

Getting Queer:  
Teacher Education, Gender Studies,  
and the Cross-Disciplinary Quest for Queer Pedagogies

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Queer politics, if it is to remain queer, needs to be able to perform the function of emptying queerness of its referentiality or positivity, guarding against its tendency to concrete embodiment, and thereby preserving queerness as a resistant relation rather than as an oppositional substance. Otherwise, queer culture is likely to suffer, on a larger political scene, the normalizing vicissitudes already undergone by so-called queer theory....“queer theory” has been...transformed into an unproblematic, substantive designation for a determinate subfield of academic practice, respectable enough to appear in advertisements for academic jobs and in labels on the shelves of bookstores. Signifying little more than what used to be signified by “lesbian and gay studies,” “queer theory” seems to have forfeited, in this process, much of its political utility. In any case, the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer “queer theory” can plausibly claim to be. (David Halperin, 1995, p. 113)

Am I Queer Enough?<sup>1</sup>

I have to work hard to be queer. And even then, I do not think I make it. I am pretty comfortable being a lesbian. I mean, I think I get lesbian-

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ism, lesbian identity; I do not think queer is as easy to get. “Queer,” I tell my students, has a deliberately disruptive, political component that is inextricable from yet not reducible to sexuality. Queer is about identifications rather than identity; in fact, it is about destabilizing social, cultural, political—all kinds—of structures—normatizing structures—that work to solidify identities and, in so doing, skew “power” toward the “norm.” I picture a kind of “queer triangle,” if you will, of biological sex, desire/pleasure/sexuality, and gender—with “power” in the center. I know, “queer” resists and eludes such a concrete, linear conceptualization of itself. Still, my queer triangle allows me to speak of queer theory in ways that make sense to me, and, I hope, to my students.

“Lesbian,” more identity than identification, seems a lot less complicated and requires a lot less work than “queer,” due mostly to the grueling feminist work of the last century. While “lesbian” is a contested term susceptible to the usual pitfalls of identity politics: “boundaries and hierarchies” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 29), it *does* offer a place not where marginalized folks become static and anesthetized with/in the identity, but rather where we might have a way-station for taking identity inventory. Yes, I have just offended queers and lesbian feminists by simplistically “pegging” each term as separate boxed sets to be taken out and looked at and then put away. But as I began researching for this piece, I decided to not be so hard on myself. For I came across more than a few articles, books, and chapters that have *queer* in the title but mostly LGBTQ discussions in the text, or at best discuss “queer” populations of teachers and students, for example, while calling for queering educational research or describing queer research in the state of the field. Not all queer work normalizes queer, certainly; Deborah Britzman (1998b) and Suzanne Luhmann (1998) both explicate queerness in terms of a workable pedagogy. Janet Miller (1998) proposes it as a curriculum practice; these three I will discuss later. Several essays in Rodriguez and Pinar’s *Queering Straight Teachers: Discourse and Identity and Education* (2007) move discussions out of the realm of theory and directly into classrooms, an example of the “pedagogical search for theory,” as Rodriguez (2007, p. 293) terms it. I found, though, that when you go searching for queer, you have to sift through an awful lot of “gay.”

Locating the elusive phantom of queerness—my own and in my classrooms—became increasingly important as I embarked upon a joint university appointment between the College of Education and the Gender & Women’s Studies Program within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Maybe, I thought, if it were difficult to locate queer(ness) in Teacher Education classes, as a teacher educator, it would be easier in gender studies classrooms. After all, I thought, I *should* be able to

find queer in a Queer Theory class. Not necessarily. It is amazing how effortlessly *LGBT* (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) arises, in comparison to that very elusive *queer*. LGBT was everywhere; in student narratives, in my teacher stories, in texts, in pop culture representations. Yes, we looked at theory, read Butler and Foucault; we had discussion after discussion after discussion. My undergraduates wanted, demanded, examples, but when we found them to offer each other, they weren't queer—they were *gay*!

I described my bewildered search to a queer-identified colleague to see whether she found anything queer in my Queer Theory classroom. She very tentatively and politely acknowledged the theory, the discussions, the *search* for queer, but noted it was a very gay classroom. "Let me show you," she said. The next week she taught a lesson in which she queered performance artist/sadomasochist Bob Flanagan's provocative film *The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (1997), using as a frame Robert McRuer's work on Crip Theory (2006). Maybe the intersections of Queer Theory and Disability Studies from which Crip Theory emerges provided me with the right amount of context—enough of a jumping-in point—to see *queer* queerly. Maybe Flanagan's sometime funny, sometimes poignant, always shocking depiction of himself as Supermasochist queered my vision. Whatever the case, I finally started getting it. A little. So, I began to wonder, is there a queer pedagogy, as Britzman asks? If so, does it show up differently in education classrooms than in queer classrooms? What does it look like at all? And, finally, am I finally queer? Queer enough?<sup>2</sup>

### Why Queer? Why Now?

I will not even make the reader wait for this one: because the rigid, static, universal, standardized, overly-assessed-in-meaningless-ways paradigm of "education" is frustrating and disheartening to me; and, if I may take the liberty, not only to me. My graduate classes, made up of experienced teachers, require de-briefing, decompression time before either of us is comfortable embarking upon the evening's lesson. I do not tell people I do this; I believe I would be told it is not a "best practice". I do believe listening to my students recount and describe normalizing contexts—which they often identify as oppressive—in their daily lives as educators is an autobiographical practice. I say "often," sometimes in the telling, they shrug them off, take them in stride—the mandates, restrictions, standardizations—*without question*. And this, I find oppressive.

My two worlds, the College of Education and the Gender and Women's Studies Program, are on opposite ends of the Kennesaw State University

campus. I realized during my trek—which I refer to as “crossing the gulf”—that each world has a distinct curriculum and each curriculum is infused in its own distinct way with sexuality and gender. The gulf is both literal and figurative. Just as the two colleges could not physically be any farther apart, so my approach to “queer classes” is different—at times seemingly contradictory and conflicting—from my infusing of adolescent sexuality and LGBT identities and issues into teacher education courses. I had been employing different curricular and pedagogical practices, and had perceived a difference in my engagement with students in each program. Yet, each time I crossed the curricular gulf, it grew a little smaller, the boundaries a little less fixed.

From curriculum border crossings, I first began to discern the interdisciplinarity of sexuality and identity, as well as the cross-disciplinarity of education, an understanding that continues to evolve as I grapple with connecting understandings of Queer Theory and Teacher Education. I juxtapose “queer theory with nonqueer higher education contexts [teacher education]” as they appear in my cross-campus classrooms (Renn, 2010, p.137) and suggest that, far from being exclusive of and in opposition to each other, sites of mutual spaces and flows exist among, within, around them. In my case, in both my job and various identifications (identities?), I am a kind of embodied common thread among these. Thus, this essay is a narrative of how I explore, grapple with, and navigate those spaces; this is my process of the search for queerness—in curriculum, pedagogy, teacher education classes. For I have also discovered queerness does not naturally exist in queer-themed classes where one might naturally look in the first place. Put simply, if I cannot queer a Queer Theory class, how can I expect to queer education courses, to practice and model a “queer pedagogy”? I can’t.

### The Queer Out There

Contextualized through the lens of place, this essay explores intersections and tensions among queer theory, teacher education, and identities/identifications, which looks to me like a particular way of looking at curriculum, pedagogy, and the self. Since the three general concepts are intertwined and irreducible, my particular situation allows me a queer glimpse even as I look for *queer(ness)*. What follows is a snapshot, reflections of a semester in the life of a queer curriculum theorist engaged in teaching teacher education and queer courses in the same semester on a university campus in the South—not the first such configuration to be sure, but one profoundly provocative for me as lesbian, teacher, and researcher. In this autobiographical feminist narrative research, I

consider my queer academic life from the perspective of an “out” lesbian teacher education and queer studies teacher, a perspective that may at first glance seem oppositional. I suggest there is less opposition than opportunity for honest engagement and making meaning.

I draw from a variety of works that include works I mentioned earlier as well as Rodriguez and Pinar’s (2007) *Queering Straight Teachers: Discourses and Identity in Education*, which contains essays about queer issues in curriculum and education classrooms. Suzanne Luhman (1998) and Deborah Britzman (1998b) both take up questions of queer pedagogy, and Janet Miller’s (1998) “Autobiography as a Queer Curriculum Practice” helps me do the autobiographical work necessary for conducting my search, of interrogating the process. I also draw from my own work on place, particularly the American South, as contested site of social, cultural, and political contexts for curriculum and education. A word about the previous texts; two were published in Pinar’s (1998) *Queer Theory in Education* and one in his *Curriculum toward New Identities*, also published, coincidentally, in 1998.

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 am thinking specifically of Kumashiro’s (2002) and Quinn and Meiner’s (2009) texts, and there are others. The reader might therefore think I am taking a step backward by turning to texts that are over a decade old. I prefer to think of it as a recursive step. While there certainly seems to be considerable queering going on in schools and universities and research settings, I do not see enough of pedagogy as the “pretty queer thing” that Luhman (1998) describes, nor sufficient response to Britzman’s (1998b) question “Is There a Queer Pedagogy?” Miller (1998), in a feminist-autobiographical-qualitative methodological move, positions autobiography as a queer practice, yet where are the lives living queered practice?

When academics attempt to “apply” or graft queer theory, and thus a subsequently emergent queer pedagogy, onto the normative and normalization field and profession of education, we run the risk, as Halperin (1995) cautions (see epigram) of making them “respectable” (p. 113). LGBT/Queer educational researchers, like Renn above, call for more directed attention to infusing queer methodologies and theoretical rigor into the field, noting that often what attempts to “pass” for queer is in practice “LGB.” For example, in “Queering foundations: queer and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender educational research,” Chris

Mayo (2007) traces the “trends and shifts” (p. 79) in LGBTQ educational research through the particular running theme over the years of the “coming out” of LGBTQ youth. Mayo notes the challenges and complications that arise when queer theory is used to approach educational contexts. Attending to LGBT issues through “immediate practical application” (2007, p. 80) sometimes has some pretty significant, necessary “immediate practical” benefits, making schools safer places for all students, for example, or including courses with LGBTQ themes and foci into university curriculum.

But these applications may or may not be—and I suspect most are usually *not* queer. They *queer* heteronormative educational structures to be sure, as Mayo states, yet are not directly attributable to queer theory. The tensions among the generally “nonqueer” (Renn, 2010) context of teacher education and queer theory are at play in my intellectual, pedagogical, academic world, and curriculum theory is a space wherein these tensions can be considered. In fact, Luhman, in the collection *Queer Theory and Education* (1998), poses both charge and challenge: “queer theory has failed to live up to its potential and must therefore move beyond a declaration of its own intent” (p. 146). Much, but not all, of what has been written about queering classrooms or curriculum or pedagogy or teachers has served—not inconsequentially—to further declare queer theory’s intent. Some, but not all, of what has been written offers glimpses of what queer looks like in these sites and contexts. This is not a work that lays claim to being strictly “queer-” or “LGBT-” or even “teacher education-” focused; in doing so I would re-solidify some of the very boundaries I seek to further blur. Rather, I leave it resistant to categories, interdisciplinary in its messiest sense and focus on mutually constitutive sites of queer and pedagogy, for as Luhman further notes,

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. (1998, p. 151)

Although applications of new knowledge and methods may not be what are at stake for queer theory and pedagogy, their implications in “messy processes” may not be clearly apparent in classrooms where they are not quite conjoined as “queer pedagogy.” I hold the unique position of not only desiring to “queer” education and gender studies classrooms, but also to explore and integrate queered pedagogies into them. It re-

quires me, then, to take a close look inside my classroom and to take that look queerly.

“Isn’t ‘Queer’ Like the ‘N’ Word?”  
and Other Tales from the Classroom

I do a lot of traipsing back and forth across the gulf. A typical semester might include teaching “diversity” courses to teacher candidates and LGBTQ “identities” courses—and specifically queer courses—to students of all kinds of majors in the Humanities and Social Science College. Based on my observations, student demographics in the first group are generally religious, conservative, Southern, and overwhelmingly straight. Students in the second group are generally religious, conservative, Southern, and (from their own self-identification) gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgendered. Perhaps readers will have assumptions, as I did at first, about how each class might approach and engage with queer issues—especially those actually entering the field of education—yet I found that within the bounds of classroom interaction the similarities are greater than might be expected. For example, toward the end of the semester of the Queer Theory class—when, presumably something of Queer Theory should have stuck with my students—we were discussing bisexuals in popular culture. Jason, self-proclaimed “good gay” (assimilationist) and not “bad queer” (disruptor) responded to another student, Jude, who had just read the oft-quoted poem, “This poem can be put off no longer” (Carlton, 1991) from *Bi-Any Other Name*, by asking across the room: “are YOU bi?” The look on his face and tone of his voice as he accused more than asked her must have registered with him because he muttered something like, “Oh, I was just asking,” as he slinked behind his laptop screen.

That was, for me, a stark lesson in identity politics and homo-normativity. Suzanne Luhman (1998) reminds us, “Even in designated queer studies classrooms heterosexism and homophobia”—and in this case internalized heterosexism and homophobia—“reemerge and threaten to overwhelm queer subjects” (p. 147). This was the day I became committed to queering the queer class. And, just as a Southerner feels most Southern when she is outside of the South, the strangest realization slowly dawned on me: whenever I was on one side of that gulf is when I felt most strongly identified with the other. In other words, I felt like a *queer* educator when I was teaching in the College of Education and a *queer educator* when I was teaching courses in the Gender and Women’s Studies Program. I had, I realized, created my own normative identity formations. A queer pedagogy requires using queer in its verb state; a

“radical politic of queer,” (see Ruffolo, 2007, p. 268, below) cannot take place when one is mired in normative queer identity politics, such as I describe. And what happened to Jude? I hope she was satisfied that I called Jason on the rude inappropriateness of his question. I rather doubt it, though, because I was not.

I must admit I was a little nervous the first time I taught Queer Theory at KSU. It was, in fact, the first course I taught in my new joint appointment. I was deliriously happy to have finally found a home—a good fit for my background in curriculum theory and women’s studies, for my identities as lesbian and teacher—a home as far away from teacher education, both literally and figuratively, as I could get. What made me nervous was not that Queer Theory was a new, high profile class for KSU or that I would be out in my education courses. What gave me more than a little pause was that for my whole career I had been a “teacher.” In academe, I had been a “teacher of teachers.” Much as I bemoaned the state of education in the U.S., it was my field. I was not, in other words, a queer theorist; all I had known of university were various colleges of education. I was unsure of the culture of another college, department, or field and the students whom I would encounter. No longer might my “war stories” of the classroom serve as discussion springboards; these were *humanities* students. Well, that and I would have to bone up on queer theory to include disciplines outside of curriculum.

I like to think I implemented an interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum and pedagogy in that Queer Theory class. I used some of the tricks of the trade new to students outside the College of Education; that is, I used instructional strategies other than lecture/exam. I put them in small groups to talk and do assignments together. It was a small summer class, so they could form circles, work with a partner, go outside. I brought in large white sheets of poster paper and markers to do an activity on identities, and they were delighted, many sprawling on the floor and clamoring for the purple marker before it was taken from the box. It was one of those rare classes that thrived and melded in spite of the professor. Their final assignment was a queer research project. My colleagues in education would be mortified, but I gave them minimal guidelines, no rubric, no grade. Like student projects across the gulf, they ranged from magnificent to not-so-magnificent. Some were more “LGBT” than “Q,” yet, I was happy with my and their first foray into theory that was queer.

One student, Robert, asked whether he could present last. He was a nursing major about to graduate, and like other students in the class—and me—he brought the perspective of his major course of study into the Queer Theory classroom. Friendly, openly gay, delightfully engaged



with the course, Robert was very excited about his final project. I had held planning conferences to check their progress and offer my feedback, yet he had remained very cryptic about his. "I've got something really cool planned, but I don't want to tell you about it yet," he grinned. "Is that ok?" Well I know it probably should not have been, but it was. He uploaded his PowerPoint and began: "My project," he began, "is about this class. It's about y'all, all of us." Robert had journaled, interviewed classmates, related anecdotes about the semester, told goofy stories about the professor—all framed nicely within that large, disruptive, non-normative umbrella, Queer Theory.

In closing, he said he had taken the class because it was "gay," but throughout the course of the semester he had watched as the class had formed important bonds, he reported. "There are people in this class that I would not have spoken to. Have seen at the coffee shop downstairs and *not* spoken to. Because they were different. Transgendered." Here I thought Robert, assimilationist gay man I had assumed him to be, would make a statement about tolerance, wherein he had learned to view his fellow trans-classmates as people, too. I had expected what Miller (2005) calls "representations of a knowable, always accessible, conscious self who "progresses," with the help of autobiographical inquiry, from ignorance to knowledge of self [and] other" (p. 219). Instead, Robert ended his presentation with a rejection of normalized versions of a "tolerance discourse" and questioned his own identity and its instability. He spoke and wrote into existence, Miller explains, "denaturalized ways of being that are obscured or simply unthinkable when one centered, self-knowing story is substituted for another" (p. 220). Robert was not tolerant of others; rather, through his growing awareness of himself *as* a Self resistant to normative sexual, gender, and biological boundaries, Robert was owning his queerness and putting (him)Self in relation with the Other.

### "A Pretty Queer Thing"

Kennesaw State University is located in Cobb County, Georgia, in the shadow of Kennesaw Mountain, the last hold-out of the Confederacy before Sherman's troops took Atlanta on its "March to the Sea." Cobb County is predominantly Republican, home of Newt Gingrich, rejected as a site by the 1996 Olympic Committee for refusing to include "sexual orientation" in its proposal to host events (*The Advocate*, September 6, 1994). Kennesaw has a quaint downtown that residents have worked hard to revitalize. In addition to hosting "The Little General's Clogging Festival" and "A Taste of Kennesaw Street Festival" during the year, Kennesaw is home to a Confederate locomotive, "The General (from

whence The Little General's Cloggers derive their name)," and a Civil War Museum. And Wildman's—Wildman's Civil War Surplus—"The Best Little War House in Kennesaw," has been written about and was even the subject of a photojournalism report by Christopher Dickey for *Newsweek* ("Southern Discomfort," August 2, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/2008/08/01/southern-discomfort.html>). There one can buy all manner of Confederama: flag stickers, uniforms, chess sets, buttons, photos of Confederate officers, swords, caps for the kids, etc. It is also a local supplier for radically conservative—and many might argue hate-filled—memorabilia. The home of my university is the kind of place many people think of when they think of a conservative, Confederate, homophobic, White-supremacist South. Like most other places, however, queer is here, but *being* a queer or practicing queerness in North Georgia is not for the faint of heart.

A year ago, state legislators from an adjoining county made national news when they "exposed" that taxpayer money was being spent to advance the homosexual agenda in Georgia. For example, they had uncovered "queer theory" courses offered at the University of Georgia (I had just offered the same course at Kennesaw State, but I kept quiet). From a list of professors' areas of scholarly expertise, they declared that universities in Georgia housed "experts" in male prostitution and oral sex ("Steamy sex courses fire GOP's ire: Efforts to oust profs," February 6, 2009, [http://www.onlineathens.com/stories/020709/gen\\_385535247.shtml](http://www.onlineathens.com/stories/020709/gen_385535247.shtml)). Two weeks later, one of them blogged that he had uncovered a course at Kennesaw State University called "Queering the American South." This was my current course offering and there was no keeping quiet. After a conference call among the Provost, university legal liaison, and me, University Relations released a statement explaining that not only would the university support the course in the interest of academic freedom, but our queer courses had practical benefits for the good taxpayers of Georgia. Yes, practical applications of queer. Suzanne Luhmann, who contends that "Pedagogy Is a Pretty Queer Thing" (1998), explains how *queer* may get straightened out.

Even in their more recent usage as critical terms, both queer and pedagogy run risk of serving as little more than convenient terminological abbreviations that suffer from over-determination and under-definition. For example, even teachers dedicated to critical pedagogy when speaking about their pedagogy might refer to little else than their teaching style, their classroom conduct, or their preferred teaching methods. In similar fashion, even in queer circles queer is often used as a mere alternative, or more convenient short-form to the lengthy "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual. (p. 142)

*Queer* and *pedagogy* as Luhmann describes them here are as sterile and fixed as how many view standardized, NCATE-driven teacher education programs; without mindfulness and practice, each will be devoid of creativity, joy, imagination, and transgression. Queer in these terms is respectable; it is assimilable into diversity and/or multicultural strands of core education courses, and, as I soon discovered, represents the path of least resistance in gender/queer courses. Of course, if Georgia's state legislators had known how just *un-queer* the classes really were, they need not have worried; as I was teaching my classes, they were only gay. Nothing but respectable queerness in Georgia.

If one did not just KNOW where I-75 South led one would have little sense of being in such close proximity to Atlanta, cosmopolitan city, Southern gay mecca. Kennesaw mainly serves students from Cobb County and North Georgia counties. Our student teachers are often placed in rural country schools, mostly White, mostly low SES. My student Zach, who has a degree in math but is in our MAT program to receive initial certification in teaching along with a Master's degree, is placed in such a school. He and his classmates student teach during the day and take their coursework in the evenings. On this particular night, we were talking about writing autoethnographies for their final (standardized across the college) class project. Perhaps predictably in a curriculum theorist's class, the discussion turned to identity, in particular, ways of writing the self into a paper that had as its focus "storying."

Also, perhaps predictably, discussions of "teacher identity" led to questions about their current daily lives in the classroom. One thing led to another and I mentioned in my most "oh-I-assume-you-know-this-but-let-me-mention-it-anyway" manner that I am a lesbian, a stark contradiction to the "in-your-face visibility" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 146) queer theory claims as it "antagonizes identity" (p. 146), which led to questions about "dealing with" situations in their classrooms. Practical applications, they wanted. I recalled my teacher experiences, LGBTQ "diversity" texts, and common sense to answer the "what if" questions that I have always found common in such classes.

Had I been mindful of queering my own pedagogy, I might have engaged in the "self-reflexivity" of homo-normativity that queer theory demands (Luhman, 1998, p. 145). She notes, "Rather than exploring, presenting, and manifesting self-esteemed queer subjects, a queer pedagogy aims at the infinite proliferation of new identifications...The tricky question of how to engage in such self-critical practices without losing track of the wider practices of social injustices persists" (p. 151). Other than the re-affirming of my lesbian identity, I had demanded nothing of

myself. This was not queer pedagogically; it was, rather, disheartening in its sameness.

He raised his hand and thought before he spoke:

Dr. Whitlock, the guys in my class are bigger than I am. Some of them play football, and a few have done time. It's almost impossible to cover Thoreau with them. And yeah, they call each other and other people fag all the time. I hear them make gay jokes. They don't try to keep it quiet, but I can't call them on this. To start with, they wouldn't pay me any attention, and then they wouldn't cooperate and let me teach. I mean, these guys are going to maybe graduate, maybe not, and stay in that same place for the rest of their lives. Go to work and come home. They're not gonna change.

Zach said a lot. I won't go into here how I stumbled over what to tell him, or how many hands went up, some agreeing that he would do better and maintain control if he did not call these students on their behavior. Others talked about his obligation to take a stand. Zach was not persuaded. With a look of what I saw as sad resignation, he never indicated that he would attempt to voice his objection to students in his own classroom. I had little of use to offer Zach, and we both knew it.

Both Luhman (1998) and Britzman (1998b) discuss the psychoanalytical relation between knowledge and ignorance in terms of what one can bear to know. Not being an expert in psychoanalytic method, I can only note what is for me a certain poignancy in the phrase, which, I suppose, sentimentalizes the relationship and perhaps reinstates a binarism. Still, looking at ignorance as the resistance to knowledge rather than lack of it is new to me; ignorance, after all, has particular connotations in rural Alabama where I grew up. Luhman poses ignorance as not the opposite of 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). Ignorance, then is ignor(e)-ance, and if it is something we do, then we are implicated in knowledge with which our action is in relation. My lack of expertise painfully obvious here, I would interrupt my rather rudimentary theorizing by suggesting it as my refusal to be resistant to knowledge. I may, as we like to say in the country, be simple, but I'm not ignorant!

Zach's distress might be his realization of what he cannot bear to know—and that his students have that which they cannot bear to know. Luhman writes, "[Queer pedagogy] suggests a conversation about what I can bear to know and what I refuse when I refuse certain identifications. What is at stake in this pedagogy is the deeply social or dialogic situation of subject formation, the processes of how we make ourselves

through and against others” (1998, p. 153). What can I not bear to know? How am I implicated with my, my student’s, even his students’ knowledge(s)?

The next week, Zach was absent from class, which concerned me more than it otherwise would have, given the dejection from the previous week—his and mine. The following day I received this email from him.

Dr. Whitlock,

I’ve been thinking about the conversation we had in class, and making a stand against the passive bigotry and hatred when students use words like “fag” and “gay” as common descriptive adjectives.

The other day we started Dark Romanticism. In this, I brought up the plethora of TV shows that cater to the “darker” side of humanity that likes to watch violence, suffering, and humiliation between a whole spectrum of races, genders, sexualities, and economic backgrounds.

*CSI*

*Fringe*

*American Idol*

*Survivor*

Talk shows (Maury, Springer, etc)

In particular I brought up *American Idol* and Adam Lambert, and the popular critique that he lost the popular vote because he admitted he was gay. I’d say about 20% of my class listened. The rest either stopped paying attention, or responded with marked animosity. Even when I tried to redirect them back to the purpose of the discussion, to think about—why—we watch shows like that and feed of the drama associated with such things as sexuality, many still couldn’t get past the primal fear of “faggots.”

It was a very humbling moment, and even though I tried to subtly teach a bit of acceptance, even then I felt I was reaching only a few, and those few were the ones who were already listening.

Best,  
Zach

Luhman notes certain realizations we, as teachers, reach as we become conscious of our implicatedness in knowledge, and thus, ignorance—again, our own and our students’. She writes, “To understand ignorance not as a lack of (political) consciousness but as a resistance to knowledge might allow teachers to become more curious about the question of resistance....What is there to learn from ignorance?” (1998, p. 150). Resigned and defeated as Zach had seemed when our class had talked about “taking stands,” he approached his class the next day and tried to help them find an in-road, “darker side of humanity” that they might actually have witnessed in popular culture, even mentioning the very queered television show *Fringe*. Zach suggests his students’ resistance

is related to their “primal fear of ‘faggots,’” and identifies humanity’s “darker side” in relation to violent acts of oppression, specifically in the case of his class, the utterance of hate speech. He considers fear and violence of the self-toward-other from raced, classed, gendered, sexualized intersections framed by the fluid and shifting, contingent perspectives of popular culture. Zach seems to have come to realize the complexity of what he cannot bear to know, that it is unbearable in its insurmountability, noting the futility of trying to “subtly teach a bit of acceptance.” Rather than express *dejection* at those whose intransigent ignor(e)-ance constitutes a violent desire not to know, he has *abjected* his teacher-self toward student-others-who-cannot-bear-to-know in order to make some meaning from those who are already listening.

Still, I owed Zach an answer so that he might in turn have an answer to ignorance and bullying. I wish I had been able to think of one that night in class, but I could not. By not giving him one, I was retreating into some old, comfortable place that remained of my heterosexual privilege. I was “passing,” a decade after realizing my lesbian identity, and I am reminded of Audra Lorde’s knowing admonition, “Your silence will not protect you” (1984, p. 42). So here, these months later, is what I would say to Zach about how to make his classroom a safe place for LGBTQ youth, and in the process, safe for himself.

I would tell him there are no easy answers or quick fixes. I would tell him that in spite of all the lesson plans and curricula on “diverse students,” there is no formula for developing sensitivity in 6’4” bullies in North Georgia. I would tell him that in spite of all this, he could make his classroom a safe space because he was developing effective pedagogical tools and because he cared very deeply about those students who were listening. Rather than suggest scripted responses that we both knew would be met with derision by the bruiser-bullies, I would direct him to resources such as GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. GLSEN was founded in 1990 by school teachers dedicated to the mission of making “every member of every school community valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression” ([www.GLSEN.org](http://www.GLSEN.org)). The GLSEN website includes resources for teachers and students, school climate surveys, lesson plans, and a Safe Space Kit with concrete strategies for supporting LGBTQ students.

To help Zach contextualize his classroom teaching in a larger frame, I would introduce him to the work of Kevin Kumashiro, Director of the Center for Anti-Oppressive Education. Kumashiro’s work (2002, 2007, 2008, 2009) connects activism in real ways for teachers with social justice in what he terms anti-oppressive education. The underlying issue,

I would say to Zach, in his classroom, seems to be one of “oppression,” which Kumashiro defines 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.” Anti-Oppressive education aims to challenge multiple forms of oppression. ([www.antioppressiveeducation.org/definition](http://www.antioppressiveeducation.org/definition))

Sometimes, I would say, the social dynamic is as close as our own classroom. Kumashiro and GLSEN are two examples of resources that offer lessons, models, strategies, and conversations that offer possibilities for putting theories into practice. These are tools teachers have at hand to support LGBTQ students. We could talk about bearing-to-know later, over coffee. For now, an anti-oppressive, safe-space classroom was the immediate goal.

As I crossed the gulf that day, I felt new weight on me. As, no doubt, many teachers have felt at some point in their careers, I felt like Zach; like I too was only reaching the ones who were already listening. He was listening, my lesbian and gay and bisexual and transgendered and straight students were listening. But I was not, as David Ruffolo notes while situating Butler in a discussion of queering straight teachers, being “queerly intelligible” (2007, p. 255) by “giving account” of my queer self, of queer itself. As Ruffolo proposes a “radical politic of queer,” which can “interrogate normative ideologies that reproduce norms through its strategic and temporary positioning as an implicated norm in the practices that prohibit its radical existence,” (p. 268), he suggests that *queer* might become a “*momentary* norm that can rework the discourses that exclude its being as a positioning outside of binary conceptions” (p. 268). It is in this way he offers a palatable deal to straight teachers, rather than having to become “intelligibly queer,” they need only become “queerly intelligible” by “giving account of queer.” I realized that somewhere in all of this becoming and accounting, if I were to pursue the queer pedagogy to disrupt particular norms on both sides of my gulf I needed to come to be both queerly intelligible—and an intelligible queer. And that would require a turn to autobiography as a queer curriculum practice.

### “Everything Looks a Little Unnatural”

I am not sure; in fact I would venture to bet, that no one on my campus claims to be deploying a queer pedagogy. No doubt, if they think about it at all, they lay claim to pedagogical practices that fall under more conventional educational trends—some of which are stu-

dent-centered and generative—Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, for example. The more I considered my own claiming of the term, the more I realized that queering pedagogy is a process that must be continually assessed, reconsidered, renewed; my own current pedagogical practices consist mostly of integrating LGBT identity politics into both queer and education classrooms—often reinforcing assimilationist stereotypes in the process. Janet Miller (1998) conceptualizes autobiography as a queer curriculum practice and addresses “gaps and silences in current constructions and uses of autobiography in education that in particular promise the benefits of ‘self-reflection’ as a means to ‘self-understanding’” (p. 219). Identifying myself as a lesbian teacher, “Look, we have been in schools along...and see how ‘safe’ and ‘normal’ I am?” I had been asking teacher education students to declare, I suppose, their own identities in relation to their personal-professional-selves-in-relation-to-other(s), “Even though I am a middle-class, Southern white, heterosexual Christian, I am a good person who will treat all my students equally.”

At the same time, I had also asked Gender and Women’s Studies students to do little more than practice tolerance; despite Robert’s queer questioning, many straight and gay students arrived, albeit via different paths, at similar “progress” conclusions: “gays, lesbians, and bi’s are just like everyone else outside of the bedroom. *And*, we will practice tolerance towards transgendered people.” Students who identified as trans used research presentation assignments to educate classmates on trans-identities and issues, which, under any guise of theory or pedagogy, is unacceptable. I had been enchanted with the promise of self-understanding (Miller, 1998, p. 219), which “replicates rather than questions...the ‘self’ as rational, coherent, autonomous, unified, fixed and given—and therefore capable of working toward complete and conscious ‘development’ and ‘understanding’ of one’s ‘identity’” (p. 219). No doubt, the reader is by this time asking, bewildered, “what about LGBT/queer, questioning students in the ed classes?” And, “is it your common practice to categorize your students by sexual practice?” And, “do you *ever* consider *gender*?”<sup>3</sup>

Miller suggests we might, through queer autobiographical practices, “cast in new terms the ways in which we might investigate our multiple, intersecting, unpredictable and unassimilatable identities” (1998, p. 220). In my university world, as I wrote more curriculum theory and read more queer theory and practiced pedagogy to beat the band, I felt a growing “gap and silence” in my curriculum and pedagogical practices. Moving my students toward progress narratives described above, where the self, rather than making meanings of consciousness is satisfied by the easier tasks of its own solidified acceptance and its tolerance of other,



became glaringly insufficient to me. Something was left out, and Miller reminds us, “what gets left out of such normalizing autobiographical practices is the unfixing of the relationship of gender identity to sexed body, or of gender performance to gender identity, for example” (p. 221). Let me stress that I felt the incompleteness not only with/in my classrooms as sites of gender and sexual conformity, but also with/in my “self.” Whether in the practice of pedagogy or practice of the self, I had neglected to “trouble the links between acts, categories, representations, desires and identities,” central to Miller’s queer autobiographical practice of possibility, wherein pedagogical practice and self practice might be reconfigured as “open and resignifiable” in a Butlerian performative sense (pp. 219-220). If queering creates spaces of resistance to normative, normalizing practices, contexts, and discourses, queer autobiographical methodologies offer a means for the self to trouble the self and throw into question an eminent site where normal is standard; the classroom. Miller concludes “Autobiography as a Queer Curriculum Practice” by returning the reader to considerations of “different” and “unnatural” in the resignification of teacher selves as open:

But an educator who conceives of autobiography as a queer curriculum practice doesn’t look into the mirror of self-reflection and see a reinscription of her already familiar, identifiable self. She finds herself *not mirrored—but in difference*. In difference, she cannot simply identify with herself or with those she teaches. In the space she explores between self and other, nothing looks familiar; everything looks a little unnatural. To queer the use of autobiography as a queer curriculum practice is to produce stories of self and other with which one cannot identify. It is to recognize that there are times and places in constructing versions of teaching, research, and curriculum when making a difference requires making one’s autobiography unnatural. (1998, p. 224)

It occurred to me that the gnawing unease about my teacher-researcher-gendered-sexual self and my curricular and pedagogical contexts grew from my growing hunch that they were all becoming a little too natural, a little too familiar. As fulfilling as I might find my lesbian identity, it makes for predictable, cohesive, coherent practice. Unlikely as it may sound coming from a fundamentalist-raised Christian in the conservative South: “lesbian” is normal.

### “Getting” Queer: A Queerly Pedagogical Conclusion

One year ago today (at the time of this writing), Jaheem Herrera, an eleven-year old student in 5th Grade at Dunaire Elementary School in DeKalb County—just outside of Atlanta—killed himself. He brought

home his report card, showed it to his mom, Masika Bermudez, with a big grin on his face; he had brought his grades up. Jaheem went upstairs while his mom finished cooking dinner. When she and his younger sister went upstairs to fetch him, they found Jaheem hanging from a belt in his closet. Now, I have hurt for my children, have seen them in the pain that can come only from taunts and hurtfulness of elementary and middle school kids, but I have no feeling upon which to draw that comes anywhere close to what Ms. Bermudez must have felt that day. She told CNN, “To hang yourself like that, you’ve got to really be tired of something.” She asked his friend from school what had happened that would drive her boy to put a belt around his neck and step off a chair. The boy told her he was tired of the other boys messing with him; tired of telling teachers, counselors, anybody—and nothing being done that would stop the constant derision.

In every report, every online account, every word diligently reported by an indignant Anderson Cooper, the focus of the—rightful—outrage over this kid’s death is bullying, specifically the failure of “the system” to stop it. Bullying is not new; it is, in fact, as old as time. It is not even new in schools, and, sadly, children killing themselves from it are no new occurrence either. What is new is that, with all information immediately at our disposal, we can know these things now, cannot un-know them. So yes, a subsequent national conversation on bullies and bullying is taking place and rightly so; however I also noticed in most reports of Jaheem’s suicide was the almost afterthought way the nature of the taunts were presented. After lengthy descriptions of his frustrated efforts to get somebody to do something, of how tired he was of the attacks, of the ineffectiveness of a school system that re-asserted its commitment to work “diligently to provide a safe and nurturing environment for all students,” we are told that what had become unbearable for Jaheem was being called “gay.”

Bermudez says bullies at school pushed Jaheem over the edge. He complained about being called gay, ugly and “the virgin” because he was from the Virgin Islands....He used to say Mom they keep telling me this ... this gay word, this gay, gay, gay. (CNN.com, My Bullied Son’s Last Day on Earth)

*Southern Voice*, Atlanta’s now-defunct LGBTQ paper called me to comment in my double-capacity as teacher educator and gender studies coordinator and professor of all things queer at Kennesaw State University. “Do kids really think gay means happy?” the reporter asked. “And where do classroom teachers figure in bullying at school?” I gave my answer, verbally connecting two fields, two spaces, two identities, and

realized the young reporter had without too much thought accomplished something I had not found a way to do: locate an embodiment of queered teacher education. This young man, whose name is Matt Schaeffer, also managed to do something the gray fox Anderson Cooper, for example, had not; he had understood the story was not about bullying, despite the cooptation of the narrative by the media to “straighten” it out for the mainstream audience. Schaeffer and the *Southern Voice* knew Jaheem’s death had queer implications, not as an example of “gay” bullying at its worse, which it certainly was, but in that it is a stark example of what happens when education is not queered but when, in Miller’s (1998) words, discourses of education “maintain the status quo and reinscribe already known situations and identities as fixed, immutable, and locked into normalized conceptions of what and who are possible” (p. 220).

I end this piece very near to where I began—the continuing search for the elusive queer—but not completely. At first glance, I wonder whether including Jaheem’s horrible—and horribly unnecessary—death is another “gay” example. Another call for tolerance and putting an end to homophobic violence, this time contextualized by the deplorable unresponsiveness of school officials in particular, and society in general to bullying. These connections made it an easy and logical example to choose, but they are not enough for my “gulf-crossings” without considering it queerly and in terms of pedagogy, particularly regarding the generally acceptable normative stance of “tolerance.” Britzman writes,

Here, I want to signal how the normal of the normative order produces itself as unmarked sameness and as if synonymous with the everyday, even as it must produce otherness as a condition for its own recognition...But how, exactly, is identification with another to occur if one is only required to tolerate and therefore confirm one’s self as generous? (1998, p. 220)

Bullying is a violent, visible social production of the normative order. The bullies who messed with Jaheem were attempting the forcible citation of a norm upon him. “He used to say Mom they keep telling me this ... this gay word, this gay, gay, gay. I’m tired of hearing it, they’re telling me the same thing over and over,” she told CNN, as she wiped away tears from her face” (CNN.com, My Bullied Son’s Last Day on Earth). Anti-bullying curricula and pedagogy stress tolerance as a goal, yet tolerance does nothing to question the production—by the bullies in this case—of heteronormativity, and also gendered and ethnic normative identities. I suggest tolerance education is no more effective than abstinence education; if these guys had felt “generous” enough to refrain from calling Jaheem “gay” or “Virgin” (a simultaneously gendered, ethnic, and sexual

inscription) they would have no doubt found other, more subtle methods to inscribe and enforce gender and sexual norms.

The insistence by media that this is a bullying issue, solely a bullying issue, only diminishes his self(hood) as the story moves from a gratuitous description of the means of his death to the collective group of bullies—just as my account that began this section. There are no subjects here, no relating among selves and others. The media appears reluctant to paint a portrait of Jaheem, for fear stories might uncover some “anomalies” in his gender and sexuality. Britzman describes her own queer pedagogy as one that might, “exceed such binary oppositions as the tolerant and the tolerated and the oppressed and the oppressor yet still hold onto an analysis of social difference that can account for how structural dynamics of subordination and subjection work at the level of the historical, the conceptual, the social, and the psychic” (1998, p. 226).

This horrific story, however, only cursorily examined the most immediate, gratuitous, and ineffective levels of the structural dynamics named by Britzman. Further, by making bullying—and therefore the bullies—the story, the person of the boy is negated. And so the perpetrators of the story—media, anti-bullying groups, teachers, university professors—deal the final blow to Jaheem Herrera; we continue to reinscribe sexual and gender norms. “He was a nice little boy,” his mother remembered. “He loved to dance. He loved to have fun. He loved to make friends.” (CNN.com, *My Bullied Son’s Last Day on Earth*). I like to believe she would rather just talk about her boy, even in her unspeakable pain.

I would note my own complicity, my own “tangles of implication,” as Britzman would call it. On some level I wanted Jaheem to be a gay kid or gender warrior. Some part of me wanted this to be hate speech aimed at a kid who was accurately—by them—marginalized for his gender and/or sexuality. I have, I hope, worked through enough to recognize and speak it. How do I queer this writing so as to reject falling in line as a normalizing bully? What is my pedagogical moment here? Turning once more to Britzman:

a queer pedagogy, one that refuses normal practices and practices of normalcy, one that begins with an ethical concern for one’s *own* reading practices, one that is interested in exploring what one cannot bear to know, and one interested in the imagining of a sociality unhinged from the dominant conceptual order. In the queer pedagogy I am attempting, “the inessentially common” is built from the possibility that reading the world is always already about risking the self, and about the attempts to exceed the injuries of discourse so that all bodies matter. (1998, p. 226)

In this particular reading-practice, I am faced with what I cannot bear to know. Reading the world and risking the self may mean discovering

what it is that one cannot bear to know—that there is in fact *something* one cannot bear to know. Will I redeem myself by returning the story in a queer move back to the young man and proclaiming that Jaheem's body mattered? That there is no queer redemption is something else I—fundamentalist Christian, Southerner, White woman academic—cannot bear to know.

In a few weeks, I will have an opportunity in my university classroom. I will teach a graduate Queer Studies class made up of a mix of American Studies majors and secondary school teachers returning for their Master's Degrees. The class seems like an appropriate place to pause and reflect and try to make meaning of queer pedagogies in a queer autobiographical move. It was a fluke, really, a mistake that education students are in the class at all. I was delighted to find they made up about half the class, especially since Education Curricula are so tightly structured as to almost never allow students to take free electives. Upon expressing this approval to my education Department Chair, she told me the students had gotten out of the cohort sequence and therefore had to take an elective while the rest of the cohort caught up. Further, she told me, their graduate advisor had suggested that since they were a Social Studies Education cohort, they might take an American Studies class—and she suggested one on Mayan culture. The students, free agents that they are, decided as a group to take instead the provocative-sounding Queer Studies course. Admittedly, some of them did know me and were familiar with my tendency to disrupt conventional pedagogical practices such as standardization and grades. They signed up, and there was no way for their advisor to gracefully nudge them to change their schedules. Had the students queered their curriculum?

I did not really think much about the configuration, other than to find it a great source of amusement, until I pondered the conclusion of this essay. And in a wonderfully queer “ah-ha” moment while working on the course syllabus, I saw the bridge over the gulf. By “ah-ha” I do not suggest clarity of self-understanding that results from reflection, a deceptive state resolution, as Miller has suggested. Rather, my “ah-ha” was the realization that multiple selves, queer knowledges, and pedagogical experiences would converge in a classroom formation that invites practices—all sorts of practices, of the self, of pedagogy, of self-and-other.

Then, while adding an extra day off for Independence Day on the syllabus, I became committed to making this class infinitely more valuable to my students—and my primary identification, admittedly was with “my” education students—than Mayan culture would have been. I am excited about the prospect of this course, not because I wish to practice toward finding answers, but because I want to practice toward finding

questions. The will-of-the-wisp queer defies answers, but it opens up possibilities. Not in some baselessly hopeful way, but in hard, grueling, playful ways. None of them—not the American Studies students, either—will be particularly happy. I am boning up on Butler and getting in touch with my Foucault. I have assigned them more readings in the abbreviated six-week summer course than I have assigned any class in the past year. They will write themselves and write their confusion as I am writing mine. I will show them this essay—to show them what confusion really looks like. They will likely end the course feeling agitated, confused, provoked, curious, overwhelmed, uncertain. Therein will lie the possibilities, and in order to cultivate a subversive learning community where we disrupt each other's assumptions concerning normativities and static identities, we will practice queer pedagogies, with an extra day off for Independence Day. Referring once more to Luhman,

What is at stake in this pedagogy is the deeply social or dialogic situation of subject formation, the processes of how we make ourselves through and against others. 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. (1998, p. 153-154)

Reading this again, it occurs to me that I may be dramatically proclaiming a queer pedagogy that aims toward heroic, one that seeks higher grounds of subversion. I probably have the luxury, privilege, positioning to believe this to be a reachable goal. After all, I do live on both sides of the gulf. And while I am probably still mostly just a lesbian, because a little owning of a lesbian identity gives me a sense of self-knowledge and identification with a community and “culture,” the more I read and practice, the more I am getting queer.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to my friend Dr. Annie Winfield for her thoughtful feedback on an early draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> One note on style. I find it impossible to separate my style from my research methodology, which is based in the rich traditions of autobiographical narrative research shaped by, among others, early curriculum reconceptualists like William Pinar, Janet L. Miller, and Madeleine Grumet, among many others. In particular, and as I have attempted to explain within the article, I am drawn to the possibilities posed by Miller as she posits autobiography as a “queer” curriculum practice. To me, that suggests a research methodology held to a rigorous standard and yet one open to experimental narrative shaping. In other words,

this article may not read like other, more conventional educational research. If we are to attempt in earnest to “queer” curriculum, pedagogy, methodologies, we must be open to the possibility that some of the writing itself might be disruptive, that some of us might queerly color outside the lines of narrative style.

<sup>3</sup> At this point readers might wonder about or begin to feel uncomfortable with what they perceive as self-deprecating language regarding my teaching. In her comments to me, Annie Winfield said, “Gee, if YOU have a hard time successfully queering pedagogy, is there any hope for the rest of us? Don’t be so depressingly hard on yourself.” Actually, those moments of self-assessing are my attempts to avoid what Miller refers to as “progress narratives,” in which we tell the linear story of struggle, conflict, crisis, and triumph. I have tried to explicitly make that clear throughout the article.

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