a kiss shared with Sally in her youth, in *The Hours* Clarissa is 'married' to Sally and her teenage summer affair with Richard was only a heterosexual phase. By flipping the narrative, Cunningham denaturalizes heterosexuality and makes a happy heterosexual life not become the endpoint to be achieved in one's life. Students recognized this shift in how sexuality-related issues were represented in the novel and several students explored this when we talked about the novel during the interviews:

> Stephanie: *When we were finally reading The Hours towards the end of the class, I was like, why are we reading this book. I wasn't even, there were so many moments when I wasn't even, what does this even have to do with gay and lesbian lit? And then, I was like, oh wait, she's gay, this character is supposed to be bi. But that was like, just so didn't occur to me. It so much didn't matter to me about the character, it was just part of who they were. It wasn't, it didn't seem like an issue, didn't distract me from who they were.* [Sandra nods her head in agreement]. *It was different for me.*

Rachel: *Yeah, it definitely, it almost was like I was confused why we read The Hours because we didn't talk about any of the characters sexuality really that much. But it was cool like they basically wrote the way, all the characters could have been bi or straight or gay. You couldn't really tell. Or you could make the point that any of them was gay, almost.*

Meryl: *It just sort of proves that it doesn't actually really matter and that it's not something that defines you.*

Sandra: *It was like exactly what she just said, it's just a part of who they are but not a book about them being gay. They're just living their lives.*

Stephanie: *Especially Clarissa.*

Casey: *The lady Clarissa. She had the most normal life by far. And I think in the other books that we've read being gay was such a struggle because they were set in the past. And it was such a struggle that it really transformed their lives. And in The Hours it's like all these ladies ... all these people are going absolutely nuts and they are like locked in their homes. And like Clarissa, she's married to a woman, but she's just out there buying flowers. She just has like the most normal, even societal, life.*

Sandra: *Yeah. She's living like the most normal life.*

Stephanie: *I really didn't, it's almost as if she choosing to marry Sally rather than Richard was to have a normal life. I totally didn't even question it.*

(Interview 5/29/13)

Here, the students picked up on how Cunningham makes same-sex desires and relationships a part of a person's life instead of depicting it as central to one's identity: "It's just a part of who they are ...They're just living their lives." Stephanie hints at how this shift allows readers to see the characters in their whole complexity because it "make[s] you view someone's full identity other than just looking at someone just for their sexuality." Or, as Meryl put it, "it's not something that defines you." Such initial analysis by students could be the starting point for in-depth discussions about identity and questions of essentialism that are central to reading queerly. In addition, queer readings present moments where readers' expectation about what is considered 'normal' are unraveled. Students found it striking that Clarissa as a lesbian was depicted as the one who seems "free" and "high spirited" whereas Laura, the straight housewife appears to be "trapped" and "unhappy." As Denise wrote in one of her journal entries:

> *It struck me how Clarissa and Laura differ so much. Clarissa seems free, high-spirited, and loves being out and about, interacting with the world. But Laura seems trapped, unhappy, and timid with her family. ...It is a little ironic that the two women in the book who are in heterosexual relationships are so unhappy, but the lesbian woman is happy, even while her best friend is dying*.

This flipping of the narrative where attributes like mental illness or simply unhappiness are not attached to someone who is in a same-sex relationship but in a heterosexual relationship, encourages reading queerly as it turns readers' assumptions upside down. Cunningham's description of Clarissa and Sally's relationship, likewise, lends itself to such a queer reading. Cunningham describes Clarissa as a "decent woman" and her same-sex relationship with Sally in terms of a "stable affectionate marriage," yet alludes to her unfulfilled desires stemming from her love for Richard:

> That's who I was. That's who I am – a decent woman with a good apartment with a stable affectionate marriage giving a party. Venture too far for love, she tells herself, and you renounce citizenship in the country you've made for yourself. You end up just sailing from port to port. Still, there is this sense of missed opportunity (Cunningham, p. 97).

Cunningham's description of Clarissa's and Sally's relationship as a "marriage" – an interesting choice of language at a time when same-sex marriages were not legalized anywhere in the world[38] - serves to normalize homosexuality. Accordingly, the students read Clarissa's choice to marry Sally and not Richard as wanting "to have a normal life" and viewed Clarissa and Sally's relationship as the "most normal life." This linking of the notion of normalcy with same-sex relationships is a paradox in a societal context in which homosexuality is still constructed as decidedly not normal but deviant. The use of paradoxical joinings of apparently self-contradictory concepts (in our example, same-sex marriage and normal) has been used by queer theorists to deconstruct commonsense thinking. Borrowing from Foucault, Sumara and Davis (1998) propose using the concept of *heterotopia* or what they call "heterotopic textual spaces" where

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[38] The Netherlands was the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage in 2001.

‘normal’ is interrogated and shown to be a construction; thus, making new interpretations possible. They explain these heterotopic spaces as:

> A set of relations where things not usually associated with one another are juxtaposed, allowing language to become more elastic, more able to collect new interpretations and announce new possibilities . . . heterotopias are critically hermeneutic spaces where ‘normal’ is shown to be a construction and, further, where this construction is rendered available for interrogation. (p. 199)

Considering the paradox of the construction of same-sex relationships as normal, it may be surprising that the students did not question this more. As Stephanie noted, “I totally didn't even question it.” This is unfortunate as Cunningham’s move to normalize homosexuality could have presented such a “heterotopic textual space” through which students could have further interrogated the social construction of normalcy related to issues of sexuality. During the interview the students took their analysis even further, offering another paradoxical reading of Clarissa as “a secretly closeted heterosexual”:

> Allison: *The heart relationship is with Richard.*
>
> Casey: *Sort of like a secret love affair. And it seems like perfectly normal.*
>
> Allison: *I think she's actually a secretly closeted heterosexual. ... I think she was really traumatized by her messed up relationship with Richard when they were younger. And that got her really confused. And then she met Sally and she was like, okay. But she still really wants Richard.*

Deconstructing Heteronormativity: Analysis of a Kiss

The student’s creation of the paradox of the “secretly closeted heterosexual” could have offered a starting point for a rich classroom conversation around heteronormativity and the naturalization of heterosexuality that is suspended in the novel. However, the students’ textual analysis occurred not in the context of a classroom conversation but during our final interviews. As Rachel remarked in reflection about the whole unit, “We didn't talk about any of the characters sexuality really that much.” This is surprising since the novel offers plenty of opportunities to critically deconstruct the representation of sexuality, especially since all of the main characters in *The Hours* are either explicitly lesbian or gay or they exhibit same-sex desires.

For example, Virginia Woolf shares a kiss with her sister Vanessa and in a twist of the plot of the original *Mrs. Dalloway* Clarissa shares a passionate kiss with her friend Sally (modeled after Vanessa) that continues to haunt her for the rest of her life. Laura Brown shares a kiss that is not quite a kiss with her neighbor Kitty, described in a scene that is rife with homoerotic undertones. Sara read this scene aloud in class, alongside a scene in which Laura thinks about Ray, Kitty's husband:

> Kitty snakes her arms around Laura's waist. Laura is flooded with feeling. Here, right here in her arms, are Kitty's fear and courage, Kitty's illness. Here are her breasts. Here is the stout, practical heart that beats beneath; here are the watery lights of her being – deep pink lights, red-gold lights, glittering, unsteady; lights that gather and disperse; here are the depths of Kitty, the heart beneath the heart; the untouchable essence that a man (Ray, of all people!) dreams of, yearns toward, searches for so desperately at night. Here it is, in daylight, in Laura's arms. ...Kitty nods against Laura's breasts. ...Kitty lifts her face, and their lips touch. They both know what they are doing. They rest their mouths, each on the other. They touch their lips together, but do not quite kiss. Kitty nods against Laura's breasts. The question has been silently asked and silently answered, it seems. They are both afflicted and blessed, full of shared secrets, striving every moment. They are each impersonating someone. They are weary and beleaguered; they have taken on such enormous work. It is Kitty who pulls away. "You're sweet," she says. Laura releases Kitty. She steps back. She has gone too far, they've both gone too far, but it is Kitty who's pulled away first. (Cunningham, pp. 109/110)

Compare this with Laura's description of Kitty's husband and how she imagines Kitty and Ray making love:

> Already, at thirty, [he] is beginning to demonstrate how heroic boys can, by infinitesimal degrees, for no visible reasons, metamorphose into middle-aged drubs. Ray is crew-cut, reliable, myopic; he is full of liquids. He sweats copiously. Small bubbles of clear spit form at the sides of his mouth whenever he speaks at length. Laura imagines (it's impossible not to) that when they make love he must spurt rivers, as opposed to her own husband's most burble. (Cunningham, p. 105)

Hearing these two scenes read aloud side by side, Laura's "disco ball feelings" (Sara) in the arms of another woman versus the disgusting image of a sweating man who "spurts rivers" while making love to his wife, emphasizes how heterosexuality may not be the ideal way of having a sexual relationship. Yet, when the class discussed these scenes, students had little insights to offer, simply stating that these scenes mean that Laura is "really a lesbian." Some of

the students, however, reflected on these scenes in depth in their journals. Lara, for example, insightfully wrote,

> *So the kiss is an emblem of their mutual experience of feeling obligated but melting at the seams – both have failed but are seeking comfort and forgiveness. In a way this secret love between them is a vision they haven't been able to explore because they have both been pressured into their heterosexual housewife roles. This kiss gives them a taste of the love they could have, the freedom they could have. ... It is interesting their mutual feminine experience brings them to accidentally kiss though they both know what they are doing. I think, though, the fact that Laura notes that it was Kitty who pulled away means Laura would have liked to explore what else the kiss could have meant. Not necessarily that she's a lesbian because the kiss wasn't described as romantic – it's just the first time she's really connected with a woman so deeply....Laura wants to go back to her routine of living in bed with her book but instead she throws away the cake – throws away her old life. Kitty serves as a wake-up call. Laura doesn't want to live this fake creepily seemingly perfect life and hate herself for the little flaws (crumbs in the icing) - she wants her own life.*

Here, Lara interprets the kiss between the two women as an act of possibility, "a vision" that "gives them a taste of the love they could have, the freedom they could have." For Lara, this kiss expresses a symbolic resistance to the obligations and pressures of "heterosexual housewife roles," allowing Laura and Kitty to step outside of the narratives that script their actions on a daily basis, even if only for a moment. Lara does not read the kiss as necessarily signifying lesbian romantic or sexual attraction but rather as expressing the emotional connection these two women are feeling in a moment of shared vulnerability and self-doubt.

Similarly, Denise also emphasized this moment as one of two women connecting through their shared experiences of being trapped in their housewife roles, writing in her journal,

> *Laura's reaction is a subtle hint that she may be lesbian. ...This moment could be seen as a lesbian moment, but also just a moment of two housewives, suffering the same 'housewife's blight' in silence, finally letting down their guard and connecting on a real level.*

Other students, in their journal reflections, placed their analysis of the kiss within the contexts of recognizing the oppressiveness of heterosexual life. Tucker, for example, wrote, "*Laura wants to escape from her life. As soon as Kitty leaves, she feels impulsive desires at escaping from her life as a housewife to a world where she feels she truly exists.*" Lori noted, "*Laura is clearly depressed. ...Laura feels as though she must play the part of mother and of wife because that is*

what is expected from her." And Brianna pondered, "*Laura has to order herself to maintain normalcy...Her resolve to love her family is the resolve to commit suicide. Is her family life suicide for her?*" These insightful students' analyses of the text illustrate how they applied their developing understanding about the oppressive forces of heteronormative demands to the reading of this text passage. Students began to grapple with how the scripts of heteronormativity (e.g., *playing* the part of mother and of wife) can trap people into unfulfilled lives and how what poses as normalcy is something to be constantly worked at (e.g., Laura has to *order* herself to *maintain* normalcy). This kind of interpretation lends itself to further queered readings with a focus on the performativity of gender and sexuality. Not all students, however, offered this nuanced reading of Laura. For Sandra, it was clear that "*Laura Brown is absolutely gay – she is not attracted to /resents her hubby, feels like she had to marry him, and is very attracted to Kitty.*" And, on a post-it note Lara later added these following thoughts to her journal:

> *Okay – after listening to today's discussion, I see that Laura is definitely lesbian – the disgusting descriptions of men's sweat, spit and streams and the most emotional journey of passion flowing through her just by hugging Kitty – snaking her arm around her waist*.

Could have juxtaposing the reading about Laura's encounter with Kitty alongside an excerpt from Butler's writings on performativity allowed students to dig even deeper in their deconstruction of these text passages? Explicitly introducing students to some of the central tenets of queer theorizing may contribute to richer explorations of text passages that challenge (hetero)normativity.

Wrestling with the Complexities of Love and Attraction: Analysis of Clarissa

That love is complex and can be at times unrelated to one's sexual orientation or choice of partner, or that people can love more than one person at the same time is a challenging thought in a society in which ideals of monogamous heterosexuality persist. In *The Hours*, Clarissa's thoughts and feelings for both Sally and Richard challenge this. In one of the scenes in the novel, Clarissa ponders the summer affair she had with Richard:

> It was the house and the weather – the ecstatic unreality of it all – that helped turn Richard's friendship into a more devouring kind of love...It was not betrayal, she had insisted; it was simply an expansion of the possible. ...it was 1965; love spent might simply engender more of the same. It seemed possible, at least. Why not have sex with everybody, as long as you wanted them and they wanted you?...How often since then has she wondered what might have happened if she'd tried to remain with him...It is impossible not to imagine that other future, that rejected future...She could, she thinks, have entered another world. ...Or then again maybe not, Clarissa tells herself. (Cunningham, pp. 96/97)

In their journals and in the classroom discussion, students reflected on Clarissa's love for Richard and her dispassionate relationship with Sally. Brianna, for example, noted how "*Clarissa has tenderness and disapproval towards her partner*" at the same time, and how the two women "*interact as strangers.*" Denise read their relationship as "missing something" and "lacking meaning":

> *They [Clarissa and Sally] seem to love each other a lot...but at the same time they seem to be missing something. Though they are 'always generous with kisses,' they seem they are lacking meaning....The kiss between Clarissa and Sally seems almost obligatory and friendly, lacking the feeling behind Clarissa and Richard's kiss.*

Rachel, likewise, noted the missing emotional connection between Clarissa and Sally:

> *They are not very lovey dovey. It's like they are just going through the motions. But they aren't mean or bad to each other either. ...Clarissa is a woman who has settled for 'decent'.*

This missing emotional connection between Clarissa and Sally coupled with Clarissa's longing for the love and passion she feels for Richard, led these students to question Clarissa's lesbian sexuality. At a time in the trimester when students had multiple opportunities to consider the fluidity and multiplicity of sexualities, students wrestled with these complexities; yet, easily categorized Clarissa as bisexual in their attempts to make sense of Clarissa's conflicting thoughts and feelings. In their journals, several students wrote about this:

> Denise: *I'm still thrown off by why they kissed so much if they are both gay* [comment by Sara: emotional love]. *I understand why they would have sex (because for them it seems it's more for physical pleasure) but kissing seems more emotional and reserved for people who are actually romantically connected. Are they both bisexual?* [written comment in the journal by Sara: this book explores the spectrum].
>
> Rachel*: I think Clarissa is bi because she is with Sally and even though they may not be in love anymore, they seem like they were at some time because they are still repeating*

the motions that people who really are in love do, like kissing and leaving notes and checking in with each other. However, she seems to have regrets about leaving Richard and I think she still loves him. She thinks about him a lot and reminisces about their love.

Sandra: *I feel like Clarissa and Virginia are both bisexual because they both definitely love the person they are with, but also want more (Clarissa wants Richard and Virginia writes her character to have a female lover).*

On the other hand, some students acknowledged the complexities of love, desire and sexuality. Lori, for example, notes about Clarissa's choice to live her life with Sally:

Clarissa is more grounded...She has learned that love is very complicated...The kiss she had with Richard was pretty passionate, but also kind of romantic. It is what she remembers as the defining moment of their relationship years later. But she knows that she kind of missed her chance with Richard because she didn't recognize that that moment wasn't going to lead to more.

Lara wrote:

Clarissa should be happy with the life she has made for herself. She shouldn't look too far for love because she'll lose the stability of the life she's built for herself and live alone hopping from place to place. She still regrets not taking that opportunity when she could have... "She realizes that that kiss [with Richard] was all the magic she was going to get from their relationship – they couldn't force themselves to love. They made love only as a kind act – not out of passion.

Here, both Lori and Lara recognize how complicated love is and how people make choices, in this case interpreting Clarissa's choice to be with Sally as an act of being grounded and choosing to build a stable life. Understanding sexuality as a complex phenomenon of emotional, romantic and sexual attractions, desires, fantasies and behaviors instead of the commonsense notions of the heterosexual/homosexual binary is one of the central tenets of queer thinking. As students tried to make sense of Clarissa's obsession with the kiss that she shared so long ago with Richard, they began to develop some understanding of such complexities.

Moreover, *The Hours* also offers opportunities to critically engage with what has been termed homonormativity, particularly through an analysis of Clarissa's life. While heteronormativity privileges heterosexuality and assumes it to be natural and normal, homonormativity refers to the "assimilation of heteronormative values" into lesbian and gay lives (van Eeden-Moorefield, Martell, Williams, & Preston, 2011) with the goal of normalizing these

lives. Such assimilationist tendencies include assumptions that all lesbian and gay people are "white, middle-class, gender normative, and increasingly in or desirous of loving, committed relationships" (Threlkeld, 2014, p. 225) or are 'just like heterosexual people' except for the gender of their choice of partner. In other words, homonormativity places certain lesbian and gay people into the fold of normalcy through processes that privilege acceptable expressions of homosexuality. For example, texts that represent lesbian and gay people in non-stereotypical ways or as "acting straight" (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2014) in an attempt to normalize homosexuality create homonormative images. In *The Hours*, Clarissa is depicted as a white, upper-class married woman with an apartment in New York City that could have been featured in a "Pottery Barn catalogue" (Sara). Not surprisingly, students found Clarissa to be "normal" and "assimilated," reading Clarissa as "more like a heterosexual lesbian" and interpreting her relationship with Sally as being "like a wife and husband relationship." However, Cunningham, at least briefly, juxtaposes Clarissa's assimilated life with more radical, unassimilated young queer ways of being. The first chapter of the novel includes a segment in which Clarissa ruminates about her daughter's partner:

> ...regretting the lovely little black dress she can't buy for her daughter because Julia is in thrall to a queer theorist and insists on T-shirts and combat boots. You respect Mary Krull, she really gives you no choice, living as she does on the verge of poverty, going to jail for her various causes, lecturing passionately at NYU about the sorry masquerade known as gender. You want to like her, you struggle to, but she is finally too despotic in her intellectual and moral intensity, her endless demonstration of cutting-edge, leather-jacketed righteousness. You know the mocks you, privately, for your comforts and your quaint (she must consider them quaint) notions about lesbian identity. You grow weary of being treated as the enemy simply because you are not young anymore; because you dress unexceptionally. (Cunningham, p. 23)

From a queer perspective, this brief text passage lends itself to a deconstructive reading. How do students understand Clarissa's reference to the "masquerade of gender"? How do they make meaning of the juxtaposition of the "queer theorist" with the "quaint" lesbian? What do Clarissa's words imply about differences of identifying as lesbian versus being queer? Questions such as these could have engaged students with queer critiques of gay and lesbian identities,

assimilation, and homonormativity. However, the brief exchange in the class around this passage went like this:

> Sara: *Who does her daughter hang out with? Throughout the day? Who does she spend all her time with?* [pause, silence]
>
> Denise: *Some person, um, kind of the hippie rock person. She likes to mock people who are normal.*
>
> Sara [laughs]: *Yes. Yes, Mary Krull. She is, she likes going to jail for her causes, for lecturing at NYU about the masquerade of gender. Who does she mock specifically, not just normal people? But*
>
> Denise: *Women wearing dresses or something.*
>
> Sara [laughs]: *Yes. And anyone who has, um,* [reads from book] *'quaint notions about lesbian identity.' So, like assimilated lesbians, she doesn't like. So her daughter spends her whole time with this radical, political, queer theorist who makes Clarissa feel like she is kind of a lame lesbian.*

With this, the brief exchange about this text passage ended in class. While Sara brought up the "masquerade of gender" and the juxtaposition of the "radical, political, queer theorist" versus the "assimilated...kind of lame lesbian," the class actually did not explore what this meant. A few days later the class returned to the descriptions of Clarissa and Mary in response to a journal writing prompt. Now, students read Mary as "strange," "anti-establishment," "loud," "political," and "anti-material" but also "condescending" and Sara added the word "butch." Clarissa, on the other hand, was described as "more like a heterosexual lesbian," who is in "like a wife and husband relationship," and "who doesn't really look that lesbian" to which Sara added "materialist" and being "a party thrower." It would have been interesting to explore more in-depth the assumptions underlying statements such as being "butch," "looking like a lesbian," or "being more like a heterosexual lesbian." In other words, what do we mean when we say things like that?

Learning about LGBTQ History: The Aids Pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s

In addition to offering rich opportunities for textual explorations, reading *The Hours* opens up a space to address one of the most important chapters of LGBTQ history – the AIDS

pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s. Richard, one of the main characters in *The Hours*, is dying from AIDS and the reader is confronted with descriptions that vividly describe how the disease ravages his body. Another character, who is not central to the novel, is able to live with AIDS due to new medications. That this is a topic worth addressing in a class focused on gay and lesbian issues became apparent when Sara asked the class how much they knew about the AIDS crisis, "*So we're just gonna do like a push-pause historical check- in. How many people know a pretty decent amount about the AIDS crisis in the 1990s? Like where did you learn in? What do you know?"* The response was overwhelming silence! Only one student offered a personal connection because her father worked as a nurse in San Francisco in the 1980s but even she knew only that "*there was, not everyone but, a ton of people who had AIDS and were dying*." That students have an interest in learning such historical knowledge was powerfully demonstrated when into this silence one of the students explicitly asked, "*Could we learn some?*" (Observation 5/17/13)

Sara responded by providing some information in the form of a brief mini lecture, but she also engaged her class with the topic by viewing with them the 2011 documentary *We Were Here*. As Sara told the class, "*It's just a huge part of gay history. ...Pretty much any gay man who lived in the city, in New York City, in San Francisco, in L.A., like from 1980 to 1990 literally lived through what the people in the movie are talking about.*" (Observation 6/11/13). This film chronicles through eyewitness accounts how the AIDS pandemic impacted the gay community in San Francisco from its arrival in the 1980s to the mid-1990s. The stories of five interviewees who lived through the disease's most destructive years alternate with archival footage and photographs to provide a moving picture of the devastation that AIDS incurred particularly on the Castro neighborhood in San Francisco while also showing the perseverance and support that arose from within the gay and lesbian community. While the class did not discuss the film in any depth and students' reactions only reflected their emotional response to the film which they found "sad" and "difficult to process" because the film "goes into the heart and the soul of people who've lived through tragedy," (Observation 6/11/13), watching this documentary expanded students'

knowledge of important ‘gay’ history; knowledge that was nearly non-existent before. In addition, even though not connected to the reading of *The Hours* but adding to the students’ developing knowledge about relevant ‘gay’ history, the class watched the 2008 award-winning biographical film *Milk* about gay rights activist Harvey Milk who was the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California, as a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. As these examples show, even though Sara’s class is a literature class, students need to and want to learn about LGBTQ history. Learning about Harvey Milk and learning about the AIDS pandemic accomplished this during the unit on *The Hours* (for a further discussion of the importance of integrating lessons on LGBTQ history into the curriculum see the next chapter).

Chapter Summary

The examples from the students’ engagement in this chapter illustrate that reading a queer-themed text opens up spaces for reading queerly as students engage with queer-friendly counternarratives and explore how this may shift their understandings of sexuality, sex, and gender. However, while queer moments can and do occur naturally, they need to be fostered so that students can expand their thinking. Sometimes such queer moments can remain hidden within classroom contexts as when students wrestle with the complexities of sexuality, sex and gender in written assignments, such as the journal responses they produced during the unit on *The Hours*. If their written texts then do not become texts for classroom conversations, the power of such moments may be lost. Embedding the reading of LGBTQ-themed texts in a queer literacies framework can support more explicit attention to the possibilities of texts or even text passages that encourage reading queerly. It can guide teachers’ questioning practices to include those questions that push students to engage more in depth with issues around sexuality, sex and gender and their representations in texts. In Chapter 12, I will turn from a discussion of how students engaged with the curriculum through an analysis that specifically focused on each of the units to an analysis of how students reflected on the class as a whole.

CHAPTER 12

REFLECTING ON THE CLASS: BEYOND A LITERATURE CLASS

In the previous chapters, I analyzed and discussed how students engaged with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum through their in-class discussions, journal entries, and projects, and how Sara, the teacher, facilitated such engagement. These chapters demonstrate how the multiple dimensions of a queer literacies approach that I proposed as my theoretical framework surfaced through queer moments in classroom conversations and students' writings and projects. In this chapter, I want to provide space for students' voices and how they reflected on the class, their learning, and Sara's teaching. I believe that it is important to validate how students' experienced the class through their own words. What emerged for me as I read and re-read the transcripts of the student interviews and read these against the students' responses in the two questionnaires is that it matters more how we read than what read, and that this Gay and Lesbian Literature class is so much more than just a literature class.

Experiencing Excitement: It Matters More How We Read Than What We Read!

"SO GREAT. SUPER GR88 WOOO!" – Casey

Sara organized her curriculum around five focal novels, some of which appear to be great choices for a class focused on gay and lesbian literature and others where I originally questioned how interesting or engaging these texts would be for students. In my researcher journal, I jotted down my initial reactions especially to two of the novels, *A Lost Lady* and *The Hours*, expressing my skepticism about the use of these particular books in the course. After all, *A Lost Lady* does not seem to belong in a gay and lesbian literature class because it does not have any explicit gay or lesbian content; instead, a queer reading of this novel relies on the deconstruction of a lesbian subtext that some might call dubious. *The Hours*, on the other hand, while having many lesbian and gay characters and themes and despite being written in the late 1990s seems far removed from students' lived experiences because it tells the stories of three middle-aged women who struggle with depression and middle-life crisis. Moreover, at first glance, both books appear to be

slow reads, not driven by action but rather slowly developing their narratives and relying on the authors' use of poetic language and symbolism to convey their layered meanings. What could these books offer students who elect this class because they want to read gay and lesbian literature? What could these books teach students about LGBTQ issues? Would these books offer opportunities for queer readings?

The answers to these questions do not lie in the books but in the context in which the reading of these books occurred. While students' responses to the books were mixed, with some of the students finding them boring while others enjoyed reading them, students absolutely loved the class and found it to be "very interesting," "amazing," "wonderful," "awesome," and "super great" as the following excerpts from the end-of-the trimester questionnaires show:

Lori: *Great! I felt like it was an extension of GSA with different members. I love it!*

Sandra: *Awesome! It was so fun, for one thing, and I just love how much more knowledgeable I am about LGBT issues and how to read between the lines.*

Lydia: *This class was awesome.*

Allison: *WONDERFUL - I loved it.*

Casey: *SO GREAT. SUPER GR88 WOOO! But seriously, I loved it. Everyone was so open about their thoughts/nonjudgmental.*

Mara: *AWESOME*

Jenna: *Amazing. Everyone needs a class like this.*

Brianna: *It was great. I loved it! Such a positive experience that I'm glad I had the opportunity to have.*

Rachel: *I liked this class a lot, but didn't like the books as much.*

Dominik: *This class has been an absolutely phenomenal experience!*

What contributed to such enthusiastic responses to this literature class? For the students, what mattered most was the learning that occurred in the spaces that the readings of the novels opened up. In other words, it was the learning context in which the readings of the focal novels

was embedded that contributed the most to students' learning. What emerged from the interviews with the students and their responses to the questions related to students' learning in the class[39] are the following themes: students appreciated the open, safe and respectful classroom environment; students felt they moved from discomfort to feeling more confident related to LGBTQ issues as they moved from ignorance to knowledge; students are eager to learn more especially about LGBTQ history and transgender experiences; students felt empowered to become supportive advocates for LGBTQ people instead of remaining passive bystanders; and they recognized the beneficial effects the course has on the school climate.

Experiencing Openness and a Safe and Respectful Classroom Environment

"I know that at least in this class I can say something.
It'll be, you know, it'll be important and it will be my own opinion and people will respect that."
– Meryl

When teaching a curriculum through which students explore difficult, complex and potentially contentious social issues, certain teacher qualities can provide for more productive student engagement. I therefore asked Sara about her strengths as a teacher, and Sara responded as follows:

> *My strength would be, I'm really comfortable talking to people. Very few things make me nervous or uncomfortable. But that I have really clear lines that I would never cross. I think teenagers are like wolves. They can sniff out like fear and they can sniff out discomfort and, you know, like they just know. And so, they know they can trust me and they know they can be open and that they can ask anything and then we can talk about*

---

[39] What are the most important new understandings that you are taking away from this class? What did you learn about LGBTQ topics/issues and LGBTQ people? Which learning experiences/assignments/activities were the most powerful for you? Why? Has taking this class changed how you think about gender and sexuality in general? Related to your own person? If so, how? If someone asked you why a course such as this one should be offered at a high school, what would you? (questions from the end-of-the semester questionnaire)

anything. But we won't really cross the line. And that it's gonna be safe and they'll be respected and that there's like a purpose.
(Interview 2/14/11)

While many teachers draw a strict boundary between their public and private lives, as the examples from previous chapters show, Sara is very open and willing to share her personal life experiences with her students. And while she is clear about having boundaries that she would not cross, she emphasized that "very few things make [her] nervous or uncomfortable." For Sara being comfortable talking with people and being open is important for establishing trust so that students feel safe to "be open" and "ask anything." Students overwhelmingly appreciated Sara's openness about her own life and life experiences, feeling that this also allowed them to make personal connections and to open up about themselves as well. As Sara incorporated her own experiences into this class, this opened up space for the students to do the same, especially since Sara explicitly invited students to make connections to their own lives. In addition, students welcomed Sara's knowledge and that she was able relate to the course content in a personal way because she "know[s] more about it and actually go[es] through different things" which allowed them to "relate better" and ask "more questions and get really real answers." The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate this:

Lara: *I think that she, um, is able to talk about her own experiences too. Which is really cool. Um, she allows us, at least me, to feel better about like talking about my own self. You know. Um, and she draws, and she also says like, she kind of pauses on the book and she like says, well how does this happen in your life? So, I like that part. You know. Um, just like applications in your life I guess, you know. Yeah. I like that.... Um, just opening up can be a little scary. But I think that she invites it a lot. You know, she opens herself up and then she like says what about you. And I like that. More of a less formal conversation. You know. It's cool.*

Meryl: *She relates [the book] to her life and she relates it to our lives. I think it's really good because we can actually think about our experiences and connect them to the novels. And it's just really cool because I've never had an English class like that before.*

Lydia: *She's so open. It's so great. I'm like, I don't know, she really she said this one thing one day in the class and I still remember it, where she said, you know, I have to think that the students that I have are actually people and they need to know that I'm a person. And so she does a good job incorporating her life into the class.... It actually gives us like background conversations. Which is really nice. I think one of the things that was great about Ms. BJ was we could really ask any question and she'd be like, well, let me tell you*

about how this has affected my life. ... I think having her, you know, know more about it and actually go through different things made it so that we could relate better and that we could ask more questions and get really real answers.

Moreover, students felt that Sara was able to create a safe classroom environment in which students felt respected and able to voice their opinions without having to worry about what other people would think. Part of this was attributed to sharing the classroom with likeminded people, but students also commented on Sara's teaching style which invited open discussions in which students felt they could freely share their thoughts and opinions without fear of being silenced:

> Meryl: *The main thing is, I guess, that I just feel a lot more comfortable talking about things. I used to be afraid that if I said something, I would offend somebody. But now I know that at least in this class I can say something. It'll be, you know, it'll be important and it will be my own opinion and people will respect that.*
>
> Lori: *I mean I've always been comfortable talking about it. So, but I think being in a room full of people who all want to be here and want to take the class, it kind of makes you kind of, I don't know, it kind of makes you feel comfortable saying anything you want. 'cause I've always been comfortable talking about it but what I was uncomfortable with was if I didn't know what the other person would think and what they would think of me or about the issue. But since everybody wanted to talk about it I felt like I didn't have to worry about that.*
>
> Lara: *Yeah. I love that she, I don't know, she opens it up to discussion in a way that isn't too scary.* [laughs] *Um, I don't know, like sometimes people are like intimating, you know, in the way that they like, so, what do you think, huh, huh?? You know. I think that she's like, uh, let's just like take things slow, you know, and she lets it kind of flow better I guess than some other teachers.*
>
> Sandra: *You can just say like anything and it's like fine. She just makes it such a comfortable environment. And I feel like our conversations are not like her dominating or lecturing on anything. She's sort of the mediator and really lets you go with whatever kind of idea you have.*

In her thesis, Sara expressed that "the most beneficial aspects of the course" might be the "personal development" of students as a result of their participation in the course (p. 26). She hoped that the course would challenge students' misconceptions and spark new thinking after reading and writing critically about issues pertaining to lesbian, gay, and bisexual lives, reexamining beliefs and assumptions, and integrating issues from the course texts and topics into the context of students' own life experiences (at that point she had not yet included transgender

experiences in the curriculum). The following reflections on the course, which students shared with me during the interviews, illustrate how the safe classroom environment that Sara was able to create as well as her own openness and willingness to relate the issues raised by the course texts to her personal experiences allowed students to explore LGBTQ issues without fear. As a result, students moved from discomfort to confidence and ignorance to knowledge, allowing them to develop more agency as supportive advocates for LGBTQ people.

Moving from Discomfort to Confidence and Ignorance to Knowledge

"Sometimes I feel like, yeah, I'm totally supportive but I don't really know what I'm supporting. [laughs] *I'm just like, go!"* - Casey

Even though queer education scholars trouble the notion of teaching *about* LGBTQ topics, advocating instead for an *unlearning* of existing, harmful knowledges (i.e., Kumashiro, 2000, 2002), students felt strongly about their own and other's lack of knowledge related to LGBTQ issues and the ensuing discomfort they initially felt when talking about these issues because of this. While many students responded on the initial questionnaire that I gave them at the beginning of the trimester that they felt very or at least somewhat familiar and comfortable with LGBT topics, what they said in the interviews and the final questionnaire provides a more nuanced picture. Here many students expressed that before taking the class they felt "embarrassed," "afraid to say something incorrect" or feared that something said could be understood as "offensive." As Sandra said, "You didn't want to say the wrong thing." However, as students learned the language and became more and more exposed to the stories and experiences of LGBTQ people, they felt that they became more able to verbalize thoughts and more confident to ask questions related to LGBTQ issues:

> Denise*: I'm totally supportive of gay rights and all that, you know. ... Before I was just like, I would feel like I would say something offensive or say something incorrect because I don't know as much about all the different types of sexuality, but now I think I am more confident in what I'm saying. The whole acronym that we learned, LGBTQ whatever, in the beginning of the class, I was like a little unsure about what all that meant. And kind of for some reason, I was still a little uncomfortable talking about it or like being, I guess like, I didn't know anybody was like transgender. I was like a tiny bit uncomfortable*

about it and I wrote about how I wanted to be 100% comfortable talking about it. And I think I'm a lot more than I was before. .... I'm more comfortable with myself being uncomfortable about it but I've also grown to be more comfortable. So that was the one goal that I had where made progress.

Hannah: *I feel like I'm more comfortable asking questions and just be more open about different sexualities. So before, I think I wouldn't ask certain questions. Now I think I have the courage to and not feel embarrassed.*

Emily*: I think like also sometimes people if they don't know about a topic, like they don't know about LGBT issues, they're like afraid to ask about it because they don't want to be offensive. Which makes sense but then it's also not good 'cause you can't actually talk about anything if people are just gonna stay in the same mindset they know. So I really believe through this class people can ask questions about things that they don't understand really, like they want to know more about without like worrying about it. Like without having to ask someone and, I don't know, have it be like a potentially offensive situation or something. But like they're genuinely just curious.*

Indeed, curiosity coupled with lack of knowledge was a common feeling expressed by almost all of the students, regardless of their level of comfort related to LGBTQ topics. Casey, who expressed that she felt very comfortable because "all my mom's friends were gay growing up [and] my aunts are gay, so actually gay relationships would never make me uncomfortable, they were like supernormal for me," nevertheless felt discomfort because of her perceived lack of knowledge that made her feel she could not join in conversations because she did not know the terminology or the historical context:

Casey: *Sometimes it would make me uncomfortable talking to people who had taken classes like this or majored in it and they would throw around all these terms. And I would be like, I don't know what you're talking about*. [laughs] *So, I think taking this class and sort of learning the terminology and learning what people are actually talking about and learning the history, I feel like*

Allison [interjecting]: *I can have more intelligent conversations.*

Casey: *Yeah! Like I'm more comfortable talking to people that are like super into it now. Because sometimes I feel like, yeah, I'm totally supportive but I don't really know what I'm supporting.* [laughs] *I'm just like, go!*

Casey attributed her increased comfort in talking about LGBTQ topics to her increased knowledge. But even students who felt they knew a lot about LGBTQ topics acknowledged that the class increased their knowledge and in turn made them feel much more comfortable talking

about these topics. For example, Meryl, a long-time member of the school's Gay-Straight-Alliance, reflected on this:

> *Before I took this class I thought I knew everything that I had to about the LGBT community. But I've learned so much in this class and I feel a lot more comfortable talking about things now. So, I think that kind of happens to everybody too. 'cause, I've been in the GSA at the school since my sophomore year. And that's really cool. But this class, you just sort of talk about the issues a lot. Because in the GSA we usually just start talking about everything and anything but here it's just based on those issues. So I've learned a lot more.*

As we can see from these excerpts, developing knowledge was an important area of learning in this class and as the following examples will show it was especially important for students to learn about LGBTQ history and transgender experiences.

Learning about LGBTQ History

"I guess an interesting lesson was strangely how much we don't know. Education, I guess, in general doesn't teach us about these things."
– Brianna

That most students lack any knowledge about LGBTQ history might not be surprising since the content for classes on United States history of the twentieth century rarely if ever includes mention of any events related to LGBTQ people (e.g., the gay and lesbian liberation) or excludes any references to the sexuality of historically important people (e.g., Bayard Rustin, a gay African American civil rights leader who played a major role in organizing the 1963 March on Washington). However, it was surprising that students did not even have sufficient knowledge about important events related to LGBTQ history, such as the Stonewall Uprising or the AIDS pandemic (as discussed in Chapter 11). Brianna, one of the students with lesbian mothers, remarked during the interview how eye-opening it was for her to learn how little her peers know about LGBTQ history since it is part of the civil rights struggle in the United States. As someone who has learned about events like the Stonewall Riots from her parents, she felt both "surprised" and "sad" that her peers did not know anything about this important historical event:

> *I guess an interesting lesson was strangely how much we don't know. Education, I guess, in general doesn't teach us about these things. ... I was kind of surprised when Ms. BJ asked who knows about the Stonewall Riots and kind of nobody did. I guess I had kind of*

> *assumed people would because, well, I have two moms and they told me about them when I was a kid. It was just kind of eye-opening for me, I guess, knowing because it's really kind of a big thing. I guess it's kind of like people not knowing about Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement. It's kind of like that thing. And I was just like really sad.*

Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) have noted that students "often lack sufficient historical knowledge to make sense of the maintenance and reproduction of oppression in contemporary life" and therefore advocate for including in the curriculum "historical knowledge and awareness of the legacies in which oppression is rooted" (preface xvii). They stress the importance of integrating historical knowledge into anti-oppression curricula so that students can understand the historical roots of oppressive systems. Bell (2007), likewise, argues for the "value of history for discerning patterns, often invisible in daily life, that reflect systemic aspects of oppression as it functions in different periods and contexts" (p. 1). One of the dimensions of the queer literacies framework concerns anti-oppression work and engaging students with learning how homophobia, heterosexism, cissexism, and genderism function jointly as systems of oppression. As the authors above emphasize, teaching from an anti-oppressive framework requires teaching in ways that students can develop an understanding of the historical roots and patterns of oppressive systems. Teaching about historical knowledge therefore needs to become an integral element of any class that addresses social issues, even literature classes, especially when doing so through an anti-oppression framework.

In the Gay and Lesbian Literature class the historical organization of the curriculum around the focal novels that span publications from 1920-1990, teaching about historical knowledge quite naturally found its way into the curriculum. As Dominik said,

> *I really liked the way she* [the teacher] *structured the course in that way to like see how it's changed over the years. 'Cause I could connect it to like the social context of those years, too.*

Sara consistently integrated current and historical LGBTQ topics into her curriculum throughout the course. In this way, the Gay and Lesbian Literature class moved beyond being just a literature class and became much more interdisciplinary. Not only did Sara provide mini-lectures on

historical and current topics, but students also watched documentaries, such as *For the Bible tells me so*[40], *We were here*[41] and *Milk*[42], and read supplemental texts, such as *The Radicalesbians Manifesto*[43] that provided them with a historical context for understanding and talking about LGBTQ issues. This is even more important since in contemporary United States society LGBTQ topics can be considered hot topics that are often front and center in the media as laws and legislation concerning LGBT people and issues are constantly being debated and change. Such current debates and legislative changes found their way into the Gay and Lesbian Literature classroom and provided students with opportunities to explore current issues related to LGBTQ people beyond what students might gather from the media. As Lara said,

> *As a teenager I think that you're exposed to it anyway but given the background information, um, helps you understand it more clearly. Understand the history of it. Versus if you don't have it, then you're just gonna go by the media and the media gives like just a surface level, you know.* (Interview 5/20/13)

For example, during the trimester when I observed the class, the Supreme Court was considering the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) on the federal level and Proposition 8 in California. Sara devoted one class session to introduce her students to these two court cases, outlining for them some of the possible outcomes based on several graphics that were featured in the New York Times[44]. At the time there was considerable news coverage of the Supreme Court hearings on these two cases but students had little or no knowledge about the

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[40] This 2007 documentary tells the stories of five Christian families in the United States who have a gay or lesbian child, including that of former House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt and the parents of the first openly gay elected Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson. Besides the personal stories of these families around coming to terms with their child's homosexuality, the film addresses how the religious right has used its interpretation of the Bible to stigmatize the gay and lesbian community and offers different interpretations of biblical scripture in regards to homosexuality.
[41] This 2011 documentary chronicles through eyewitness accounts and archival footage how the AIDS epidemic impacted the gay community in San Francisco.
[42] This is a 2008 award-winning biographical film about gay rights activist Harvey Milk.
[43] For the full text see: http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/wlm/womid/
[44] http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/03/24/us/how-the-court-could-rule-on-same-sex-marriage.html?smid=fb-share&_r=1&

complexities of the underlying issues and what different outcomes of the Supreme Court decision might mean for the gay and lesbian community. Students had many questions and their lively engagement during this class session speaks to their interest in the matter.

At the end of the trimester, many of the students commented on how important and often eye-opening learning about the historical context and contemporary LGBT issues was for them and how it made the class not only "really educational" but also "most interesting" for them because it was so "relevant":

> Brianna: *Seeing the whole history, back from like A Lost Lady, 1920s or something ... a long while ago to now. That was actually really educational. Especially living around here, you know, like Williamstown bubble* [makes equal sign with hands], *the River Valley is a bubble. Kind of seeing the history and how society dealt with gay and lesbian, and more recently transgender issues was really eye-opening.*
>
> Mara: *I mean the history of LGBTQ issues is something I didn't know a lot about. Especially watching Milk and all of that. ... Yeah, that was pretty eye-opening, yeah.*
>
> Hannah: *It's really relevant to what is happening now.*
>
> Denise: *I think it's the most relevant English class that I have taken. ...The gay rights movement is way more recent and actually still going on and there's a lot of things that I didn't know that I should know for living in this time period. So it's like the most relevant and therefore the most interesting English class that I have taken.*

As these excerpts from the interviews show, students felt that the class was not just interesting but that it was "the most relevant" because it connects directly to what is "going on" right now related to LGBTQ rights.

Learning about Transgender Experiences

"I have not found a transgender book that is a great work of literature
that meets the criteria for public schools.
I'm waiting for that book.
I'm waiting and eagerly looking for that book that is a high quality book."
– Sara

Another important area of learning concerns transgender people and their experiences. Since transgender experiences are even more erased from the curriculum than lesbian and gay experiences, students felt the least knowledgeable and familiar here. Some might argue that transgender experiences are not really part of most students' experiences. However, that was not

true for the students in the class that I observed. Several students had family members or friends who had transitioned or were in the process of transitioning from one gender to another. Before one of the class sessions, one of the students asked Sara for help because her friend who had just come out as transgender needed support because of family problems. Another student brought up that she has a transgender cousin and how shocked she was as a child when the person who she knew as a woman one day appeared as a man in her house. Yet, she never dared to actually talk with her cousin about these changes, having no courage to ask him questions. Another student remembered how the community at her old school failed to be supportive of a transitioning student, her friend, lacking the language and not even knowing which pronoun would be appropriate to use. In addition, learning about transgender experiences is also very relevant to students because it connects directly to current issues within the students' communities. During the semester when I observed the class, a huge debate erupted at Smith College in Northampton on the issue of denying admittance to a male-to-female transgender student whose legal documents still showed her to be male. At the high school, important changes were in the making as the school was working toward making bathrooms and locker rooms trans-friendly, possibly because a transgender student would be moving up from the middle to the high school the upcoming academic year. As these experiences show, transgender experiences and issues are part of students' lives; yet, even within the context of an LGBTQ-themed curriculum, they often remain silenced and continue to be erased. Going into the class, I felt concerned that this might also apply to a class titled Gay and Lesbian Literature. In my researcher journal I jotted down, will we talk about any transgender issues? And, yes, the class did.

Sara and I talked about the challenges of integrating transgender content into the curriculum. Sara's response to my question why the course is called Gay and Lesbian Literature and not LGBT Literature illuminates how the course title was chosen initially because of fear of backlash and has stayed the same even though Sara has integrated content related to transgender issues since 2003:

> *We just called it that in 2000 because then it was the first one in the country. Actually first we called it Gender in Literature because we were afraid to call it Gay and Lesbian Lit. And then, um, anyway, I think the title, I think it could use a title change. But I don't want to change it until I really, I mean I could change it to LGBT literature 'cause it is definitely, being there's enough 'T' it could work. Yeah.* (Interview 6/17/13)

When I asked Sara whether or not she had ever considered including a transgender-themed novel as a focal text, she affirmed this, saying that students who complete Advanced Placement projects can choose to read a transgender-themed text; however that she has not found a novel that would meet her criteria for high-quality literature as well having a "good educational impact" for the whole class to read:

> Sara: *Yeah. I actually looked and spent a lot of time trying to do it. And Stone Butch Blues was, I couldn't, that was my favorite book in the books I read and people have done it as an AP book. And the same with Middlesex. They've done Middlesex and Stone Butch Blues.*
>
> Kirsten: *But these are all AP books, right. So only some kids read them.*
>
> Sara*: I have not found a transgender book that is a great work of literature that meets the criteria for public schools. ...I'm waiting for that book. I'm waiting and eagerly looking for that book that is a high quality book. 'cause I don't just want it to be any book about a transgender person. I want it to be, I want it to like really be, I want it to work educationally. I want it to have a good educational impact*. (Interview 6/17/2013)

In addition, Sara pointed out how many transgender-themed texts feel very brutal, showing the horrors of living as a transgender person instead of providing information and positive imagery for transgender youth. Referring to the novel *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg, 1993), Sara reflected, "*The portrayal is so outdated. And it's brutal. ...it would be better to provide information and positive imagery*." So, in order to include content related to transgender issues in the curriculum, Sara relies on films and articles that can vary from trimester to trimester. During the trimester when I observed the class the students watched the film *Two Spirits* (Nibley, Martin, & Mitchell, 2009) that chronicles the life and death of Fred Martinez who was brutally murdered at age 16 for being a *nádleehí*, a male-bodied person with a feminine nature, a special gift according to his ancient Navajo culture. The film demonstrates how Native American people are revitalizing two-spirit traditions, once again claiming their rightful place within their tribal

communities. Through this film students learned that some cultures do not view gender as a binary of female and male but acknowledge multiple non-binary genders that integrate aspects of both femininity and masculinity. During other trimesters students watched the French movie *Tomboy* (Sciamma & Héran, 2011) about a 10-year old trans boy. Students also read two articles that focus on queer and transgender issues[45]. Since talking about transgender issues is still such a novelty for most people, Sara invited her students to ask all the questions they might have as they engaged with these texts: "*You should ask whatever questions you have today because this is like the one issue where people are like, wait. 'cause it merges sexuality and gender identity.*" (Observation 6/18/13)

Not surprisingly, students showed the most interest in learning about the details of the transitioning process, especially related to sex-reassignment surgery. Sara was very aware of this, saying in the interview,

> *The article* [Male to female/Female to male, see footnote 7] ... *is super detailed in the nitty-gritty. And that's what people want to know. They really do at this point. They want to know how much does it cost, what do you do, why do people do it, is it genetic.*

This focus on the transgender body and the physical aspects of the transitioning process has been critiqued by many transgender activists who condemn this approach to talking about trans issues as objectifying and reductionist. Most recently, Laverne Cox in a reply to invasive questions around the body and surgery asked by Katie Couric in an interview said[46],

> *I do feel there is a preoccupation with that. The preoccupation with transition and surgery objectifies trans people. And then we don't get to really deal with the real lived experiences. The reality of trans people's lives is that so often we are targets of violence. We experience discrimination disproportionately to the rest of the community. Our unemployment rate is twice the national average; if you are a trans person of color, that*

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[45] Generation LGBTQIA by Michael Schulman, New York Times, 2013; Male to female/Female to male by Sunshine Dewitt, Daily Hampshire Gazette, 2003

[46] http://www.salon.com/2014/01/07/laverne_cox_artfully_shuts_down_Lori_courics_invasive_questions_about_transgender_people/

rate is four times the national average. The homicide rate is highest among trans women. If we focus on transition, we don't actually get to talk about those things.

So, while transgender issues found their way into the curriculum, they sometimes did so in troubling ways and they did not encourage students to learn about transgender experiences through an anti-oppression perspective. However, Sara continues to look for ways to include these issues in sensitive ways. During the spring trimester 2014, for example, she invited a panel of four trans college students to speak with her class, and the students watched the two films "But I'm A Girl" and "Tomboy" as well as Laverne Cox's commencement speech at Hampshire College. Sara wrote to me in an email, "*Rather than it being peripheral, trans issues are a good 2+ weeks of the course now, and also woven throughout.*" As is her custom, Sara is keeping up to date on emerging literature, for example, reading Janet Mock's (2014) autobiographical novel *Redefining Realness* and Jennifer Finney Boylan's (2013) book *Stuck in the Middle With You: Parenthood in Three Genders*, of which students will read excerpts in coming trimesters. These curriculum changes will be reflected in the new course title "LGBTQ Literature," which is anticipated to happen for the academic year starting in 2015. Furthermore, Sara is actively involved at her high school in "achieving gender-neutral/unisex bathrooms at WRHS (which will be completed this year)" (Personal correspondence, 9/3/14). All of this will surely contribute to students learning about transgender experiences in more nuanced ways.

In addition to what Sara brings into the classroom, transgender issues found their way into the curriculum sideways through what students brought in. For example, when Emily presented her Gay Notions project she introduced the class to a news article about a fraternity at Emerson College who helped to raise funds for the transitioning of one of their transgender fraternity[47]. Other students as well looked at transgender representations in the media as part of

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[47] http://abcnews.go.com/Health/college-fraternity-helps-transgender-brother-pay-sex-change/story?id=18611183

the *Gay Notions* project (e.g., see Chapter 8 for a discussion of "Him" – the gender ambiguous devil in the cartoon *PowerPuff Girls*).

As these examples show, learning about transgender experiences is relevant and important for students. Unfortunately, however, most students have little to no knowledge about trans issues. The Gay and Lesbian Literature class, while still focused on lesbian and gay topics, at least provided some opportunities for students to learn more. Mara, for example, noted:

> *I feel pretty comfortable talking about gay and lesbian issues but I didn't know a lot about transgender perspectives. None of the books really dealt with it but we did talk about it some. And I definitely feel that I know more now than I when I started the class.*

There are a lot of misconceptions and misunderstandings about transgender people and trans experiences. Allowing students to ask questions "whatever questions they have" may give them a way to start the conversation but it raises questions about how to protect transgender students or those who are questioning their gender from troubling and harmful questions or responses. The question becomes how can transgender issues be discussed with students without falling into the trap of othering and exoticizing?

Gaining a Fuller Understanding of the Complexities around Sexuality, Sex and Gender

> *"I feel like this class should be required for everyone to take because what it really does, it makes you view someone's full identity other than just looking at someone just for their sexuality."*
> – Stephanie

One way to minimize an othering might be to provide students in general with opportunities that allow them to gain a deeper and fuller understanding of the complexities around gender, sex and sexuality. The deconstruction of categorical binary thinking is one of the central tenets of queer theory and while Sara did not explicitly draw on queer theoretical thinking, the following quotes from students' reflections in the interviews highlight that students indeed moved away from binary thinking, embracing, for example, the idea that sexuality and gender exist on fluid spectrums that refuse "just a simple box answer" of being "either gay or straight."

> Lydia: *Well, I think, I've lived in this area for most of my life, and you always hear like, oh you live in the Happy Valley like, it's all free and we all accept gays and stuff like that.*

And I thought that that was really true. But I think it's almost this kind of false reassurance that we do. 'Cause we are not, coming into this class I didn't really understand like the spectrum as much as it was just like, you're either gay or you're straight. And so, kind of understanding that. And really learning that it's not just a simple box answer. That was really good.

Sandra: *When we talked about the spectrum, that was really interesting to me. I had never thought about sexuality in that way before. And I think that that is like a very important concept for people to understand. It's not like black and white.*

Rachel: *Kind of like Ms. BJ talks about how you can feel attracted to different genders and that you categorize sort of and I had really never thought about that before.*

Allison: *I think...when we were like, this is pansexual when you fall in love with any person, it's not like gender specific. I think that was one we learned about that. That made so much sense to me. Like you fall in love with the person, it doesn't matter what gender. Or what they look like. It's just like, I don't know, for me, I guess that's like, I guess what love really is. It's about the person not their sexuality. You know, yeah.*

Students also moved away from an essentializing view where sexuality "defines you" and it is a "big part" of how people are perceived to one where sexuality "less determines" how they see someone which allows them to "view someone's full identity":

Stephanie: *I feel like this class should be required for everyone to take because, um, what it really does it makes you view someone's full identity other than just looking at someone just for their sexuality.*

Meryl: *Now I see sexuality as sort of a general thing. ... It's not something that defines you.*

Casey: *I think that, I don't really know how to say this, but sort of taking this class has made me almost like not less interested in but less interested in peoples sexual orientation. I don't know. Before I would be like, oh, they are gay, or they are straight, and it would be a big part of how I perceive them. Like their image, or, I don't know how to explain it. It's less now. It less determines how I see someone. ... It's still like interesting but it's easier to look past that now. I don't know how to explain it.*

While the students did not explicitly talk about this, these reflections show how a queer literacies approach that allows students to gain a fuller and deeper understanding of the complexities of sexuality, sex and gender might be more productive in creating affirming school environments for LGBTQ youth than, for example, anti-bullying and safe schools initiatives. If students do not determine how they see someone based on how they perceive their sexual orientation, instead viewing someone for their "full identity," then chances are that it will be less

likely for them to single out someone for their norm-disruptive sexual or gender identity. Hand in hand with gaining a fuller understanding, students also reported that taking the class allowed them to confront and dispel some of their own stereotypes about LGBT people:

> Stephanie: *I definitely came in with much more stereotypes then I'm leaving with. You definitely go in with, you have your basic concepts of what this means and that means and then just the class made it much more open. Not just that you learned more about different, like the identities of different people and different terminology and stuff like that. But like to be able to go off and learn more afterwards and then be more accepting about new ideas about it.*
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> Meryl: *I mean, I definitely have a lot less stereotypes then I did coming into this class.*
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> Lydia: *One of the things that I really enjoyed was looking at the stereotypes in the class. Seeing how they really affect people. Instead of having the people cause the stereotypes, the stereotypes really changed the people. And seeing how, yeah, witnessing that was really interesting for me.*

What students expressed related to a sexuality spectrum, identity and stereotypes are important shifts in thinking and moving towards non-binary, non-essentializing understandings about sexuality and identity. These are integral components of queer thinking. So, while the curriculum was not framed using queer theoretical concepts and did not have an explicit queer focus, students' responses show that students were in fact moving towards queer understandings of sexuality and identity. By developing such new knowledge and disrupting old harmful knowledge, students began to read their world differently.

Reading the World Differently

"*I have a better understanding now of how this world works*
through this class and the readings
than I did just trying to live the world on my own."
– Jenna

As students learned about LGBTQ history, made connections to current events related to LGBTQ issues, and deconstructed media representations of LGBTQ people – as they began to notice and take note – they acquired new lenses and developed a more critical consciousness for reading the world (Freire). In her final reflection, Jenna wrote,

> *I learned more from this class in a trimester than I have in my 17 years. I have a better understanding now of how this world works through this class and the readings than I*

> *did just trying to live the world on my own. It's a big thing to say but it's one of those things, it opened many doors not just through the gay and lesbian and transgender, queer but it opened my eyes to other things that are going on. That are like, I don't know. I have a different lens.*

For Miranda, the class made her "*see the world in a different perspective ...like different parts of like the world, like TV, advertisements, stuff like that, I notice those things. ...That it's actually some part of it that I can recognize*."

For Tucker, who was one of the few students taking the class who had not elected it but was enrolled in it by the school, the class "*totally changed*" his attitude towards LGBT people. As someone who had immigrated to the United States from South Korea, he wrote about how he grew up in a country "*where being gay or lesbian is viewed as committing an unforgivable crime or sin.*" In his introductory paper, Tucker shared several stories in which he wrestled with the homophobia that he attributes as a cultural value to his home country:

> *While I was living in Korea, I've heard some sad news that involved a gay kid proposing to a boy he liked, and then getting bullied and beaten up almost till death. ...Since all the cultural homophobic beliefs and morals were deeply rooted, people cared less and viewed gay people with disgust.*
> …
> *There was this one friend of mine who came straight from Korea a year ago. We took a [] class together and had fun until when [the teacher] showed the class a documentary film on a transgender boy who wanted to become a girl. While I found the film to be interesting, I became aware of my friends' uneasiness. He swore in Korean on how the boy was disgusting and "wrong," which was a bit uncomfortable for me to listen to.*

In his final reflection, Tucker remarked how he used to join in and make fun of gay people but that taking this class "*totally changed*" that and that he is not "*going along with it anymore.*"

For Emily, who has two lesbian mothers, taking the class did not mean that her own thinking about LGBT people and topics shifted but rather that she learned to "see [these] through other people's perspectives" and not "just through [her] parents' perspective":

> *I've grown up around a lot of LGBT stuff just through my family and everything. But I think like it helped because this class let me see it through other people's perspectives as well. Like I think the discussions that we had were really productive. Like a lot of the class was kind of based around discussion of all these different issues throughout time. So it was interesting just seeing different people's perspectives on that. And just like actually talking about them made me see things a little differently. More than just through my parents' perspective.*

Dominik, likewise, emphasized how he appreciated learning about other people's perspective. Having two lesbian mothers and identifying as gay himself, he appreciated that:

> *Through discussions I learned about what the other students thought about whatever we were discussing and so I learned more than just what my own opinions were. Which is important to know how other people view it. And people who aren't necessarily part of the LGBT community. How they see it from like an outsider's perspective.*

These excerpts show that through taking the class, students not only developed more comfort and knowledge in talking about LGBT topics but they also began to look more critically and develop a deeper understanding of the social processes in their world. So, what impact did all of this have beyond personal shifts in thinking? An important objective for critical pedagogues is that of taking students' developing critical consciousness for social transformation. Such transformation does not always have to happen on a large scale, it can affect how students respond in personal interactions. The following examples illustrate how students felt they were able to be more supportive to someone they knew who identified as lesbian, gay, or transgender, began to take action when confronted with homophobia and heterosexism, and acknowledged how taking this course impacted the school climate as students interacted with their peers.

Learning How to Be Supportive

"I now have a better understanding of how to be supportive to them ...
I know how to be more like productive in a way to like help them."
– Jenna

In addition to feeling more able to have "intelligent conversations" related to LGBTQ topics, quite a few students found that the class enabled them to make sense of their personal experiences and to understand better the experiences of their LGBTQ friends or family members and be supportive and accepting. For example, some of the students shared how taking the class helped them support gay friends during their coming-out processes; another student talked about how she now feels more knowledgeable and comfortable talking to her transgender cousin; and a third student mentioned the difficulties of relating to a transgender friend at her old school. Each of them struggled in their own ways to make sense of these experiences and taking the Gay and

Lesbian Literature class gave them the language and knowledge to talk about it, to be supportive and to be accepting.

> Hannah: *Well, I have a cousin who is transgender and I didn't feel comfortable at all talking to him about it. He went from being a woman to a man. I never really understood it. But now I feel more comfortable talking about it. I haven't done it yet but I want to talk to him about it. I feel like I have the knowledge to do that and before I didn't know that much.*
>
> Lydia: *I actually had one friend at my old school who was transgender and was going from a girl to a guy. And that was really hard at my old school for them to really know how to verbalize that. There wasn't really any system of, do you call it him or say her. Those kind of things. And I think that taking a class like this really helps you kind of learn how to deal with that and also learn to kind of like be accepting of wherever people are in their life. Like being accepting.*
>
> Jenna: *A lot of my friends are coming out now. And I now have a better understanding of how to be supportive to them 'cause their families are not very supportive. So you know, they come to me and now I know how to be more like productive in a way to like help them.*
>
> Brianna: *I have a friend who's been kind of dealing with issues with his parents ever since he came out as gay. And, um, I've been talking to him about that a lot, especially since prom is coming up and I think like this class has helped me support him.*

Often discussions about LGBTQ-inclusive curricula focus on the impact such a curriculum may have on LGBTQ students. As these stories show, many students who identify as cisgender and heterosexual have personal relationships with LGBTQ family members, friends, or peers and having a space within which to learn about LGBTQ topics helps them to be supportive as allies. In addition, students began to take a more critical stance related to what they witnessed in their immediate environment, taking more of an ally stance and sometimes even taking action to affect change.

Taking Action

"I think that now that we are able to speak about it more freely,
we can actually do something
more important as allies
than just kind of being bystanders."
– Lydia

As students critically engaged with the curriculum, they developed more empathy for LGBTQ people and began to take a more interventionist approach when confronted with

homophobia and heterosexism. In the final interviews, several students talked about how important it is for straight allies of LGBTQ people to speak out, break the silence and take action. Students shared instances where they spoke up in situations where they previously would have remained silent. Lydia, for example, shared how she confronted college students at the supermarket when she overheard their use of homophobic slurs. For Lydia, taking this class empowered her to change and move from the position of a bystander to one of active ally who "can actually do something" and "be verbal about it":

> Lydia: *Well, I think one of the problems is ... I think historically one of the things that kind of have hurt gay rights is that our allies or people who are just accepting aren't speaking about it. And so I think that now that we are able to speak about it more freely, we can actually do something more important as allies than just kind of being bystanders. ... I kind of lost it with these random college kids at Big Y a couple of weeks ago. They were like using the word faggot and stuff and I just turned around and screamed at them for a while. Which then was a little bit embarrassing afterwards because people started looking at me and stuff. But that was definitely one of those moments that afterwards I walked out of there and I was like, wow, I definitely wouldn't have done that a couple of months ago. So that was kind of nice to know that I was able to kind of change and be verbal about it.*

For Rachel, being an ally was less about being interventionist and more about educating people based on the new knowledge that she learned in the class. She said, "*After when we were talking about AIDs, I felt like more I wanted to do something about it. I don't know. Like I wanted to tell other people about it that didn't know about it.*" For Sandra, taking the class encouraged her to use her new comfort in talking about LGBT issues in other contexts, for example in other classes, where she previously "wouldn't have said anything" which in turn provided for a "really interesting discussion":

> *Yeah, in our film in society class and there was this character where everybody thought was gay. And I think that before I took this class, I wouldn't have said anything because I wouldn't have wanted to offend anyone. I don't know. But I did and I was then really glad that I did because it started a really interesting discussion and it was like nothing that I would've done before.*

Dominik noted how some people "get really into it" and "transform ...from being just accepting to being advocates" as a result of taking the class. He said:

When people take it, afterwards I've heard about people like becoming much bigger advocates and joining the GSA and that kind of stuff. So I think it definitely has an impact on the school climate. A positive impact. [A friend] did that. She took the class and she got really into it and joined the GSA. ... I've heard about that happening frequently. I don't know if they always stay for a long time but they at least come and check out the GSA. And it definitely makes people into not just, because it transforms people a little bit from being just accepting to being advocates. To a certain degree. I mean 'cause I think they feel more empowered to speak up because they took a class on it. So they're more knowledgeable and with knowledge comes power and self-confidence to speak up.

For the students, the impact of the Gay and Lesbian Literature class on themselves and the whole school was clearly positive. Experiencing themselves as being more aware, knowing more, and having better language to talk about LGBTQ topics, they advocated for it as a "required class" for all students. Viewing students who had not taken the class as "homophobic," "ignorant and so stupid," or "not as aware or accepting," they thought that "everybody should take this class" so that they could have their "eyes opened" and form "educated" opinions:

Stephanie: *Every time I hear a homophobic comment, I don't know, I'm talking to one of my friends and they say something homophobic, they just seem so ignorant and so stupid. And I'm like, I wish you were in this class. You would be so ashamed of yourself.*

Sandra: *Yeah, it should be a required class ... I just think it helps people to less stigmatize others. It makes them know more.*

Meryl: *I also think everybody should take this class because I think it just, even if someone starts off not being as aware or as accepting of the LGBT community, I think it really sort of gets people to understand a lot more about LGBT people are just as human as straight people.*

Stephanie: *I think, I guess, opinions are fine, everybody can have their opinion. But don't have an uneducated opinion. Don't come to any conclusions unless you have taken a class like this.*

Jenny: *It just changes your opinions. I think your eyes would be opened if you take this class.*

Many scholars have acknowledged that a liberatory, anti-oppression curriculum can result in conflict, tension, and even anger by students. hooks (1994), for example, writes:

> Another difficulty I had to work through early on as a professor was evaluating whether or not our experience in the classroom had been rewarding. In the classes I teach, students are often presented with new paradigms and are being asked to shift their ways of thinking to consider new perspectives. In the past, I have often felt that this type of learning process is very hard; it's painful and troubling. It may be six months or a year, even two years later, that they realize the importance of what they have learned… In

> reconceptualizing engaged pedagogy I had to realize that our purpose here isn't really to feel good. Maybe we enjoy certain classes, but it will usually be difficult. We have to learn how to appreciate difficulty, too, as a stage in intellectual development. Or accept that that cozy, good feeling may at times block the possibility of giving students space to feel that there is integrity to be found in grappling with difficult material, whether that material comes from confessional narratives, books or discussions. (pp. 153-154)

Kumashiro (2000, 2002), likewise, has written about students' experiencing moments of crisis caused by encountering troubling knowledge and he emphasizes how working through discomfort and crisis provides for important learning and growth. One might expect that a class like the Gay and Lesbian Literature course would at least have some students who feel such crisis. There was a tension between the comfort of feeling safe to voice their opinions and the discomfort of feeling not knowledgeable enough. Some of the moments discussed in the previous chapters allude to moments of discomfort (e.g., when texts confronted students with their own internalized prejudices). However, the general feeling among the students was that all of them came into the class being supportive of LGBTQ people, and definitely being not homophobic. This might be explained by the administrative process at WRHS that offers the Gay and Lesbian Literature class as an elective, which means that students generally self-select the course. That it is a choice to take the class, impacts the classroom environment positively, but it also felt limiting to the students because "those kids" who "don't want to take it aren't' here" and students wondered during the interviews, "*how a homophobic person would actually react to this class*" (Jenny). Casey said:

> *I feel like it's great that everybody who's in this class wants to take it. But it's sort of rough that those should don't want to take it and aren't here. Because, I don't know, I don't think many people came into the class like, like very much at all homophobic. Or like nobody's coming out of this class going, well, my perception has totally changed. Like it changed my life because we all are super grateful for the new knowledge. But there are just so many people that are like, even in our school … It's not even that they like hate. You know what I mean. The things that we learned in class about intense hatred and hate crimes. It's really nothing like that but they just make like stupid comments* [Allison overlapping: *make jokes*] *and it's all ignorance. It's impossible to leave this class ignorant. So I feel like it's impossible to leave it even a little like that. I just feel like, it's rough that those kids aren't in this class.*

Here, Casey acknowledges that even at this school, which was characterized by most students in the initial questionnaire as "accepting" or even "very accepting" of LGBTQ people, homophobia and heterosexism surfaces in "stupid comments" or "jokes" by peers. For Casey, this type of behavior is rooted in "ignorance," and ignorance she feels is impossible to retain when taking this class. The transformative potential of the class and its positive impact on the school's climate was acknowledged by other students as well. Miranda, for example, noted:

> *This class can change a lot of people. Like even just with the few of us that are here, we already have like different views just from taking this class. And I feel like this is very good for our school climate.*

Emily, likewise, reflected on the positive impact the class has on the school climate because so many students take the class – "it's the most sought after class" – and then "spread to their friends" what they learned because they "want to talk about the stuff." In the process, talking about LGBT topics becomes normalized – "just this kind of like normal thing" – something highly unusual within a social context in which issues around sexuality are generally tabooed:

> Emily: *A lot of people want to take this class. It's like the most sought after class, you know. And I think the fact that people do take it and enjoy it and then recommend it to other people, it becomes just this kind of like normal thing. And it's like this good class that everyone wants to take. So I feel like it definitely affects the school as well. 'cause people want to talk about this stuff and once they do that it spreads to their friends, too.*

Another student, Lara, also recognized how having the Gay and Lesbian Literature class and having so many students take the class, "*normalizes it.*" As she said, "*It's not like a foreign thing.*" Lori echoed these thoughts, commenting, "*I think that if you have the option to take a class about like gay and lesbian lit, then more people kind of come to think of it as accepted. Because like you can take a whole class about it and it kind of makes it more normal.*"

Sara concurred with what her students had to say about the impact the course has had on the school climate, pointing out how the sheer number of students taking the class makes a difference because those who take the class do not use anti-gay language anymore:

> *It has changed the climate of our school. It's changed everything. It's like, we had nothing before. Now, it's the most popular lit class at the high school. There are a hundred, a hundred fifty kids a year taking it. … It does, it does affect the way they*

behave. Like, if they know all this information, they don't run around in the halls being like 'You're so gay.' 'What a fag.' Whatever. They just don't do it anymore.

That the class can change people's attitudes and behaviors was also emphasized by the students. Elena felt that the class is "beneficial" because when students who "don't know" or "aren't really aware" or who are "not as eager" to learn about LGBT topics, do sign up for it, "they're getting it" and "they "end up loving it." And when these students then "tell their friends" and "see what we love and learn," they might take the course too which "would be good for them":

> Elena: ... *People who don't know or people who just don't have a lot of information or just aren't really aware of it or even don't really feel like they want to learn about it are not as eager to take the class. So when those kind of people do sign up for it, then they're getting it. And like the most unexpected people that take it of course end up loving it. It's really beneficial because then they tell their friends who probably wouldn't have taken it as well and it adds on. And then really all you just have to do is just take the first step and sign up for it because it just can't hurt. ... Like the sophomores are gonna look at what we're taking right now. And see what we love and learn. Like taking Gay and Lesbian Lit. It would be good for them.*

As an example, Elena mentioned her best friend who she characterized as being "really conservative" and who signed up for the class after Elena talked with her about the topics discussed in class: "*We just had this whole conversation and I told her like everything and she signed up for this class ...And she's so pumped up about it. ...She's totally into it. ...And it was so nice to see. Like once I told her things about it, she would be more comfortable with it.*" This example and the other student responses clearly show how when an LGBTQ-expansive curriculum is offered in a relevant, meaningful and interesting way at a public high school, the success of the class will spread beyond the classroom and eventually impact a school's climate.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I used students' reflections about the Gay and Lesbian Literature class that they shared during the interviews and in the questionnaires to showcase how students moved from discomfort to confidence and ignorance to knowledge which in turn enabled them to become more supportive allies and advocates related to LGBTQ issues. Some of their most

impactful learning occurred related to language and terminology, LGBT histories, transgender experiences, the notion of sexualities and genders existing on spectrums, and working against stereotypes. Such learning shifted students' thinking about identities and encouraged them to read their world more critically. Students recognized the positive impact taking the class had on themselves as well as on their school's climate; however, they also acknowledged that the class targets a specific student population which means that students who exhibit a more homophobic stance often are not represented in the class because they choose not to take this elective.

In Chapter 13, I reflect on the im/possibilities of queering a high school literature curriculum. I revisit how the dimensions of queer literacies surfaced during queer moments in Sara's classroom. I also provide suggestions for pedagogical practices and further research.

CHAPTER 13

QUEERING THE CURRICULUM: REFLECTING ON THE IM/POSSIBILITIES

As this dissertation narrative shows, it is not enough to attempt to make schools more inclusive for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning students by simply adding LGBTQI-themed texts and topics on to the curriculum. The central question rather should be: How do we engage students with diverse and norm-disruptive sexualities and genders so that we can work with them against the oppressive systems of homophobia, heterosexism, genderism, cissexism, and transphobia? Through my work I have come to understand the value of queer theory as a lens that can inform and expand our thinking about teaching LGBTQI topics in schools. However, bringing a queer lens to classrooms continues to present a dilemma for educators. While queer theory offers possibilities for rethinking the teaching of LGBTQI topics in schools, there are also many challenges and complications that arise when queer theory is used within educational contexts.

When I first observed a social studies class on LGBT topics (as the pilot study for this dissertation study) and then Sara's classroom, I often felt like Youdell (2010) who wonders about "the (im)possibilities of doing queer in particular spaces" (p. 89) and writes, "I was certain that I could only do queer where queer was recognisable, and that the school was a space where polymorphous perversity and Foucault's turn from sexdesire to bodies and pleasure was unintelligible" (p. 95). Schools with their normative practices and rules are spaces where queer is not recognizable or intelligible but rather suppressed, and where queering as a practice of deconstruction and disruption runs counter to traditional notions of teaching and learning. This is particularly true within the current context of standardization and high stakes testing that is grounded in conceptualizations of teaching and learning that stand in stark contrast to what a queered curriculum and a queer pedagogy set out to do.

Further, "the study of 'special populations' in and of itself is contested territory" (Bacon, 2006, p. 269) at the institutional, curricular, and classroom levels where LGBTQ people have

fought hard and continue to fight to see representations of their identities. Particularly at elementary and secondary schools where LGBTQ-themed curricula are still largely absent, a queer approach to teaching LGBTQ topics or a queer pedagogy seems to be out of the realm of possibility. Within such spaces it may be more important to make visible the experiences of and give voice to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people in an effort to provide positive representations for students than to start by trying to break down social categories. Atkinson and DePalma (2008) caution that "classroom settings [] are so overwhelmingly heteronormative that even the mere mention of an alternative is transgressive to the point of being dangerous" (p. 32). Teaching about LGBTQ topics continues to be "transgressive" in and of itself as "any mention of alternative [to heteronormativity] is constructed as transgressive ('not appropriate') by the powerful silent force of the heterosexual matrix" (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008, p. 33).

It must come as little surprise then that while addressing LGBTQ issues in schools is often framed in terms of a 'queering' of curriculum and/or pedagogy, as Mayo (2007) points out, "these applications may or may not be—and I suspect most are usually *not* queer. They *queer* heteronormative educational structures to be sure, yet are not directly attributable to queer theory" (pp. 85/86). A review of the literature that addresses the teaching of LGBTQ topics in actual classrooms reveals that what poses as 'queer' really often is just 'lesbian and gay'. Whitlock (2010) states,

> The 1990s, it seems, were heady years for queering education— theoretically extending the promise of, as Miller (1998) might put it, possibility. Looking around (and within) for queer, I do not believe this promise has been realized. Important and potentially impactful work continues to be done that calls for queering schools and schooling; … I do not see enough of pedagogy as the "pretty queer thing" that Luhmann (1998) describes, nor sufficient response to Britzman's (1998) question "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? (p. 113)

However, while a queering of educational spaces in elementary and secondary schools might appear neither realized nor possible, others have argued that the studies of LGBTQ issues in schools always already reflect an oppositional stance that functions to disrupt homophobia and heterosexism. Mayo (2007), for example, notes, "While it has been occasionally argued that

framing issues as lgbt rights rather than queer is an assimilationist mode that parallels sexuality with ethnicity, that argument ignores the very real way in which even lgbt issues are disruptive and implicitly critical of heteronormativity" (p. 469).

What these authors say resonates with me. Going into this dissertation study, I felt that the Gay and Lesbian Literature course definitely queered the context of the school and students felt similarly about this. As my son Dominik stated when I asked him,

> *I mean, it's the only course of its kind being offered at a public high school. So it definitely queers the general English class because it's all, you know, they're all gay books. And some of them are very explicit. And you don't read explicitly gay things in high school generally. So, I definitely think it queered the class. Yeah. 'cause it's a new topic that most English classes don't focus on. Don't even go close to covering, you know. They don't. Yeah. I've never read a book with a gay character in any other English class in high school. They're all in that one class. I definitely say that's queering the English class. This curriculum.* – Dominik (Interview 1/10/14)

However, I also assumed that I would not see much of a queering of curriculum and pedagogy. After all, this was a *gay* and *lesbian* literature class, not even including references to bisexual or transgender texts in its title – so how queer could it be? In addition, I wondered about the possibilities and tensions of applying a queer theoretical framework to someone else's work. After all, Sara's class was clearly not conceptualized using a queer lens but instead is grounded in a multicultural and social justice framework. I worried about imposing a theoretical perspective and the dangers of invalidating Sara's important work. With this study, I want to offer some insights on how the teaching of LGBTQ topics in English language arts classes can be reframed by bridging the goals, practices and conceptual tools of queer theory to literacy teaching, I did not want to do this by misusing Sara's work through a critical evaluation. Too often university researchers take advantage of their research subjects and advance their own agenda regardless of how this might affect those who enable them to do their work in the first place: their research participants. Honoring Sara's work and her willingness to invite me into her classroom became of paramount importance to me. It is my hope that in writing this dissertation I have succeeded, even though I was not able to involve Sara or her students in the processes of analysis and

interpretation as I would have liked to do. Teachers are more than busy, students move on, and as researchers we cannot expect them to become more involved in projects that are not theirs. This dissertation, therefore, presents my story about the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, one that is hopefully respectful of Sara and her students. No story is complete or true. The story that I tell in this dissertation offers just one story that can be told about the Gay and Lesbian Literature class. It is based on my personal interpretations and reflects my own wrestling with how to engage students with LGBTQ-themed texts and teach LGBTQ topics.

Wrestling with Queer: Reflecting on Bringing a Queer Lens to this Study

And wrestle with "queer" I did, personally and academically. Not only do I not identify as queer myself, but I also found myself feeling very resistant to adopt 'queer' thinking. Feeling very attached to my own lesbian identity seemed to run counter to queer theory's critique and deconstruction of identity categories. I struggled and continue to struggle with the notion that all our identities are always only constructed and not essential to our selves. While I agree that identities are constructed in the sense that they are the outcome of processes of identifying and naming oneself and others in relation to each other and within a particular historical and sociopolitical context, my lived experiences and my feelings tell me that something internal and essential to my 'self' also drives these processes. In addition, experiencing queer lingo to be overly complex and, therefore, often very difficult to access, I myself did not want to fall into the trap of academic jargoning. Queer theorists have been critiqued for having developed a language that is inaccessible for non-academics so that "queer theory can appear to be self-indulgent word-play, a Scattegories for higher education" which creates a "language gap" that "runs counter to critical and liberationist pedagogies which emphasize personal political action" (Dilley, 1999, p. 468). While noting queer theory's potential for transformative social practices, some scholars recognize limits of queer theory for real world application due to its disruptive, deconstructive language. Chang (2005), for example, cautions that,

> The excessive reliance on the disruptive semiotics of postmodernist or poststructuralist theory probably empties out real meaning in real situations. In brief, although postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches are powerful enough to open important doors in this field, these approaches also, at the same time, set limitations on the deployment of theory into real scenarios. (p. 178)

As someone who feels grounded in transformative, liberationist approaches to education and whose goal it is to make my work accessible and usable for practitioners, I did not want to fall into the trap of such "self-indulgent word-play" that only serves to over-complicate. However, as I read more queer theoretical pieces, I did find myself adopting some of the language, echoing the chains of thought of those before me. This was somewhat troubling to me and I hope that I have managed to keep this dissertation a readable piece. As queer theorists like Judith Butler have pointed out, we cement our meaning-making through repetition. As she also said, every repetition offers the potential for change, even if only minimal. Therefore, I hope that with this dissertation I am able to bridge the gap that often exists between theory and practice, contributing to educational praxis.

I also recognize that queer theory is not easily understood, not just because of the complexities of its language but also because it challenges basic tropes used to organize our society and our lives. In a reflection in my comprehensive exam paper, I wondered whether it might even be questionable if secondary students can or should work through the unraveling and troubling of identity categories, as queer theory demands. I questioned whether secondary school students are cognitively mature enough to grapple with the challenges that queer theory poses to their identity, arguing that adolescents are at a stage in their identity development where they try to fit their identity into externally defined labels, defining themselves through stereotypes and the norms established by their peer groups (Abes, 2007). Queer theory's deconstructive approach and its project of troubling the notion or normalcy seems to run counter to adolescents' desire to fit in, be viewed as normal, and be accepted. As I am reflecting on this study, I am still wondering how high school students experience the disruptions to their normative frames of thinking. Yes, Sara's students were intrigued by the idea that sexuality and gender are fluid, multiple, and more

characteristic of spectrums than binaries; but on a personal level, students very much appeared to remain thinking in terms of identity categories, even if these were expanded beyond straight/gay or female/male, and norms.

This makes sense because it appears to be impossible to escape the notion of identity when teaching about a topic that is necessarily bound to sexual and gender identities. Indeed, one of the major challenges of a queer pedagogy revolves around the tension between identity politics and poststructural critiques of essential identities. Bryson and de Castell (1993), regarding the limitations of their queer interventions in teaching a lesbian studies college course, noted, "What this taught us is that lesbianism, although it could of course be any other subordinated identity, is always marginal, even in a lesbian studies course, and that lesbian identity is always fixed and stable, even in a course that explicitly critiques, challenges, deconstructs 'lesbian identity'" (p. 294). Thus, regarding the notion of putting queer theory into practice (=praxis), they conclude that "praxis makes im/perfect" (p. 299).

I too wonder whether it can ever be possible to un-fix the subordinated LGBTQ identities when we have to make such identities the focus of inquiry to break the silence around them in the first place. Although rejecting 'normal' might be an option for some, others have fought hard to be recognized as 'normal' human beings. While I agree with queer notions of troubling normalcy, I worry like Bacon (2006) that 'queer' sometimes forgets that "it is a measure of privilege to be able to shun the normal." Mollie Blackburn (2012) writes about Harstock's (1990) critique of the Foucaultian (1982) argument that oppressed people need to reject their naming and labeling as a form of resistance to social control and power. From Harstock's perspective, Foucault's poststructuralist understanding of power is grounded in his personal history and perspective of a dominator as a white male, which allows "systematically unequal relations of power to vanish" (p. 165). She warns that this is "a dangerous approach for any marginalized group to adopt" (p. 160). Instead she argues that oppressed people need to be able to name themselves to make visible and work against oppressive power dynamics. I agree. For me, it is important to recognize

that identity-based approaches to teaching LGBTQ topics provide especially students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning with "a place where they can 'be themselves,' read about others like them, and acquire increased self worth" (Brueggemann & Moddelmog, 2002, p. 318).

I witnessed this happening in Sara's class where those students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning felt deeply connected to the class. In his final reflection paper, my son Dominik, who took the course during the first trimester of the school year 2012-2013, powerfully stated:

> *The discussions, papers, and movies in this course constantly related to my life and provided me with a much needed source of gayness. Sometimes I feel separated from the gay community or even out of touch with my gay identity, but being in this course day after day allowed me to reconnect with this part of myself.*

What Dominik says reminds me of how I felt when I first had the opportunity to connect my academic work to my lesbian identity – the critical incident I describe in the introduction to this dissertation. Like Luhmann (1998), I see the "im/possibilities" of a queering of curriculum and pedagogy. Luhmann cautioned that "a queer pedagogy must learn to be self-reflective of its own limitations" (p. 142), and pointed to the im/possibilities of such pedagogy as she reflected on her experiences of trying to implement queer pedagogy in her own college classroom:

> As an inquiry into those processes, my queer pedagogy is not very heroic. It does not position itself as a bulwark against oppression, it does not claim the high grounds of subversion but hopefully it encourages an ethical practice by studying the risks of normalization, the limits of its own practices, and the im/possibilities of (subversive) teaching and learning. (pp. 153-154)

I find her reflection insightful because it encourages us as educators to always be reflective of our practices.

Queering the Curriculum: Reflecting on Queer Moments in the Gay and Lesbian Literature Course

So, what does this mean for the im/possibilities of queering Sara's course? While Sara's pedagogy and curriculum was decidedly not queer in its intent and planning, this study shows that

the Gay and Lesbian Literature class, in fact, did offer many opportunities for students to read queerly. These opportunities were sometimes realized in what appeared to be queer moments that surfaced at times quite unplanned and unintentional, and usually unrecognized, as instances of queer readings. In other cases, such opportunities were not realized and I feel that a more deliberately queer approach to reading a text, for example, by adopting the queer literacies approach that I propose, could have provided for richer and deeper engagement with the course topics.

In the previous chapters, I sought to illustrate such queer moments by showing how students engaged with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum through their in-class discussions, their journal entries, and their projects and how Sara, the teacher, created and implemented the curriculum and facilitated students' engagement with the course content. I looked at how students reflected on the class during the interviews and as they responded to the prompts in the two questionnaires. What emerged for me from this is that the curriculum and students' engagement with it was queerer than I thought. Not only did the class go well beyond *gay* and *lesbian* topics, rather recognizing as legitimate bodies of knowledge and making the focus of inquiry the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQ people. But the class also engaged students with LGBTQ topics in ways that reflect queer theoretical thinking. Students wrestled in mature ways with the complexities of identity, power, privilege and oppression. They began to trouble commonsense notions about sexuality, sex and gender as they explored stereotypes, language, and the notion that identities are non-binary, fluid, and complex. They developed a better understanding of LGBTQ histories which in turn helped them to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ people. They learned to use the critical method of deconstruction for the literary and social analysis of discourse and text, looking not only for what there is in texts but also uncovering the hidden subtext through absences, silences, secrets and exclusions. They began to develop new imaginings as they encountered and produced counternarratives and alternative conceptualizations of knowledge around sexuality, sex and

gender. They began to see themselves as social change agents as they became more knowledgeable and confident to be able to talk about LGBTQ issues with others and stand up against homophobia.

For my theoretical framework for this study, I proposed a critical multidimensional queer approach to reading texts that I termed queer literacies. I developed the dimensions of this queer literacies framework based on my observations of students' engagement with LGBTQ topics throughout the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, and in conjunction with my review of literature relevant to the teaching of LGBTQ topics. I suggested that such a queer literacies approach should include the following interconnecting six dimensions:

- Dimension 1: recognizing as legitimate bodies of knowledge and making the focus of inquiry the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQI people.
- Dimension 2: developing an understanding of the dynamics of oppression related to normative systems of regulation of sexuality, gender and sex (i.e., homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, cissexism, genderism, transphobia).
- Dimension 3: troubling knowledges in the form of commonsense, partial and distorted understandings of sexuality, sex and gender.
- Dimension 4: using the critical method of deconstruction for the literary and social analysis of discourse and text.
- Dimension 5: engaging with and producing counternarratives that open spaces for new imaginings about sexuality, gender and sex.
- Dimension 6: creating spaces where students can enter and work through feelings of discomfort and crisis.

As I engaged with the empirical materials that inform this study, I applied these dimensions to my reading of the class texts (i.e., the novels, articles, videos, films, student work, Sara's master's thesis/curriculum guide) and the texts that I created in the form of transcripts and

notes. At the same time, in a recurring process, my reading and analysis of these texts also informed how I thought about what I mean by queer literacies and the multiple dimensions of queer literacies. While I found evidence for all of these dimensions of queer literacies in the Gay and Lesbian Literature class, not all dimensions appeared equally.

The units around *A Lost Lady* and *Giovanni's Room* offered the most opportunities for students to work within one or more of the dimensions of a queer literacies approach. Even though the book itself was not the favorite book for most of the students, the unit around *A Lost Lady* was powerful because students learned to read texts using a deconstructive lens not only related to the book but especially when watching the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* and, maybe most importantly, when doing their *Gay Notions* projects. What could have been a boring read turned into one of the strongest and most engaging units of the course, possibly because it drew heavily on film and popular media as a resource for building lessons. Students were intrigued as they learned about the lesbian and gay stereotyping and subtext in Hollywood movies and then enthusiastically used what they learned from the film *The Celluloid Closet* to deconstruct stereotypes of LGBTQ people and to critically examine the overt and subtle messages that popular media texts represent. In addition, beginning the course by apprenticing the students to use a deconstructive lens to uncover subtexts and hidden meanings in literary and media texts allowed students to apply this new skill to the other, later course materials as well. Once students began to develop such critical awareness, they could not stop noticing. Even beyond the end of their projects, they kept emailing Sara more media examples and when they read the other novels they kept looking for subtext.

Similarly, the unit around *Giovanni's Room* stood out because the book not only provided an explicitly gay narrative, even if troubling in its depiction of denial and self-hate based on internalized homophobia, but the learning activities that surrounded the reading of the book actively engaged students in deepening their understandings of the complexities around sexuality, sex and gender. Reading the novel through a psychological framework allowed students to

understand the effect that homophobic and heterosexist oppression has on lesbian and gay people. Discussing troubling scenes, for example as the one described around the drag queens, confronted students with their own bias and internalized prejudices. The class discussion that evolved around the definition of key terminology provided a rich way of thinking through everyday manifestations of heterosexism and heteronormativity. The students' projects that they created based on the novel encouraged them to step outside their comfort zones, to adopt lesbian or gay perspectives, and to create powerful counternarratives that opened up new imaginings about same-sex love, desire and relationships. These two units exhibited many of the dimensions of queer literacies.

However, the book that I thought would offer the most potential for a queer reading, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, had the least effect on the students, possibly because students engaged with the novel mainly through reading quizzes and in-class conversations. What could have been a rich exploration of how the story dismantles normative notions of sexuality, sex, and gender by offering a provocative counternarrative that presents a strong, proud, empowered, sexually liberated lesbian woman who actively resists not only social norms related to sexuality, gender and social class but also evades easy categorization and labeling, often remained on a level where these topics were just touched upon. Yes, there were moments when students' thinking was challenged, for example, when they read and talked about the Radicalesbians manifesto and the notion of choice related to one's sexuality. However, students did not read Molly, the protagonist, as sexually liberated instead almost pathologizing her as having attachment issues. In addition, the class could have explored more in depth the intersections of sexuality, gender, social class, and even race through this novel. Yet, queer moments were also present during this unit; most notably, the activity *Beyond Binaries* in a powerful way allowed students to kinetically and visually experience the complexities and fluidities related to sexuality.

Similarly, the unit around *The Hours* could have provided for more queerly informed readings. Again, the novel presents a counternarrative through the stories of its lesbian, gay and

bisexual characters; however, issues around the characters' sexuality rarely were explored in any depth as part of the classroom conversation. With each story set in a different time period, students could have explored how the characters' sexuality played out differently in different times. Students could have asked, what Cunningham accomplished by interweaving these different times and stories. Students could have explored notions of heteronormativity and even homonormativity. Students could have examined in more depth the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s. While they watched a very powerful documentary that showed the devastating effect that AIDS had on gay communities in urban centers, they did not engage in any real conversation about this film or about AIDS.

Finally, while part of the curriculum, the class did not read the final novel *Funny Boy*, a missed opportunity to read a transnational text that would have been wonderful for the exploration of how race/ethnicity, sexuality, and gender intersect. In addition, this novel would have provided a great opportunity to examine the intersections of genderism with homophobia and heterosexism through the novel's protagonist's enactment of gender-transgressive behavior. A school trimester is much too short a time to read five books; especially, since reading supplementary texts in the form of news articles and viewing documentaries added crucial content to the course that should not be missed. This multimodal, intertextual approach that integrated media texts into the literature curriculum was decidedly one of the strong points of the class.

Another strong point of Sara's class was that bisexuality and transgender experiences were addressed throughout the course despite the course title suggesting an exclusive focus on gay and lesbian literature. Too often the 'B' and 'T' of LGBT remain silenced and unexplored when we talk about a queering of the curriculum. Not so however in Sara's class. As a class, students deconstructed stereotypes of bisexual people. Through the activity *Beyond Binaries* students experienced the spectrum of sexual diversity. In some of the novels, students encountered bisexual characters or characters that had sex with both women and men while not

identifying as bisexual. Sara challenged her students to rethink their own assumptions and bias about bisexual people when she shared with them that she herself identifies as bisexual rather than lesbian even though she is married to a woman. Transgender issues were both an official part of the curriculum and found their way into the curriculum through what students brought into the classroom (see Chapter 12 for a discussion of this).

In the following table, I draw together the focal texts with the accompanying texts and learning activities and connect these to the different dimensions of the queer literacies framework that were observable or have the potential to manifest in each unit. As the table shows, all dimensions of the queer literacies framework showed up during some units but not consistently across all of the units. Some units provided more opportunities for a multidimensional queer literacies approach, while others focused more on just a few dimensions. In addition, some dimensions of the queer literacies framework were not demonstrated as much as others. As to be expected, all units focused on the stories, experiences, cultures, histories and politics of LGBTQ people (queer literacies dimension 1). In addition, all units provided opportunities for students to encounter and/or create affirmative counternarratives about LGBTQ people, either directly through the focal novel or the accompanying texts and learning activities (queer literacies dimension 5). Students' commonsense knowledges of sexuality and gender were also consistently troubled throughout the course (queer literacies dimension 3). All of the units provide opportunities for learning about oppression (queer literacies dimension 2) and deconstructive analytical work (queer literacies dimension 4); however, these opportunities were not always realized. For example, the class rarely adopted an intersectional lens to explore how issues of norm-disruptive sexualities, genders and sexes intersect with other identities (e.g. race/ethnicity, social class). Unfortunately, the final unit around a reading of the transnational novel *Funny Boy*, which would lend itself to such an approach, often gets cut because of time issues. The dimension of a queer literacies framework that was possibly the least engaged was the one on engaging with and working through discomfort and crisis (queer literacies dimension 6). Moments of real crisis

never surfaced and those of discomfort were also hardly discernible, remaining mostly hidden and being rarely explored.

Dimensions of Queer Literacy*	**Focal Novel**	**Other Texts**	**Learning Activities**
3, 4, 5	A Lost Lady by Willa Cather (1923)	The Celluloid Closet (documentary, 1995)	Introductory Essay Gay Notions Project Essay: Symbolism in *A Lost Lady*
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin (1956)	For the Bible Tells Me So (documentary, 2007) *The Conscience of a Conservative* by Eve Conant (Newsweek, 2010)[48] *Homophobic? Maybe Your' Gay* by Ryan and Ryan (New York Times, 2012)[49]	Defining Terminology Creative Project
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Rubyfruit Jungle by Rita Mae Brown (1973)	Generation LGBTQIA by Michael Schulman (New York Times, 2013)[50]	Beyond Binaries Epiphanies Voice Paper
1, 5, 6	The Hours by Michael Cunningham (1998)	The Hours (film, 2003) Milk (film, 2008) We Were Here (documentary, 2011) *A Letter to Harvey Milk* (short story) by Lesléa Newman (2004)	Journal Writing Proprioceptive Writing Visualization Group Project
1, 2, 4, 3, 5, 6	Funny Boy by Shyam Selvadurai (1994)	Two Spirits (documentary, 2009) Male to female/Female to male by Sunshine Dewitt (Daily Hampshire Gazette, 2003)[51]	Research Project

Table 2: Dimensions of queer literacies and the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum

Dimension 1: Making the focus of inquiry the stories, experiences, cultures, histories, and politics of LGBTQI people
Dimension 2: Understanding the dynamics of oppression
Dimension 3: Troubling knowledges
Dimension 4: Deconstructing discourse and text
Dimension 5: Engaging with and producing counternarratives
Dimension 6: Entering and working through feelings of discomfort and crisis

[48] http://www.newsweek.com/bushs-solicitor-general-gay-marriage-right-70917
[49] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/opinion/sunday/homophobic-maybe-youre-gay.html?_r=0
[50] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/10/fashion/generation-lgbtqia.html?pagewanted=all
[51] http://www.antijen.org/Articles/amherst/Amherst/Amherst.html

This reflection on the Gay and Lesbian Literature course shows that while queer moments that exemplify dimensions of a queer literacies framework can and do occur in classrooms that offer an LGBTQI-themed curriculum, more can be done to involve students' in a deeper engagement with LGBTQI-themed texts and topics. The proposed multidimensional approach of queer literacies is meant to provide teachers with a theoretical framework that can guide them in developing LGBTQI-expansive curricula that work against homophobia, heterosexism, cissexism, and genderism in our schools, our communities, and the larger society.

Reflecting on the Study's Strengths and Limitations

As any study, this study has its strengths and limitations. The study was strengthened by a research design that allowed for a more holistic exploration of the complex interactions that are characteristic of classrooms through an extended period of time. Drawing on ethnographic practices allowed me to provide a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the classroom discourse and interactions around the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum, illustrated in the chapters that describe Sara's and her students' engagement with the focal novels and their accompanying texts and learning activities. The approach of a case study enabled particularity and depth of analysis through the detailed exploration of a single classroom with the purpose of looking at the larger phenomenon around the implementation of an innovative and, what some might consider, controversial curriculum.

However, what is a strength, can also be a limitation. It is not possible to draw generalizing implications from this study since it is so particular. The study is bound by a particular place (Sara's classroom), time (the trimester when I observed the class), and positioned within a specific context (the school and wider local community). It is through this bounded system that Sara's and her students' engagement with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum must be understood. Studying the curriculum with different students or looking at how the curriculum is implemented by the other teacher at the school who teaches the course may have led to a different, expanded, or more nuanced understanding.

In addition, the context of the study, especially the characteristics of the school and wider local community, appear to be particularly relevant. First, the geographical location of the school in which this curriculum is taught needs to be considered. Williamstown is located in a region of New England that is characterized as liberal and very progressive. In fact, the region in which the school is located is considered as very liberal especially in relation to LGBT issues and students frequently referred to their town as "the bubble" that is set apart from other places because "most people in Williamstown have been brought up to think that it's [being LGBT] more normal than in other parts of the world". This is not to say that no homophobia exists in Williamstown – just a few years ago an openly gay student of the high school was a victim of gay bashing in the middle of the town – but in general people feel that there is a climate of acceptance here. This may also be attributable to the fairly large visible population of lesbian and gay and some transgender people in the area. The school district has a number of families that are headed by same-sex partners as well as a number of openly out lesbian and gay teachers and staff. At the high school the long-standing Gay-Straight-Alliance, of which Sara is the teacher advisor, regularly organizes events around LGBT topics, such as participation in the annual Day of Silence or having children's author Lesléa Newman (*Heather Has Two Mommies*) as a guest speaker during whole school assemblies. Second, the school district is dedicated to social justice, acknowledges the responsibility of its educational institutions to eliminate oppression and injustice, and encourages the development of curricula and ways of teaching that interrupt oppressive systems, explicitly including that of heterosexism. Such institutional support for anti-oppression work is quite unusual. Many school districts curtail teachers' autonomy in regards to curriculum development; thus, foreclosing critical opportunities for teachers to become social change agents within their school communities. Both Sara and her students were very aware of this special circumstance. Many of the students remarked how unique this class is and what an opportunity it offered to them. However, the obstacles that the current move towards high stakes testing and standards-

based education poses for the development of groundbreaking curricula cannot be underestimated.

It is within this context in which the design, implementation and engagement with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum must be understood. The liberties that Sara enjoys when teaching the class some might consider extraordinary. Many might point out that teaching a class such as the Gay and Lesbian Literature course is not possible in most other schools. I have no way to refute this and certainly the many accounts by educators who have dealt with backlash from students, families, and administrators when attempting to teach in LGBTQ-expansive ways speaks volumes to the risks and limitations of such work. However, like others who have reported surprisingly positive reactions from students and families in response to LGBTQ-inclusive teaching (e.g., Blazar, 2009; Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009; Atkinson et al., 2010), I want to provide an example of how such work can be accomplished successfully. Too often, teachers and administrators take the easy way out and fall into self-censorship, relying on the narrative of fear of backlash to avoid a proactive stance in making their curricula and schools LGBTQ-expansive. It is a dangerous stance to take that leaves behind all those students who feel alienated because their norm-disruptive sexualities, genders or family structures are not valued, respected or even acknowledged in the heteronormative and cissexist spaces of schools. Mollie Blackburn (2012) has written about the power of literacy for anti-oppression work. In her work she explores how LGBTQ and allied youth become empowered and develop agency through literacy practices in queer-friendly spaces outside of school (e.g., youth center, literature discussion group), which they then use to assert themselves and take action in the queer-unfriendly spaces of schools. In this dissertation, I describe the power of an official school-based literacy curriculum that created a queer-friendly space inside the school. It is my hope that with this dissertation study I can add to the hopeful literature that shows that it is indeed possible to queer curriculum and pedagogy. And while it is not easy and comes with risks – even Sara initially feared backlash, yet decided to take not only the risk but an actual pay cut to make the implementation of the Gay and Lesbian

Literature class happen – it is work that needs to be done if we want to truly make schools places where all students can learn in an anti-oppressive environment.

Looking Ahead: A Vision for the Future – Pedagogical Implications

My vision for the future comprises of the following implications for a queered teaching of LGBTQI topics, particularly in secondary school contexts:

1. Learning about LGBTQI histories: LGBTQI topics need to be historically contextualized. Students need to understand how the experiences of LGBTQI people have shifted and changed throughout time and how historical developments influence contemporary debates. Only through a historical context can students understand how LGBTQ people have been historically, socially and culturally constructed and how shifts happen through their struggles and fights. In other words, as students explore the marginalization and oppression of LGBTQ people through a historical lens, for example, by learning about the historical construction of the modern homosexual as a person and identity (Foucault), important historical events (i.e., the Stonewall Uprising, the Lesbian and Gay Liberation movement and its participation in the larger Civil Rights movement) or shifting representational politics in media texts (i.e. *The Celluloid Closet*), they can make connections to current events that broach LGBTQ issues. Students are eager to develop such knowledge because it is relevant to their lives and their experiences.
2. Developing language: Introducing and discussing with students relevant terminology allows students to develop a framework through which to read queerly the world and the word (Freire). Students often do not know how to talk about LGBTQI topics in what Sara's students termed "intelligent" and "informed" ways. Through discussions of terminology students can gain an understanding of how language shapes how we construct our worlds and how language provides opportunities for change (e.g., through discursive processes of supplementation and re-signification).

3. Critical media analysis: Students come into our classrooms with knowledge, beliefs and assumptions about LGBTQ topics and the experiences of LGBTQ people that they gather to a considerable part through the media. However, media representations of LGBTQ people and their issues remain problematic, as Sara's students' critical analysis during the Gay Notions projects demonstrated. Integrating critical media analysis into a queered curriculum encourages students to deconstruct the overt, subtle, and often hidden media messages related to sexuality, sex and gender. Such projects allow students to draw on what they know and what interests them, making the curriculum relevant to their lives. In a world so immersed in media culture, critical media literacy should be a part of queer literacies teaching, especially since it aligns well with models of literacy teaching that acknowledge the connection between reading the world and reading the word (Freire).
4. Textual choices: Sara's curriculum takes a historical approach and focuses on a set of focal novels, written for an adult audience, and supplementary texts. Choosing multiple texts for students to explore various perspectives related to the experiences of LGBTQI people is a critical element of a queered approach to teaching these topics. While Sara pushed many boundaries, some restrictions remained in place. Some texts that might be considered more controversial because of more explicitly sexual content, are only available to those students who opt to do the Advanced Placement project. One of these novels, Rice-González's (2011) novel *Chulito*, was a favorite read among the students but considered too risky by Sara for a whole class adoption. Set in the South Bronx and amidst queer youth culture, *Chulito* tells a coming out story of a young Latino man. A text like *Chulito* could have invited expansive queer readings because it allows for intersectional explorations of issues around sexuality, gender, race and social class. In addition, bringing in texts written by authors of color is critical so that students do not come to understand LGBTQI experiences as white experiences.

5. Creative engagement: Teachers should engage their students creatively with the curriculum materials. The use of media, art, creative writing, drama, music, etc. provides different modes of engagement for students that can open up new lines of thinking and new imaginaries; thus, providing for subversive queer moments in the classroom. In addition, literacy strategies such as journal writing provide students with a medium in which they can safely explore and develop their understandings of LGBTQ topics.
6. Teacher qualities: Sara as well as her students emphasized that any teacher, regardless of their own sexual orientation should be able to teach an LGBTQI-expansive curriculum. However, students also mentioned several characteristics that they particularly valued in Sara's teaching. First, students greatly value a teacher's openness about their own lived experiences related to LGBTQ issues. This is especially important when teachers expect their students to share personal information or opinions and make connections to their own lives. Sara's openness allowed students to experience her as relatable and approachable, and it encouraged a back and forth sharing. Second, students want teachers who have a deep knowledge about LGBTQI issues, not just related to the official curriculum materials but they should keep up to date with current events. This means that teachers should be familiar with LGBTQI histories and events, but also that they need to keep their finger on the pulse of times, follow the news, and bring that into their classroom. Finally, teachers need to be comfortable to talk about sex. This might be difficult within school contexts where conversations about sex is highly tabooed, but especially with high school students the sexual dimension of sexuality will come up.
7. Creating safe classroom environments: Teachers need to create a classroom environment in which students feel safe to take risks as they share their stories, experiences, beliefs, and assumptions. This does not mean that students cannot or should not experience occasional discomfort in response to challenging new ideas. Indeed, within a queerly informed pedagogy teachers must push students by challenging commonsense thinking and by introducing

students to alternative ways of thinking. Rather than avoiding uncomfortable moments, it becomes important to provide opportunities for students to work through discomfort or moments of crisis.

8. Adopting a queer literacies approach: The six interconnecting dimensions of the queer literacies approach that I developed provide a theoretical framework that teachers can use to create, implement, analyze curricula that critically engage students with LGBTQI topics. Teachers could use the six dimensions of queer literacies for choosing texts, designing learning activities and assignments, and creating critical questions for students to explore. Teachers could choose texts that present counternarratives to dominant representations of LGBTQI people and they can provide opportunities for their students to create such counternarratives. As teachers consider an intersectional approach to the study of LGBTQI topics, they could choose a text or text set through which students can explore how issues of sexuality and gender intersect with other issues around race or social class. Shifting reading practices, for example, rather than reading texts for plot or character development, teachers can ask their students to employ a critical deconstructive lens and/or to use different routes of reading when they analyze a text.

Looking Ahead: Further Research Suggestions

One of the limitations of this study concerns that Sara's curriculum was not conceptualized through a queer lens and thus, this study cannot provide an examination of what the implementation of an explicitly queered curriculum would look like in practice. Future research should explore how students engage with an explicitly queered curriculum and pedagogy or one that was designed and implemented drawing on the six dimensions of the queer literacies framework.

The dimensions or pedagogical moves that make up the queer literacies framework have been developed particularly for the specific context of English literature classrooms. However, it seems reasonable to expect that a queer literacies approach would also be productive in other

subject areas, such as social studies. Future research could explore the application of a queer literacies framework to other content areas.

School climate research could consider the impact of a comprehensive LGBTQI-expansive curriculum that is embedded in queer literacies framework on improving the learning conditions for youth with norm-disruptive sexualities and genders or family structures, and on shifting homophobic or heterosexist attitudes of heterosexual students. In the current study, I alluded to a positive impact that such a curriculum can have based on the students' comments about how they experienced their school. However, since this study did not evaluate the impact on school climate of having an LGBTQ-expansive curriculum, future research may want to explore this more fully. This could expand anti-bullying and safe school research and could have important implications for curriculum development and policy work.

It may also be interesting to teach an LGBTQI-expansive curriculum to younger students. All the students in the current study were 17- to 18-years old and it was particularly interesting to hear from them that they believed that younger students would be too immature to engage productively with such a curriculum. Some research exists that documents teaching lesbian- and gay-themed texts to younger students; however only one larger project – the *No Outsiders* project – examines long-term LGBTQ-expansive work on the elementary level while also employing a queered lens.

Finally, this study was informed by various educational theories, and in particular by theories of antioppressive education and queer pedagogy; however, it did not specifically consider the analytical insights that might be gained from trans theoretical approaches. While queer theorizing considers issues of sexuality, gender and sex, trans-informed theoretical perspectives might add valuable insights for the teaching of an LGBTQI-expansive curriculum.

Concluding Thoughts

As I am putting the finishing touches on this dissertation and critically engage with my own work, I am noticing additional interpretations that remain not or under-explored in the

presented narrative. This study has taken a pedagogical approach to explore how Sara and her students engaged with the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum. It was my intention to bridge theory and practice and suggest possibilities for queer praxis. My main focus was, therefore, on showing the 'how' and the ways this 'how' created opportunities for students to engage with the intersecting texts and learning experiences the class made available to them in ways that reflect queer moments. I used the dimensions of the queer literacies framework to make sense of these queer moments. In my interpretative work, I paid less attention to how Sara and the students enacted, performed and negotiated their identities in relation to the curriculum and to each other. Since the idea of the performative, discursive, and relational construction of identities is central to queer poststructuralist thinking, this could be an area for further analysis. By re-reading the empirical materials through the lens of performativity the focus of inquiry could be shifted to generate new understandings related to questions around roles, positionings, and identity constructions. After all, the dimensions of queer literacies offer all kinds of possibilities for the teacher and for students to engage with an LGBTQI-expansive curriculum in ways that may be affirming, resisting, reimagining, reformulating, and more. I recognize that these other spaces for interpretative analysis exist; however, I feel it was beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore every possible analytical angle.

As with any narrative, meaning is not fixed in this dissertation. Where I am today, is only a pausing but not an end point. In addition, as with any text and narrative, different readers will read this work differently and come to their own understandings based on their own "cacophony of ideas swirling" (St. Pierre, 2011). This dissertation is one of many possible stories of the Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum. It is also a story of my personal journey and those critical experiences and intellectual engagements that have influenced me and set me on this path that became this dissertation. I introduced the first chapter telling a story about my first engagement with an LGBT-themed assignment in the first class that I took at the University of Massachusetts as a master's student. Just like the students in Sara's class, I felt excitement about the opportunity

to explore a topic that was close to me based on my own identities and experiences *and* that was disruptive and transformative in its subject matter.

This dissertation is also Sara's story – the story of a teacher who believes in the transformative potential of education, a teacher who was willing to take risks and make sacrifices to effect change, and a teacher who has been able to inspire and excite hundreds of students about a topic that is silenced in most schools. While this was not the focus of my study and I am not able to present empirical evidence, I know from my own experiences of being at the school and from my many conversations with my son Dominik that Sara's Gay and Lesbian Literature class has transformed the school's climate for LGBTQ and questioning students as well as for students with LGBTQ parents, family members, and friends. Critical educators believe that teachers have the potential to function as agents for social change in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Oftentimes it is individual teachers who courageously take on controversial issues and engage with their students in what some consider dangerous conversations that inspire a movement against oppressive practices in schools. The development of innovative antioppressive curricula is a form of teacher activism that contributes significantly to changes in the larger political landscape of education and to changes within local school cultures. This study tells the story of such a teacher – Sara. Sara's contribution to the field of education as a teacher-activist and curriculum designer has so far not been recognized. I hope that with the publication of this dissertation and the manuscripts coming out of it, more educators will take notice of the possibilities of queerly informed curriculum and educational praxis.

And, finally, it is the story of Sara's students – students who not only choose to enroll in this class but who love to engage with and are truly excited about this Gay and Lesbian Literature curriculum. Teaching a queer curriculum presents many challenges but maybe even more opportunities. It is a curriculum that is highly relevant to all students because all students have to negotiate their own positions and identities related to sexuality, sex and gender. It is a curriculum that is highly relevant to all students because it connects with students' lived experiences as well

as with important current events. And, it is a curriculum that is highly relevant to all students because all students are restricted by the homophobic, hetero-cissexist, and genderist cultures that permeate school life.

In conclusion, social questions appear in and develop out of literary texts. Literature and literary criticism can be used for social change.

I now want to close this dissertation by allowing the words of one of Sara's students to stand on their own because they speak powerfully to the impact a class like Sara's Gay and Lesbian Literature can have on students. These are the words that Dominik, my son, wrote to Sara as his final reflection.

My Son's Final Reflection – A Letter to Sara

Dear Sara,

This class has been an absolutely phenomenal experience! Although my life revolves around gayness and it is certainly not a new topic for me, I have never been able to discuss it in a school setting. Not only was I shocked and delighted to see who was taking the course, but also to see the varying connections my peers have to the gay community. This really came through during our discussion of the gay notions project, when one person after the other seemed to share that a family member, a friend, or just an acquaintance of theirs was gay. Seeing these connections made me feel happy and proud to go to a school that is so open and accepting and really proved to me that Harvey Milk's idea about acceptance coming from personal relations to gay people is true still today. Being able to talk about gay issues in school was such a nice change from the regular, heteronormative classroom setting.

In terms of books, I thought it was extremely interesting to see the change that occurred over the years in terms of how authors wrote about LGBTQ characters and issues in their books. The hidden meanings and symbolism present in "A Lost Lady" were both fascinating and tragic to find. Every reading seemed like a small adventure that challenged me to read between the lines and catch on to Willa Cather's secret messages. It was sad to know however, that Willa Cather

did not necessarily chose to write in such coded language, but was forced to do so by the norms and expectations of the time period during which she wrote this novel. This influence of periodic social and cultural norms on the writings of the various authors was a reoccurring theme throughout this course that really made me reflect on and appreciate the time period in which I live, where President Clinton openly support gay marriage and a course such as this one can be taught in a public school.

My AP project[52] *again pushed my analytical thought process and allowed me to really delve into the text. It was such a fascinating experience uncovering the subtle symbols within "Chulito" that I even mentioned it during my college interview. Trying to understand Gonzalez' messages and interpret them impassioned my writing. It was amazing to know that this text – been so recently published – had never been analyzed in this way by another student most likely even a professional scholar. I feel that I was a pioneer of sorts, setting out to examine this new text and discover hidden meanings that had never before you discover. I wish I had this type of opportunity more often because it made me feel that my writing was unique and even important, so much so that I am still considering sending my paper to Gonzalez, just for the hell of it.*

"Giovanni's Room" however was my favorite book for this course because I fell in love with the language used by James Baldwin and the honesty with which you told the story of said, troubled David. The agony and self-hatred that David felt allowed me to more fully understand why certain people – such as the homophobic Republicans on Capitol Hill – have such a hard time coming to terms with their own sexuality and living proudly as part of the LGBTQ community. Growing up in a household with two lesbian mothers, I have only seldom felt this internalized homophobia and had a positive experience coming out of the closet. Although I cannot say I am free from such feelings as internalized homophobia, which sadly is true for most,

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[52] Advanced Placement option

if not all, gay people, I certainly have never been as self antagonizing is David. I absolutely love this book and, if I ever have the time, will read it again in the future.

Finally, the films that were interspersed with the readings in this course not only gave us nice breaks from reading, but also told touching and important stories within the period of a couple of hours. From this list of movies, tool definitely stood out for me. First, "For the Bible tells me so" was a very touching and emotional movie that produce simultaneous feelings of anger and pride in me. I was angry at the religious groups for causing so much pain in people's lives and being one of the major reasons for homophobic attitudes within American society. At the same time, stories such as that of Reverend Gene Robin, and especially the scene during which his entire congregation stands up and cheers at his nomination, brought me close to tears. Knowing that there are people out there ready to make a difference and religious groups that are able to move past the hatred taught so often in the name of God, gave me hope for the future. Secondly,"Freeheld" was an emotional roller coaster which reiterated why it is so vital that the LGBTQ community must have equal rights under the law. Seeing a woman die of cancer in front of my eyes was one thing, but witnessing the pain her partner felt not only because of the situation but also because of the discrimination they faced was another. I'm so happy that with this year's election, gay marriage finally has a chance of being legalized and that we will soon hopefully no longer have to live as second-class citizens.

The discussions, papers, and movies in this course constantly related to my life and provided me with a much-needed source of gayness. Sometimes I feel separated from the gay community or even out of touch with my gay identity, but being in this course day after day allowed me to reconnect with this part of myself. Never before has of course so heavily catered to my own interests and I am overjoyed to have had you as my teacher. From now on, I will just constantly have to attend the GSA for my weekly dose of gay.

Sincerely,

Dominik Doemer

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

STUDENT INTERVIEWS – GUIDING QUESTIONS

Student Interviews – Guiding Questions

1. How was it for you taking this course?
2. When you enrolled in the class, you probably had some expectations, some hopes and concerns. Where are you now in regards to these?
3. What are you taking away from this class? What did you learn?
4. What experiences in the course were the most valuable for you?
5. What are your best memories about this class?
6. Thinking about sexuality, sexual orientation and gender – have you experienced any shifts in thinking as you were taking this class?
7. Has anything changed for you in regards to LGBT people or issues? Has taking this course affected your own attitudes towards LGBT peers? If so, how?
8. How would you explain to someone who is not familiar with this class what it is about?
9. What about Ms. Barber-Just's teaching stands out to you?
10. Was there anything you didn't like about the course?
11. Was there anything that you struggled with?
12. Do you think that the fact that this course is being offered at your school as part of the regular curriculum impacts your school's climate? If so, how? Has it affected antigay name-calling or bullying?
13. Does it matter in your opinion to have a course on Lesbian and Gay Literature offered at your school? Why? How?
14. Is there anything else you want to add?

APPENDIX B

INITIAL STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

Please complete this form.
If you don't feel comfortable answering a particular question, please just skip it.

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Are you a: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior (circle one)
4. Religion:
5. Sexuality: heterosexual bisexual lesbian gay queer other: (circle one)
6. How do you define the following terms?
   Heterosexual:
   Bisexual:
   Lesbian:
   Gay:
   Queer:
   Transgender:
7. Race/Ethnicity:
8. Were you born in the U.S. citizen? Yes/No If no, country of origin:
9. Is English your first language? Yes/No If no, what is your first language:
10. How familiar are you with lesbian and gay topics?
    Very familiar somewhat familiar not familiar (circle one)
11. How comfortable do you feel talking about lesbian and gay topics?
    Very comfortable somewhat comfortable uncomfortable (circle one)
12. How comfortable would you feel if one of your close friends came out to you as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?
    Very comfortable somewhat comfortable uncomfortable (circle one)
13. Do you have lesbian and/or gay: friends family members (circle all that apply)

If family members, who?

14. Have you ever viewed lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT)-themed media before?
    Yes/No If yes, what kind?
15. Have you ever read lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT)-themed literature before?
    Yes/No If yes, what texts did you read?
16. Have you ever attended or participated in LGBT-related events (e.g. Day of Silence, Gay Pride, movie screenings, etc.)
    Yes/No If yes, what were these events?
17. How would you describe your school's climate in regards to LGBT students?
18. Why are you interested in taking this class?
19. What are your hopes and concerns/fears regarding your participation in this class?

APPENDIX C

FINAL STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

Please complete this form. If you don't feel comfortable answering a particular question, please just skip it.

After having taking the class Gay and Lesbian Literature this trimester…

1. How familiar do you feel now with lesbian and gay topics?
   Very familiar somewhat familiar not familiar (circle one)

2. How comfortable do you feel now talking about lesbian and gay topics?
   Very comfortable somewhat comfortable uncomfortable (circle one)

3. How comfortable would you feel now if one of your close friends came out to you as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?
   Very comfortable somewhat comfortable uncomfortable (circle one)

4. After taking this class, do you consider yourself to be an ally for LGBTQ people? Yes/No

5. Reflecting back on your hopes and concerns for this class, what are your thoughts now?

6. How was it for you taking this class?

7. What are the most important new understandings that you are taking away from this class?

8. What did you learn about LGBTQ topics/issues and LGBTQ people?

9. Which novel(s) did you like best? Why?

10. Which novel(s) did you like least? Why?

11. Which learning experiences/assignments/activities were the most powerful for you? Why?

12. Did you ever talk with someone outside of class about the topics discussed in class? With whom (friends/family)? About what?

13. Has taking this class changed how you think about gender and sexuality in general? Related to your own person? If so, how?

14. If someone asked you why a course such as this one should be offered at a high school, what would you say?

15. Ms. Barber-Just used some mindfulness practices, such as playing music during writing activities, the proprioceptive writing that you did in class, or the journaling. How was this for you? Did you like it? Did the music help you focus?

16. Ms. Barber-Just gave you some creative projects. How was it for you engaging with the literature through such creative projects? How did it help you or not to engage with the literature in this way?

17. Do you wish that anything had been different about this class? If so, what?

18. How important was it for you to have an openly lesbian/bisexual teacher teach this class?

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT - TEACHER

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Principal Investigator: Kirsten Helmer, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education

Study Title: An Explorative Ethnographic Case Study of an Innovative Gay and Lesbian English Literature High School Course

1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?

This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research study. This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate and any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. I encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?

Participants for this study are the teacher and the students of the course "Lesbian and Gay Literature" that is offered during the third trimester of the 2012-13 School Year at Amherst Regional High School in Amherst, Massachusetts.

3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this research study is to examine how an innovative English literature curriculum through which students explore lesbian and gay experiences and stories gets enacted in a high school classroom. I am particularly interested in learning about the content of the class, the pedagogical choices and tools of the teacher, and how the students make meaning of their learning in response to this. To address these questions from a critical perspective, I will use the theoretical frameworks of critical multicultural education and critical pedagogy in conjunction with queer theory and queer pedagogy.

4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The research will be conducted in the class "Lesbian and Gay Literature" during the third trimester of the 2012-13 School Year at Amherst Regional High School in Amherst, Massachusetts. Classroom observations will begin March 12, 2013, continue until the end of the school year in mid-June, 2013, and include three to four classroom visits per week.

5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. I will observe you as you teach this class.
2. I may audio- and/or videotape/photograph selected classroom activities and classroom conversations.
3. I will collect, read and analyze your responses to the students' class assignments.
4. I will ask you to take part in two in-depth interviews. My questions will focus on how you developed the course, your experiences teaching this class, your reflections on your teaching style and practices including your teaching philosophy, your reflections on the kind of learning that you see happening in your classroom, and any challenges that have come up for you teaching this class.

6. WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, I hope that your participation in the study may help to make your work public so that it may inspire other educators, schools, and school districts to also engage in this important work. I believe that your class is an example of innovative work in the field of education that offers students the unique opportunity to engage with a topic that is often silenced in our schools, helping them to understand the effects of homophobia.

7. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

There are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

8. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of the study records and of the audio-/videotapes. I will keep all study records in a secure location (locking file cabinet). All electronic files (e.g., audio-/video files, scanned documents, spreadsheets, etc.) containing identifiable information will be stored on a computer that has password protection, to which only I have access, to prevent access by unauthorized users. The digital audio- and videotapes will be destroyed after the research report, oral presentations, and journal articles and/or book chapters are completed, which may take up to five (5) years after the data has been collected.
This research will be shared in the following ways: the dissertation report and presentation during my oral defense submitted to my dissertation committee at the School of Education; conference presentations at regional and/or national venues; publication in the form of an academic journal article, book chapter, and/or book. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in any publications or presentations. This information will remain confidential. The only people who will have access to my research data will be the person who will help me transcribe my data.

9. WILL I RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT FOR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?

You will not receive any payment or other compensation for participation in this study.

10. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may call me at (413) 461-1036, email me at khelmer@educ.umass.edu, or ask me in person. You may also contact my advisor Dr. Maria José Botelho at (413) 545-1110 or mbotelho@educ.umass.edu.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact Associate Dean Dr. Linda Griffin for the School of Education's Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Amherst at (413) 545-6984 or lgriffin@educ.umass.edu.

11. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

12. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. The general purposes and particulars of the study as well as possible inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time.

_____	_____	_____
Participant Signature:	Print Name:	Date:

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

_____	_____	_____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Print Name:	Date:

APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER & FORM - PARENTS

Dear Parent,
My name is Kirsten Helmer. I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Language, Literacy, and Culture Concentration of the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. My current research interests focus on the ways how lesbian and gay issues can be integrated into the school curricula, specifically in English language arts.

Ever since I learned about how prevalent antigay bullying is in our schools, which culminated in an epidemic of gay teen's suicides a couple of years ago, I have decided to focus my graduate studies on lesbian and gay issues in education. When I learned about the course "Lesbian and Gay Literature" that is offered at your child's school, I knew I needed to learn more about how this class is taught and what students take away from this class. I believe that this class is an example of innovative work in the field of education that offers students the unique opportunity to engage with a topic that is often silenced in our schools, helping them to understand the effects of homophobia. It is my hope that my study will inspire other educators, schools, and school districts to also engage in this important work.

Your child is enrolled in the class "Lesbian and Gay Literature" taught by Ms. Sara Barber-Just. I plan to visit and collect data in the class at Amherst Regional High School during the third trimester of the 2012-13 School Year. Classroom observations will begin March 12, 2013 and continue until the end of the school year in mid-June, 2013.

I will visit the class three to four times a week to observe and participate in the lessons and explore the classroom activities and interactions among teacher and students. With your permission, I would like to

(1) audio-/videotape and/or take photos of selected classroom activities.
(2) photograph and/or copy some of your child's work completed in this class so that I may review it.
(3) conduct one personal interviews/focus group interview with your daughter/son, towards the end of the trimester.
(4) Have your child complete two brief questionnaires, one at the beginning of the trimester and one at the end of the trimester.

The audio/videotapes and photographs of classroom conversations and activities, the samples of student work, the personal interviews and the questionnaires will help me better understand how the students make meaning of and engage with the course's content, what they learn about lesbian and gay experiences, and how they experience their participation and learning in this class. These activities will be coordinated with your child's teacher and will not disturb your child's participation in the classroom.
Please note that I will also have an assent form for your daughter/son. I have asked your daughter/son to talk with you about the participation in the study. Even if you give your

permission for your child to take part in this study, your daughter/son can still decide not to do this.

This study probably will not help you or your child personally, but if you agree to have your child participate in this study, it will teach me important ways on how to create and teach more inclusive school curricula. Also, participation in a research study itself is often a rewarding because it affirms the value of an experience.

There are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

This research will be shared in the following ways: as part of my dissertation which will be presented to my dissertation committee at the School of Education; presentations at conferences; and through academic journal article, book chapters and/or a published book. I might use your child's work to illustrate these presentations and/or publications. I will not use his/her name or anything else that might identify your child in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. The only people who will have access to my research data will be the person who will help me transcribe my interview data. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw your permission even after you have consented to allow me to audio/videotape/photograph your child engaged in classroom activities, copy your child's class work and/or interview your child.

Please sign the attached form, if you permit me to review your child's schoolwork and interview your child. The second copy of this consent form is for your records. If you wish to receive a summary report of the research findings, please provide your name and mailing address on the consent form.

I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may call me at 413-461-1036, email me at khelmer@educ.umass.edu, or ask me during a personal meeting. You may also contact my advisor Dr. Maria José Botelho at (413) 545-1110 or mbotelho@educ.umass.edu. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact Associate Dean Dr. Linda Griffin for the School of Education's Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Amherst at (413) 545-6984 or lgriffin@educ.umass.edu.
Sincerely,

Kirsten Helmer
Doctoral Candidate
Language, Literacy, and Culture Concentration
School of Education
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Phone number: 413-461-1036
E-mail: khelmer@educ.umass.edu

Consent Form – Parent

I acknowledge that the focus of this research project has been explained to me and that any question that I have asked has been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can change my mind and deny access to or request copies to my child's schoolwork, deny permission to interview or audio/videotape or photograph my child at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Kirsten Helmer and agree to the following (you may choose to decline any):

____ I agree to allow Kirsten Helmer to audio-/videotape and/or take photos of selected classroom activities and conversations.
____ I agree to allow Kirsten Helmer to make copies of my child's schoolwork for the purposes of learning about how my child makes meaning of the content taught in the class "Lesbian and Gay Literature".
____ I agree to allow Kirsten Helmer to administer two questionnaires to my child.
____ I agree to allow photographed samples of my child's work with his/her name removed to be shared at conferences and/or published as a journal article.
____ I agree to allow excerpts of the audio/videotapes or photographs that show my child to be shared during oral presentations and/or conferences.

Signature: _____
Name (printed): _____
Name of child: _____
Date: _____

APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER & FORM – STUDENTS, 18+ YEARS OLD

Dear Student,

My name is Kirsten Helmer. I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Language, Literacy, and Culture concentration of the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. My current research interests focus on the ways how lesbian and gay issues can be integrated into school curricula, specifically in English language arts.

Ever since I have learned about the prevalence of antigay bullying in our schools, which culminated in an epidemic of gay teen's suicides a couple of years ago, I have decided to focus my graduate studies on lesbian and gay issues in education. When I learned about the course "Lesbian and Gay Literature" that is offered at your school, I knew I needed to learn more about how this class is taught and what you, as the students, take away from participating in this class. I believe that this class is an example of innovative work in the field of education that offers students the unique opportunity to engage with a topic that is often silenced in our schools, helping you to understand the effects of homophobia. It is my hope that my study will inspire other educators, schools, and school districts to also engage in this important work.

You are enrolled in the class "Lesbian and Gay Literature" taught by Ms. Sara Barber-Just. I plan to visit and collect data in the class at Amherst Regional High School during the third trimester of the 2012-13 School Year. Classroom observations will begin March 12, 2013 and continue until the end of the school year in mid-June, 2013.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. I will ask you questions about what you are learning in the class and how you are making meaning of the readings and class activities.
2. I will ask you questions about why you are taking this course and how you feel about being in this class.
3. I may make a videotape or take photos of you doing activities in the classroom and/or audiotape what you say during the classroom conversations.
4. I may contact you to conduct a personal interview, lasting around 30 minutes to ask you some more questions about your experiences with the course. You will have the chance then to decide whether you want to answer my questions.
5. I may photograph and/or copy, and review the class work that you submit to your teacher (e.g., written papers, projects).
6. I will ask you to complete two questionnaires, one at the beginning of the course and one at the end of the course.

The audio/videotapes and photographs of classroom conversations and activities, the samples of your work, the personal interview, and the questionnaires will help me better understand how you make meaning of and engage with the course's content, what you learn about lesbian and gay history, and how you experience your participation and learning in this class.

This research will be shared in the following ways: as part of my dissertation which will be presented to my dissertation committee at the School of Education; presentations at conferences; and through academic journal article, book chapters and/or a published book. I might use your work to illustrate these presentations and/or publications. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. The only people who will have access to my research data will be the person who will help me transcribe my interview data.

This study probably will not help you personally, but if you participate in this study, it will teach me important ways on how to make school curricula more inclusive of the experiences of lesbian and gay people. Often, the participation in a research study itself is a rewarding experience because it affirms the value of your experience.

If you don't want to be in this study, you don't have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop. If you choose not to participate in the study, it will not affect the grade you will receive for this class.

I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have questions later on, you can call me at 413-461-1036, email me at khelmer@educ.umass.edu, or ask me in person. If you have any questions concerning the rights of a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

Sincerely,
Kirsten Helmer
Doctoral Candidate
Language, Literacy, and Culture Concentration
School of Education
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Phone number: 413-461-1036
E-mail: khelmer@educ.umass.edu

Consent Form – Student

I acknowledge that the focus of this research project has been explained to me and that any question that I have asked has been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can change my mind and deny access to or request copies to my schoolwork, deny permission for a personal interview or audio/videotape or photograph of my person at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Kirsten Helmer and agree to the following (you may choose to decline any):

____ I agree to allow Kirsten Helmer to audio-/videotape and/or take photos of selected classroom activities and conversations.
____ I agree to allow Kirsten Helmer to make copies of my schoolwork for the purposes of learning about how I make meaning of the content taught in the class "Lesbian and Gay Literature".
____ I agree to allow Kirsten Helmer to administer two questionnaires.
____ I agree to allow photographed samples of my work with my name removed, to be shared at conferences and/or published in a journal article.
____ I agree to allow excerpts of the audio/videotapes or photographs that show my person to be shared during oral presentations and/or conferences.

Signature: _____
Name (printed): _____
Date: _____

APPENDIX G

ASSENT LETTER – STUDENTS, UNDERAGE

Dear Student,
My name is Kirsten Helmer. I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Language, Literacy, and Culture Concentration of the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. My current research interests focus on the ways how lesbian and gay issues can be integrated into the school curricula, specifically in English language arts.

Ever since I have learned about the prevalence of antigay bullying in our schools, which culminated in an epidemic of gay teen's suicides a couple of years ago, I have decided to focus my graduate studies on lesbian and gay issues in education. When I learned about the course "Lesbian and Gay Literature" that is offered at your school, I knew I needed to learn more about how this class is taught and what you, as the students, take away from participating in this class. I believe that this class is an example of innovative work in the field of education that offers students the unique opportunity to engage with a topic that is often silenced in our schools, helping you to understand the effects of homophobia. It is my hope that my study will inspire other educators, schools, and school districts to also engage in this important work.

You are enrolled in the class "Lesbian and Gay Literature" taught by Ms. Sara Barber-Just. I plan to visit and collect data in the class at Amherst Regional High School during the third trimester of the 2012-13 School Year. Classroom observations will begin March 12, 2013 and continue until the end of the school year in mid-June, 2013.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. I will ask you questions about what you are learning in the class and how you are making meaning of the readings and class activities.
2. I will ask you questions about why you are taking this course and how you feel about being in this class.
3. I may make a videotape or take photos of you doing activities in the classroom and/or audiotape what you say during the classroom conversations.
4. I will ask you to complete two questionnaires, one at the beginning and one at the end of the course.
5. I may contact you to conduct a personal interview, lasting approximately 30 minutes, to ask you some more questions about your experiences with the course. You will have the chance then to decide whether you want to answer my questions.
6. I may photograph and/or copy, and review the class work (e.g., written papers, projects) that you submit to your teacher.

The audio/videotapes and photographs of classroom conversations and activities, the samples of your work, and the personal interviews will help me better understand how you make meaning of and engage with the course's content, what you learn about lesbian and gay history, and how you experience your participation and learning in this class.

This research will be shared in the following ways: as part of my dissertation which will be presented to my dissertation committee at the School of Education; presentations at conferences; and through academic journal article, book chapters and/or a published book. I might use your work to illustrate these presentations and/or publications. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. The only people who will have access to my research data will be the person who will help me transcribe my interview data.

This study probably will not help you personally, but if you participate in this study, it will teach me important ways on how to make school curricula more inclusive of the experiences of lesbian and gay people.

Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. Your parents have given their permission for you to take part in this study. Even though your parents said "yes," you can still decide not to do this.

If you don't want to be in this study, you don't have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop. If you choose not to participate in the study, it will not affect the grade you will receive for this class.

I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have questions later on, you can call me at 413-461-1036, email me at khelmer@educ.umass.edu, or ask me in person.

Sincerely,
Kirsten Helmer
Doctoral Candidate
Language, Literacy, and Culture Concentration
School of Education
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Phone number: 413-461-1036
E-mail: khelmer@educ.umass.edu

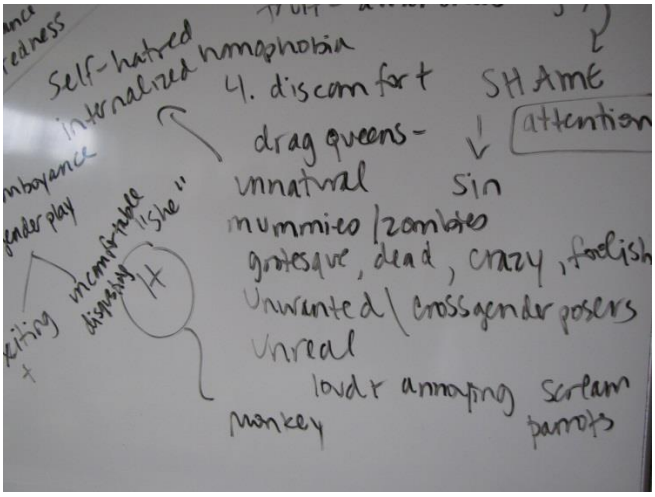
Signing your name at the bottom means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form after you have signed it.

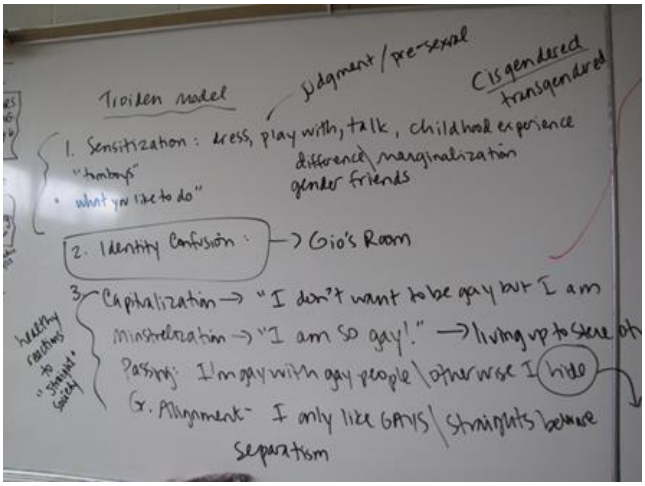
_____ _____

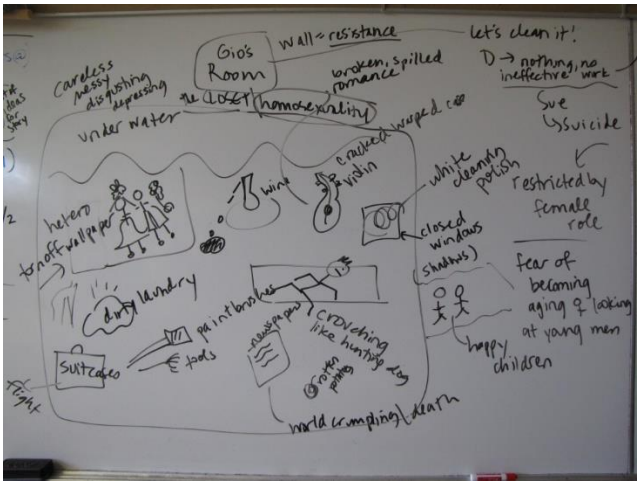
Signature Date

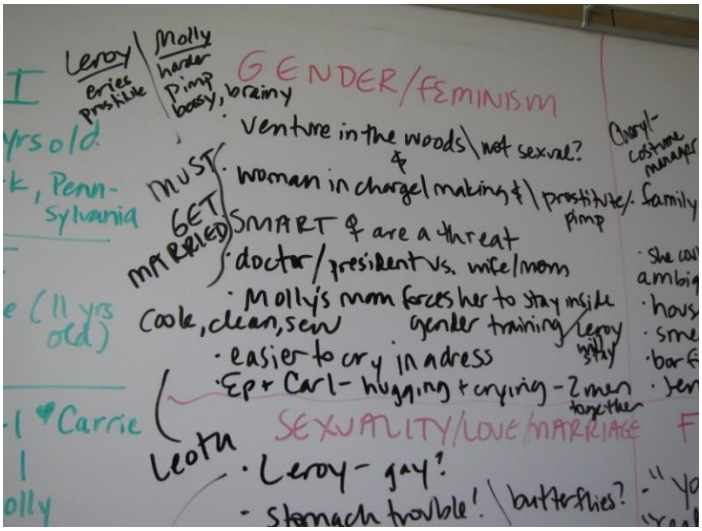
APPENDIX H

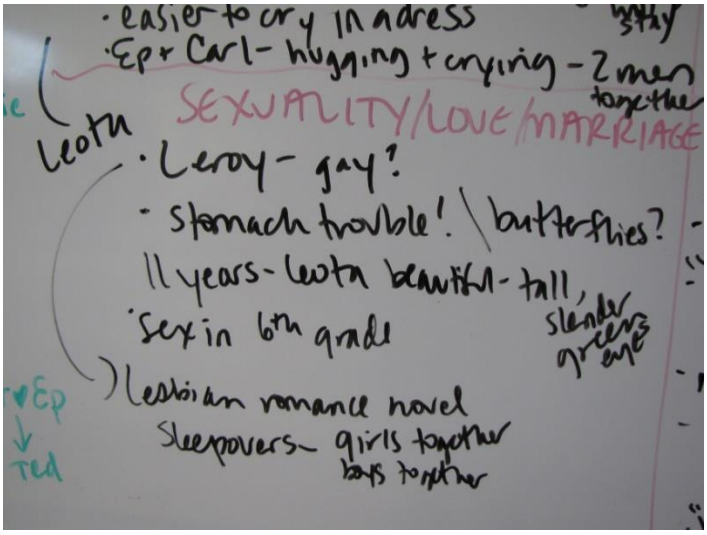
WHITEBOARD NOTES

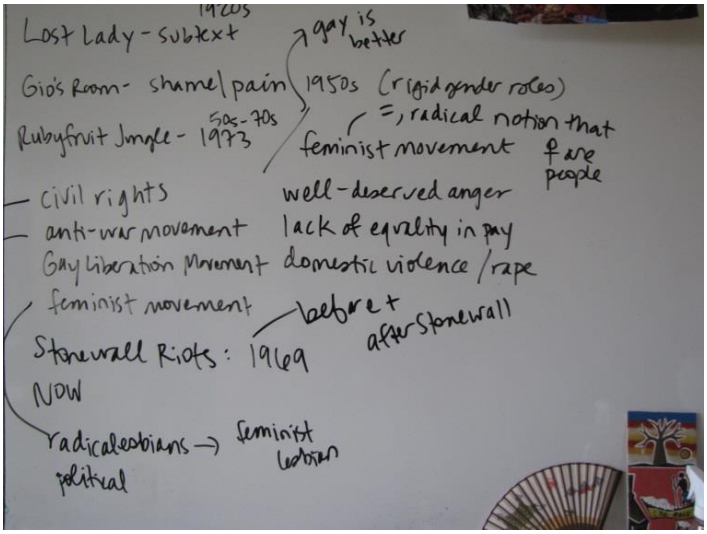







Leroy
eries
prostitute
Molly
harder
pimp
bossy, brainy
GENDER/FEMINISM
Venture in the woods \ not sexual?
woman in charge/making $ \ prostitute/pimp
MUST GET MARRIED
SMART ♀ are a threat
doctor/president vs. wife/mom
Molly's mom forces her to stay inside
Cook, clean, sew
gender training
Leroy will stay
easier to cry in adress
Ep + Carl - hugging + crying - 2 men together
SEXUALITY/LOVE/MARRIAGE
Leota
Leroy - gay?
stomach trouble! \ butterflies?
Carrie
Penn-sylvania
(11 yrs old)


easier to cry in adress
Ep + Carl - hugging + crying - 2 men together
SEXUALITY/LOVE/MARRIAGE
Leota
Leroy - gay?
stomach trouble! \ butterflies?
11 years - Leota beautiful - tall, slender
green eye
sex in 6th grade
Lesbian romance novel
Sleepovers - girls together
boys together
Ep
Ted


1920s
Lost Lady - subtext
gay is better
Gio's Room - shame/pain
1950s (rigid gender roles)
Rubyfruit Jungle - 1973
50s-70s
=, radical notion that ♀ are people
feminist movement
civil rights
well-deserved anger
anti-war movement
lack of equality in pay
Gay Liberation Movement
domestic violence/rape
feminist movement
before + after Stonewall
Stonewall Riots: 1969
NOW
radical lesbians → feminist lesbian
political

APPENDIX I

INTRODUCORY WRITING/PERCEPTIONS

Gay and Lesbian Literature

Sharing your ideas and feelings with others will be an important part of this course. In this introductory writing exercise, consider the questions below and answer as many of them as you can, drawing upon your education, your upbringing, and your personal experience. Please type and double space.

Part I. (about 1 page)

How have you learned about sexuality and sexual orientation? More specifically, what are some of the positive and/or negative messages you have received about gay, lesbian, or bisexual people? Where did this information come from?

Also, what is socially expected of you (by friends, family, and the wider world) in regard to sexual orientation? Who holds these expectations? Feel free to talk about how you feel about your answers to these questions.

Part II (about 1 page)

How would you describe the climate in this country and the world at large for LGBT people? What facts or experiences inform this description?

Part III (paragraph)

Discuss why you have chosen to take this class and come up with a few questions you would like to have answered by the end of this course!

APPENDIX J

SYLLABUS GAY AND LESBIAN LITERATURE

Gay and Lesbian Literature

Ms. Barber-Just

Students in public schools have been reading literary classics by gay, lesbian, and bisexual authors for more than a century; however, gay authors' lives are often concealed rather than rightfully explored. This course closely examines the struggles and triumphs of these artists—as well as the historical periods during which they wrote—allowing readers to more deeply analyze their diverse literary contributions. Gay and Lesbian Literature is split into five major sections, moving in chronological order from the early 1900s to the 1990s. Class readings include works written by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender authors during eras of severe legal and social oppression; conformity and self-loathing; anger, activism, and radicalism; and, finally, pride and acceptance. The course focuses on renowned modern and contemporary American authors such Willa Cather, James Baldwin, Rita Mae Brown, and Michael Cunningham, and concludes with an examination of Sri Lankan author Shyam Selvadurai and a study of short stories from around the world. Each unit includes a combination of critical essays, poetry, short story, and/or film, providing a rich cultural and historical context for the featured literature. You will no doubt leave this class with a better understanding of LGBT people, their unique and vibrant culture and literature, and their search for inclusion and representation.

Syllabus:

First 2 weeks: The Early 1900s-1930s

A Lost Lady, by Willa Cather

excerpts from Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde

Next 2 weeks: The 1950s

Giovanni's Room, by James Baldwin

gay identity development models

Next 2 weeks: The 1970s and '80s

Rubyfruit Jungle, by Rita Mae Brown

"A Letter to Harvey Milk," by Leslea Newman

essays and poetry

Next 3 weeks: The 1990s

The Hours, by Michael Cunningham,

Excerpts from *Mrs. Dalloway,* by Virginia Woolf

Last 2 weeks: Contemporary/International Perspectives

Funny Boy, by Shyam Selvadurai

independent LGBT research project

HONORS/AP PROJECTS

11th and 12th grade literature students may complete one independent project (in one class) for honors credit and two independent projects (over two courses) for AP credit (one classical, one contemporary). Each project requires reading at least one additional novel and writing an 8-12 page analytical paper. Honors and AP projects are worth 20% of a student's overall course grade. Juniors wishing to change from the Honors or AP designation to a College Prep designation MUST complete the drop by the midterm; seniors must make any changes in English courses by the midterm of the first trimester of their senior year.

Attendance and Class Participation

It is essential that you attend class daily, as much of the learning is based on in-class notes, writing, discussion, and group work. If you are absent, please contact me via email or phone in order to stay up-to-date on work from home. (barber-justs@arps.org/413-362-1516)

Reading and Writing

You will read literature daily in this class, in addition to writing often. When there is reading, you will have approximately 20-25 pages of reading a night. In addition, you will be expected to write a paper approximately every other week. Nearly all pieces will be graded within 1-2 weeks and returned to you with extensive teacher comments and evaluation; you will then revise your writing right away for your course portfolio. This helps you to constantly learn from your reading and writing, revising weekly to improve upon your skills. The writing portfolio is worth 10% of your class grade.

Late Work

In the event of absence, students are given a reasonable amount of time to make up work (usually 1-2 days for each class missed). I want you to succeed in class, and so turning in late work should be your priority. Please advocate for yourself in this regard! If you are ever behind, please contact me to set up a reasonable schedule for making up assignments. I am also happy to provide a quiet room for you to work in during my study hall, prep period, or after school. If you have an IEP or 504, you are expected to speak with me beforehand about whether you will need to use accommodations for extended time, and if so, how much time you will need. Any late work will be marked down a grade per day in the event that students have not communicated with me and have no reasonable explanation for tardiness.

Class Discussion

I love a class capable of lively discussion. As such, I expect you to follow a few basic rules: Come prepared for class, having completed any reading, writing, and any other class assignments, so that you may contribute your ideas. Exercise strong listening. Don't talk when others are talking; don't have side conversations. Respond to others respectfully, taking into consideration

their views and ideas, building upon them, challenging them, and proposing new ideas. Never use derogatory language, tone, or gestures in a discussion. I enforce this policy like no other. I will not tolerate offensive put-downs even if they are used so casually they have become the norm. Be brave enough to present your ideas in front of a group, even if you're shy. Engage in debate without making others ideas seem ridiculous. Commit yourself to the idea that every single person in a class has something valid to say, and work to increase or decrease your own participation accordingly.

Plagiarism

Any unacknowledged use (not cited) of the words or ideas of another writer's work is an act of intellectual dishonesty. Since citing another's work in no way devalues an essay, stealing the words of another writer (this includes friends, relatives, books, articles, and the Internet) will result in a zero for the assignment, a parent meeting/communication, ineligibility for the honor roll in the trimester in which the action occurs, and loss of your academic integrity. Copying notebooks, copying homework, cheating on quizzes, and similar forms of intellectual dishonesty lead to the same consequences. Remember, it is always better to ask for an extension or ask for help when you struggle than it is to commit an act of plagiarism.

APPENDIX K

THE CELLULOID CLOSET/NOTES - HANDOUT

1. sissies
2. vampires
3. strong women in men's clothes=sexy
4. "weak" men in women's clothes=funny
5. gays who must die (heroes), be killed (victims), or kill themselves—"a nasty end in the last reel"
6. gay subtext due to censorship—Ben Hur, Rebecca, Rebel Without a Cause, movies where you have to "read between the lines"
7. the need to abide by traditional gender roles (walk like a man, sleep with men if you're a "real" woman or feminine)
8. indirect expression of homosexuality—everybody in the closet (stereotypically gay characters who aren't otherwise out as gay—the guy with the lilac floor, etc.)
9. cutting sexual material (censorship of gay content, even in films based on explicitly gay books) and forcing writers/filmmakers to "write between the lines"
10. being gay as perverted, sick, immoral, something "nice people don't do," and leading to a dark, sad, depraved, depressing life of misery, abuse, and isolation
11. gay people just need a good experience with a man or woman of the opposite gender
12. gay men as having incredible camaraderie—belonging to a group, celebrating, dealing with their pain—as in Boys in the Band
13. laws against "the core of one's being" and humanity lead to self-hatred/still classified as a mental illness
14. casting black gays b/c it's easier to paint "the other" as being a person of color
15. excessive use of "faggot" and "queer"—in a way no other derogatory words are used
16. surprise murder of a gay person in a film—often horrendously violent—even a purposeful gay bashing for audience pleasure
17. audience discomfort with films that show healthy gay sexuality—pandemonium
18. lesbian nudity and sexuality—erotic, titillating, or completely unthreatening to men
19. gay male sexuality as completely threatening—intimacy is more often expressed through violence, as an act of anger; two men together are seen as "weak"
20. everyone is just searching for love—this is the constant—love IS the same for all of us
21. universal work—does it exist? some people appreciate gay work that is simply gay and doesn't need to be decoded, interpreted, etc.
22. the gay hero who dies (Philadelphia, Brokeback Mountain, Milk, etc.)
23. censorship of REAL images—many heroic stories of real people exist

APPENDIX L

DEFINITIONS TERMINOLOGY HANDOUT

DEFINITIONS *(from Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook.)*

Heterosexism: the societal, cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that assume and enforce the idea that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, acceptable sexual orientation.

Heterosexual Privilege: the benefits and advantages heterosexuals receive in a heterosexist culture; also, the benefits lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people receive as a result of claiming a heterosexual identity or denying a homosexual or bisexual identity.

Sexism: the societal, cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege men, subordinate women, and denigrate women-identified values.

Homophobia: the fear, hatred, or intolerance of lesbians and gay men or of any behavior that falls outside the boundaries of traditional gender roles. Homophobia can be manifested as fear of association with lesbian or gay people or fear of being perceived as lesbian or gay. Homophobic behavior can range from telling jokes about lesbian and gay people to physical violence against people thought to be lesbian or gay.

Biphobia: the fear, hatred, or intolerance of bisexual women or men.

Internalized Homophobia or Biphobia: the fear and hatred that some gays, lesbians, and bisexuals feel toward themselves or toward other gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, as a result of having lived in a heterosexist, homophobic culture.

Sexual Orientation: the desire for intimate, emotional, and sexual relationships with people of the same gender (lesbian, gay), the other gender (heterosexual), or either gender (bisexual).

Biological Sex: the physiological and anatomical characteristics of maleness or femaleness with which a person is born.

Gender Roles: the socially constructed and culturally specific behavior and appearance expectations imposed on women (femininity) and men (masculinity).

Gender Identity: one's psychological sense of oneself as a male or a female.

Transgender Person: a person whose self-identification challenges traditional notions of gender and sexuality; transgender people include transsexuals and others who don't conform to traditional understandings of labels like male/female or heterosexual/homosexual.

Transsexual: a person whose biological sex does not match his or her gender identity and who, through gender reassignment surgery and hormone treatments, seeks to change the physical body to match this gender identity. Transsexuals' sexual orientation can be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual.

APPENDIX M

Giovanni's Room - Creative Final Project

As a final project for *Giovanni's Room*, you will represent the theme/symbol you have been following throughout the novel in a creative project. You may also explore specific aspects of the sexual identity model we studied, as long as you relate it to the text. There are many avenues you may choose for this project, so try to pick something you can have fun with!

Examples of creative projects include but are not strictly limited to:

Painting, Drawing, Collage, or Dance (all of these should explore some thematic aspect of the novel and must be accompanied by a one page written statement explaining how your project is connected to the theme/symbol you have chosen).

Song (lyrics should connect to characters, symbols, and themes within the novel, and should be at least a page long.) Please record it for us or perform it!

Poetry (poems should connect to characters, symbols, and themes within the novel, and should be at least a page long.)

Short Film (This can take the shape of interviews with people about a key theme related to the text—documentary. It can also be a recreation of a dramatic scene from the book or a fictional scene you have created that is linked to the text in some way.)

Letter (Write a letter from the point of view of a character within the novel. In doing so, you must use the character's voice as it is portrayed within the novel. Often what works best here is to delve more deeply into the text, revealing a character's unstated inner feelings, resolving a question left by the author, or explaining actions that are not clearly understood by readers or other characters. 2 pgs. +)

***Creative Writing*:** Using a theme or symbol from the novel as a jumping off point, share a story from your own life or create a work of fiction. Rather than simply "telling" the reader what is happening, try to play with Baldwin's creative style. Use sounds, sights, smells, and feelings to portray the events, matched with some---even subtle—symbolism.

Drama (Act out a scene from the novel or create a new scene which does not appear within the novel. If you act out the scene, you must include a written script, dress the part, and memorize your lines. (2 pgs. +)

All projects should be typed, double-spaced, and should represent your BEST EFFORT!

APPENDIX N

INTRODUCTION TO RITA MAE BROWN AND THE RADICALESBIANS

***Rubyfruit Jungle*: biography, background, bastards, and themes o' interest!**

Rita Mae Brown (born November 28, 1944) is a prolific American writer. She is best known for her first novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Published in 1973, it dealt with lesbian themes in an explicit manner unusual for the time. Brown is also a successful mystery writer and an Emmy-nominated screenwriter. Brown was born in Hanover, Pennsylvania, and grew up in Florida, and as of 2004 lived outside Charlottesville, Virginia.

In the 1960s, Brown attended the University of Florida but transferred. She moved to New York and attended New York University, where she received a degree in classics and English. Later she received another degree in cinematography from the New York School of Visual Arts. She also holds a doctorate in political science from the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C.

In the late 1960s, Brown turned her attention to politics. She became active in the American Civil Rights Movement, the anti-war movement, the Gay Liberation movement and the feminist movement. She cofounded the Student Homophile League and participated in the Stonewall riots in New York City. She took an administrative position with the fledgling National Organization for Women, but angrily resigned in February 1970 over Betty Friedan's anti-gay remarks and NOW's attempts to distance itself from lesbian organizations. She played a leading role in the "Lavender Menace" zap of the Second Congress to Unite Women on May 1, 1970, which protested about Friedan's remarks and the exclusion of lesbians from the women's movement.

In the early 1970s, she became a founding member of *The Furies Collective*, a lesbian feminist newspaper collective which held that heterosexuality was the root of all oppression. She has said, "I don't believe in straight or gay. I really don't. I think we're all degrees of bisexual."

Brown has been in relationships with tennis player Martina Navratilova, actress/writer Fannie Flagg, socialite Judy Nelson, and politician Elaine Noble.

Brown enjoys American fox hunting and is master of her Fox Hunt Club. She has also played polo, and started the women-only Blue Ridge Polo Club.

From Radicalesbians' *The Woman-Identified Woman* (1970):

What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society - perhaps then, but certainly later - cares to allow her. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with herself. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society--the female role. The turmoil she experiences tends to induce guilt proportional to the degree to which she feels she is not meeting social expectations, and/or

eventually drives her to question and analyze what the rest of her society more or less accepts. She is forced to evolve her own life pattern, often living much of her life alone, learning usually much earlier than her "straight" (heterosexual) sisters about the essential aloneness of life (which the myth of marriage obscures) and about the reality of illusions. To the extent that she cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself. For she is caught somewhere between accepting society's view of her - in which case she cannot accept herself - and coming to understand what this sexist society has done to her and why it is functional and necessary for it to do so. Those of us who work that through find ourselves on the other side of a tortuous journey through a night that may have been decades long. The perspective gained from that journey, the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women, is something to be shared with all women - because we are all women.

Bastard--1**:** an illegitimate child (born to unwed parents) 2**:** something that is spurious, irregular, inferior, or of questionable origin 3 a**:** an offensive or disagreeable person —used as a generalized term of abuse

Key Themes—Race and Class, Gender Roles and Feminism, Sexuality and Love, Family (Biological and Created)

APPENDIX O

BEYOND BINARIES QUESTIONNAIRE (OCHS, 2013)

Other-sex attracted					Same-sex attracted	
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

***PLEASE READ**: Many of the questions refer to the spectrum at the top of this page. All questions that refer to sexual experience refer only to consensual experience. If a question doesn't apply to your experience, it's fine to put "n/a" (not applicable) or to write in a comment.*

WHERE WOULD YOU PUT YOURSELF ON THIS SCALE, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT ....

1) ... your sexual orientation overall? _____

2) ... your sexual attractions overall _____; before age 16 ____; in 2008_____; in the past month ____

3) ... your sexual experience, including making out, overall ____; before age 16 ____; in 2008_____; in the past month ____

4) ... your fantasies overall ____; before age 16 ____; in 2008_____; in the past month ____

5) ...your romantic/emotional attractions overall _____; before age 16 _____; in 2008_____; in the past month _____

6) Where do your closest family members think you are on this scale? _____

7) Where do most of your friends think you are on this scale? _____

8) If you could be anywhere on this scale, where would you choose to be? _____

9) Why? _____

_____

10) What word(s) (i.e., gay, straight, etc.) do you use privately to describe your sexual orientation? _____

11) What word(s) (i.e., gay, straight, etc.) do you use to describe your sexual orientation to others? _____

Note: This exercise was designed by Robyn Ochs (www.robynochs.com) drawing from the work of Kinsey, Klein, Storms, *et al.* You may use and adapt this exercise providing you give credit to the author and inform her when you do so. Suggestions/feedback welcome.Adult/short version/ revised September 2009.

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