

Among the Tentative Haunters:

A Trans* Memoir of School

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Abstract

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Jack Helton

This autotheoretical dissertation delves into the complex and often invisible dynamics of cisheteronormativity within the landscape of American public schools. Drawing from personal narrative, feminist, queer, and trans theories and educational research, this meditative study offers a nuanced examination of the ways in which cisheteronormativity shapes not only the educational experiences of students, educators, and administrators alike, but also the system of schooling itself.

Through introspective reflection and critical analysis, the researcher navigates their own lived experiences within the educational system as a queer and trans student and teacher, illuminating the pervasive influence of cisheteronormative ideologies on identity formation, social interactions, and institutional policies. By centering the researcher's personal narrative as a lens through which to explore broader sociocultural phenomena, this dissertation challenges traditional academic conventions and offers a more intimate and embodied theorizing of queerness and transness in American schools.

Through an autotheoretical framework, this study seeks to disrupt dominant narratives and interrogate power structures within educational spaces, including those that dictate what constitutes "research" and "theory." By amplifying marginalized voices and offering alternative

ways of knowing and being, this dissertation aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to create more equitable and affirming educational environments for all students, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

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Dedication

In this dissertation, I write a great deal about faith—the ways in which we find and lose and chase its warmth, only to lose and find it over and over again. I have been the beneficiary of a depth of faith that astounds me. There are, blessedly and unbelievably, so many people to whom I owe thanks for believing that I could do the things that I thought would surely shatter me (including telling the stories that I have in this autotheoretical memoir ahead). The last five years have held trials that I never suspected as lurking around the corner, on both a global and personal scale, and I owe thanks to the people who insisted that I could finish this collection of writing, that I could be vulnerable and strong even and especially when I felt so weak.

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understanding of interconnectedness and the transcendence of love on the back of your unfinished math homework, and it remains a sacred text sketched in my mind, even as we've long lost the paper itself. You and I made equally sacred promises to one another over 10 years ago now, and I'll always keep them. Thank you for believing in me.

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*Never in my life
had I felt myself so near
that porous line
where my own body was done with
and the roots and the stems and the flower
began.*

Mary Oliver, "White Flowers"

*Then to Lebanon, oh God
The flashing at night, the sirens grow and grow
Oh, history involved itself
Mysterious shade that took its form
Or what it was, incantation*

Sufjan Stevens, "Concerning the UFO Sighting Near Highland, Illinois"

Preface

(The first one)

This dissertation is a work of creative nonfiction. The writings herein reflect my present recollections and (varied, filtered, shifting) interpretations of experiences over time in and around the many classrooms I've inhabited over time. I have tried to recreate events, locations, and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity, people's names and characteristics have, in some instances, been changed. Some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated. Memory is a tricky subject, especially as filtered through the wavy lenses of trans time and the lives lived between then and now. While the minute details of the scenes depicted here might vary from their initial occurrence, the weight, feeling, and truth of them remain steady.

Preface

(The second one)

This body of work began as my body began to change again. Perhaps appropriately for a collection of work about *transition*, the pages ahead do not represent a clear or linear sequence of events; the moments from my teaching life and the affective experiences surrounding and enfolded within them proceed circuitously, unevenly. As a student, as a teacher (and, if I'm being honest, as a person), I often crave clarity—a legible order to things, a clean degree of understanding that I have always hoped might make sense of things. I craved it with the body of this dissertation as distinctly as I craved it for my own body: a smooth cohesion from one moment to the next, an ascension from the muck of my past into something transcendent, beautiful, lightened, *meaningful*. And, as with my own body, this written work has been a 5-year exercise in detachment from the need for legibility—the legibility that is afforded by a chronological narrative, a distinction between past and present and future selves, a hierarchical presentation of “conclusions” that I can offer to ensure my ideas and experiences make sense to both myself and to others—for the pain to be worth it. It is not lost on me that the schools of thought upon which I relied to carry out this work are ones deeply committed to indeterminacy as an organizing principle, a methodology, a conclusion in and of itself. I didn't have the language for what *radical indeterminacy* was until I first heard it in one of the graduate seminars on narrative research that I was lucky enough to take with Janet Miller—but I had the feeling of it, the embodied memory of indeterminacy as fruiting ground in my work in the classroom as a teacher. And it is not lost on me either that I am writing these words as a teacher of English, an

academic discipline taught (if not founded) as the apparatus by which we develop and define *legibility* in all its forms—legible sentences that eventually, and systematically, form legible subjects.

And how lucky I am as I bring forth this work that has felt messy, circuitous, disjointed, mis- and re-placed to have people around me—brilliant mentors, educators, and researchers—who are staunch advocates for *resolute irresolutions* in writing about education. It's been a 5-year journey that has me standing somewhere I could have never imagined when I started my doctoral studies in 2018. Yet, isn't it funny that I can remember saying the same at that time, too: "I could have never imagined this—that my life would bring me here." I felt so sharply then that I was standing at the edge of my own newness, perhaps too aware of how floored my former self—a young teacher at 23 years old, married, timid in her green eyelet dress and afraid of the safe home she'd built for herself—would feel to see how things had turned out, this divorced lesbian back in New York, ringless, for once relatively guileless, slouched again in university classrooms in dark denim. In August of 2018, I was standing in the wreckage of a life that had imploded. That I'd carefully, slowly, made implode. I lost my family that year, I lost friends, I lost colleagues and a community and students and their families who'd loved me as the married woman teacher I'd been, a performance I had carried out with perhaps as much unfaltering dedication, if not more, as I had my teaching work (if, in fact, such lines can be drawn between the two in the first place). I'd lost my husband, who was the first person I ever loved, my first boyfriend, my first of so many things, and it was the end of the life that had begun at our first kiss when I was 15 years old, and the beginning of something else.

At the end of that first semester of my doctoral studies, in December of 2018, I took the Metro North to Rhinebeck, rented a car in town, and drove out into the washed-out frosted hills

until I found the clapboard quiet cottage where I'd rented a room to ring in 2019 by myself. It was the first New Year's I'd ever spent alone. I woke up on the last day of 2018 and read Adrienne Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck" for the very first time. A moment in my literary life so hilariously and cosmically fated as to feel fictional, pat. I remember the already-still landscape around me creeping further to a halt as I read:

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
Slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed.

The thing that I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.

This body of work that I humbly share with you now is both the wreck and the story of the wreck: the stories of a woman's lonely life that delivered me, miraculously, into this new body I live in now, and into this work, and the stories of what they have meant to me and mean to me—and how all of those stories have changed as I have.

On that last brittle morning of 2018, my body bore the residual marks of my wreck. My ribs were visible, as were the jugged curve of my hip bones, the sharp line of my jaw and dark eyes framed by the shortest haircut I'd had since childhood. I was, I felt, *shorn*. This is the story

of how I became shorn, of what cut me, and of how new life has since softened me, flooded into the long boarded-up corners of me, solidified me and returned me closer to the earth and to myself. This dissertation began as the words that were my map: to understand what had happened in the last 5 years of my life as a schoolteacher, and what had happened to me. What I hope this dissertation has become is a study of *how* the words, specifically the theories, were my map, in the ways that they are for so many of us queer and trans folks who find ourselves here. That is, using the often-rudimentary spare tools at our disposal to build unimaginable, imaginable futures for ourselves, brick by brick, to craft both our maps and the formless destinations to which they lead.

More practically speaking, what sits here is a collection of writing done over the course of the last 5 years that documents my life as a closeted classroom teacher in the South. My memories of this, and relationship to, have of course changed as I have—as I’ve aged, as I’ve grown, as I’ve transitioned. What I hoped to do here was to produce something that bears the same sorts of marks of transition as my body does now; I wanted the body of my dissertation scarred, fleshy, storied, and uneven, undulating terrain that can attest to how bizarre a thing it is to be trans in a body, and even more so in a place like school. School: a place for straightness, evenness, symmetry, lines, cleanness, *clarity*. School: the violence of whose sharpness I felt, and which *honed* me, long before I figured out a way to articulate it. I want this work to read with the feeling of transition in it, for *trans* to function as the form, the aesthetic, and the methodology that shapes how I ask questions about school, gender, bodies, sexuality, and how it is we come to know, doubt, forget, and learn again the things that make us who we are.

I have written an introduction that explains—however incompletely—the nature of this project: a sort of retrospective meditation on my life as a closeted queer and trans teacher in

schools, and before and alongside that, a closeted queer and trans student. This includes, in broader strokes, some of the stories of the queer and trans young people whose lives brushed up against mine, who lit the way for me and for whom I hope I lit the way sometimes. The three core chapters of this dissertation represent work that has now appeared originally in published form in three separate academic journals between the years of 2020-2023. These three previously published chapters appear in this dissertation in the form in which they were originally published with and on purpose, to represent a sort of map of my transitioning mind and heart. Woven as interludes between these chapters is the traced line of intellectual and theoretical traditions, and my own stories of queerness and transition, on which I've relied to situate my thinking and writing over the course of these last 5 years. My hope is that the dissertation holds these chapters, and the song of their interludes, less as representations of my current thinking about gender and school, and more as artifacts exhibiting the path that transition (gender transition, intellectual transition, institutional transition, geographic transition...) took me on over the last 5 years and before then, hopefully leaving readers thinking some things about the nature of transition and school and gender themselves.

My INTRODUCTION: Teaching While Trans opens with an incident from the last day that I was in the classroom as a secondary English teacher, in January of 2022, just a few months before my long-awaited top surgery, when my body hung at its most ambiguous point in terms of gender scripts and reading. It tells, among other things, the story of a group of high school students scrutinizing my breasts in an attempt to parse my gender. The CONCLUSION: Codes of (Un)Disciplining opens with one of the first moments I can remember being painfully aware of my breasts, of what my gender *meant*, which was in the car pick-up line in the final days of my sixth grade year, the opening notes of my first puberty. I am, as I write this, in the throes of a

second puberty at age 34—incomprehensibly, delightedly, sweatily—now more than 3 years into hormone replacement therapy. What fills the space between these two school story bookends, laid in reverse chronological order, are stories of the classrooms between and around them, where I was a student/teacher/student, and the schools of theory that have helped me sift through and, intermittently and incompletely (always incompletely), understand how I came to be gendered through school, how pervasively that gender schooling has impacted who I’ve been in the world, and what I’ve understood to be possible for my life as a result.

I hope for the dissertation to read, on a larger scale, the way that I wanted CHAPTER ONE: *Topographies of Disruption* to read when I began writing it, back in the spring of 2019: as a braiding of teaching stories, theory, and the new stories that moments of narrative inquiry might illuminate between the two former threads. I was reading *Living a Feminist Life* at the time of writing *Topographies of Disruption*, was reading and wondering about Sara Ahmed’s (2017) words: “Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life” (p. 10). I had been ruminating about the things I had experienced and witnessed in the Southern schools from which I’d very recently departed; Ahmed’s words, among others, offered me the permission to drag the colored lens of theory across those moments to read and wonder about them differently. In this sense, the overarching form of this work is an autotheoretical one, taking up moments from my, my students’, and my colleagues’ lives in school, alongside moments in feminist, queer, and trans theories to generate, if nothing else, a textured portrait of what it can be like to be a queer and trans teacher in school, and a queer and trans child—as very often for me, those experiences have felt concurrent. I lean here, as models for the kinds of work

I'm trying to do, on the genre-bending memoirs and theoretical texts produced by contemporary queer and trans writers like Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Alexander Chee's *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*, Thomas Page McBee's *Amateur*, Sarah Schulman's *Gentrification of the Mind*, Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression*, and Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie*, to name a few. The last of these, *Testo Junkie*, is often credited as the first work to explicitly name the practice of autotheory; Preciado (2013), in their documentation of beginning hormone (testosterone) replacement therapy, identifies their work as being that of a "body essay...a theory of the self, or self-theory" (p. 11). I want theory to act as a sort of playgrounding lens through which you and I peer into my wavy memories of school, at the spaces between and around these memories, at the space between and around where I started this writing project and where I stand now. Wondering together at what remains ambiguous, ambivalent, untamed, and unclear. I hope the thing *feels* trans, that it proudly shows its scars and lines, to make ambivalent what has previously been clear, to draw into possibility ways of thinking, living, researching, teaching, and loving that have, until now, felt, well...unimaginable.

Introduction: Teaching While Trans

I am a better thinker because I teach.
-Ocean Vuong

In this act of magical transformation, I recognize myself again.
-Susan Stryker

Halfway through the last day that I was a teacher in a classroom, I was running down the stairs two at a time just before third period to cover a class that wasn't mine when I turned the corner and nearly collided with my assistant principal. "Liz,"¹ he stammered, sounding as harried as I felt, the two of us a pretty representative picture of the day's energy. It was the first day back to school from winter break, in January of 2022. COVID cases from the newly discovered Omicron variant were surging, and the school's halls were eerily empty of students, who were either at home with COVID, in quarantine, or kept home by families fearful of the emerging, disastrously contagious variant and who were justifiably distrustful of the school district's ability to manage this new surge responsibly. The tone of the previous day's emergency faculty meeting, held over Zoom, had been dire and tense, our principal commanding us, in a tone barely concealing threat, to be "team players" by covering the classes of the quarter-to-half of our faculty out sick with COVID. I recall her employing the analogy of a captain and her crew in describing how we were to communicate a sense of comfort and safety to students and their families that had not been provided to us by either the district or the school's administration.

¹ "Liz," the name I used to go by, the name my mother still calls me and probably always will.

As I jostled around the corner that morning, clutching a stack of work and my to-go coffee mug against my chest, barely avoiding spilling onto my assistant principal, I remember thinking that it was one of the few times from the entire school year that I could recall hearing an administrator address me by name. Despite having been at the school by that point for over 5 months, I rarely managed to get a response to any of the e-mails I sent to either my principal or assigned assistant principal. The last one I sent was an urgent response to a series of gun threats, and subsequent lockdowns at the school, just before term ended for winter break in mid-December of 2021. In the e-mail, I had detailed a list of my students' questions and concerns about future gun safety protocols following what many of my students had collectively agreed had been a disorganized, irresponsible, and deeply unsettling approach to contain the situation by the administration. The e-mail went unanswered. On the very rare occasion that I glimpsed my principal or assistant principal from the other end of a hallway in those opening days of the spring term, they avoided eye contact, ducking back into one of the many administrative offices where I assumed they must spend their days. I rarely saw them in the school's hallways, common areas, or classrooms; my students reported having observed the same. Both my principal and assistant principal would go on to resign before the school year's end. I distinctly remember feeling surprised to have made a rare sighting of an administrator in the hallway on that first day back to school in January.

"Liz, you're supposed to be covering room 110," my assistant principal continued breathlessly.

"I know," I replied. I could see the room over his shoulder, could see that the door was already open and that kids were milling around the entryway while they waited for the bell, their masks pulled down below their chins as they mumbled to one another, exhaustion plain in their

ringed eyes and scratchy voices. “I was on my way there just now,” I said, gesturing to the door beyond him with my handful of papers, and he whipped around to look where I’d indicated.

“Oh—” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Right, well—” He stepped to the side to let me pass. I arranged my face into a tight, polite smile, hoping I didn’t appear as strained as I felt, and was continuing toward the classroom when he shouted out from behind me: “Oh and, uh, they’ve combined classes, okay?” I furrowed my brow at him in confusion, opening my mouth to ask a question that hadn’t quite yet formed. “There’s a few classes of kids in there, okay?” he quickly clarified. And then, something between defensiveness and tired apology in his voice, he added quietly: “We’re doing the best we can.” With that, he disappeared around the corner without waiting for a response, off to what I imagined would be countless similar exchanges with countless others of the overstretched teacher reserves on campus that day, a bedraggled fraction of the nearly-200-person faculty at the school. After a moment, I turned back toward the classroom, from which I could now hear the cacophonous voices of many more teenagers than could possibly be as socially distanced as the district had promised days earlier in their frantically compiled list of “COVID-19 Safety Protocols.” They had published a post over their social media accounts and reported to the *Los Angeles Times* (Blume, 2021) a list of guidelines that they insisted were being *strictly observed* in order to keep schools open at the start of term amidst the worst surge in COVID cases since the start of the pandemic. By the end of that first day back, our school hadn’t received a single one of the N95 masks that the district had assured the public each and every teacher in the county had been issued ahead of their return to school. Ana, our school’s office manager, laughed caustically when I had asked for my mask that morning. “You really think we’re getting those?” she said, not unkind but knowing, jadedness coloring her rhetorical question. Ana, I knew, had worked in the district for decades.

Mr. Fox's classroom was on the floor below mine. Unlike mine, it faced the interior rather than exterior of the school building. I opened the door to a windowless room packed with ninth graders squeezed shoulder-to-shoulder at group tables, the air thick with the heady funk of Axe body spray, artificially scented vanilla lotion, and the breaths of what I quickly counted as nearly 40 kids in a classroom that couldn't have measured more than 200 square feet. Mr. Fox was a ninth grade English teacher and one of my department colleagues. He was, like many of my colleagues and students, out sick with COVID, and some part of me had felt relieved to have been assigned coverage on his classroom in particular, which I knew from previous department meetings was decorated with student-drawn *Odyssey* assignments and peeling, faded literary device posters—the shabbily earnest and comfortingly familiar decor I'd long associated with high school English classrooms.

As I placed my things—my laptop, my already-forming stack of papers to be dealt with (forms to fill out and sign, crinkled late work to be graded, 504 plans to review), and my mug of coffee that had grown cold—on Mr. Fox's desk, a student toward the front of the room who'd watched me carefully since I'd entered it said, "*Hola, señor.*" "*Hola,*" I responded, glancing at him as I continued unpacking my things, and he turned around to his friends, snickering. They whispered to one another briefly before he turned around and again said, "*Hola, señor,*" this time louder as though to make sure I'd understood him correctly. I looked at him levelly, matching his volume so that he heard my response. "*Hola,*" I said. "Pull your mask up please." He quickly turned his body away from me and, mask still worn like a beard under his exposed nose and mouth, laughed with his friends, whose stares I could feel on me. I heard the beginning of a whispered line: "What the fuck..." as I turned to write my name on the board, shaking out my hands in an attempt to quiet the nervousness that was blooming as a buzzing in my fingers.

I have always felt a little uncomfortable when covering classes, for reasons that have both stayed the same and evolved over the decade of my career as a classroom teacher. As a person highly sensitive to external stimuli of any kind—light, sound, movement—the job of teaching, while fulfilling in the deepest, most abiding of ways, is also utterly exhausting for me. My planning period has always felt like 50 minutes of absolutely necessary respite and recovery time from the constant talk, movement, thinking with, and moving among 30 adolescents. But over the years, as I moved through the slow (and then fast?) stages of my gender transition, the discomfort of covering other classes took on the new glint of my steadily increasing gender ambiguity and adolescent attempts to parse it. The 2021-2022 school year was my first time back in the classroom in person since the start of the pandemic. It was also my first time back in the classroom since I'd started hormone replacement therapy and the progressive layers of my gender transition. Most of the classes I'd covered that year had begun with some passing moment of gender confusion: a student calling me "Mr." before approaching me more and, their eyes flitting down to my chest and back up, coughing out a correction—"Sorry, Miss"—before they darted away, horrified and blushing. In one special ed class that I covered in the fall of 2021, an eleventh grader, lanky and even taller than me, looked curiously down at me and asked, "Are you a boy or a girl?" Unsure of how to respond, and worried as ever at my having inconvenienced this young mind with the problem of my ambiguity, I hesitated: "Um—well. Both. I'm both." I remember my body tensing, subconsciously bracing for some sort of blow. Instead, he nodded slowly, his wide, serious eyes unblinking as they scanned my face. "That's pretty cool," he said, before ambling over to his seat and getting started on his work. It took several minutes for me to process that there had been no malice in his question, or in his simple response. It appeared to me that, to him, my naming of both "boy" and "girl" as markers for

myself had been a clever trick on my part, a cheating of the system which he seemed to regard with a sort of admiration.

“My name is Mx. Helton,” I said, my back turned to Mr. Fox’s class, trying one and then another near-dead dry-erase markers in my attempt to write my name on the board, my hands shaking slightly. “And you’re welcome to call me that or call me Liz, either one is fine with me.” As I was capping the marker, I heard a girl’s voice from the back of the room, in a sort of stage whisper as she turned to her friend to ask: “Wait...is *it* a he or a she?”

“A *they*,” I responded flatly, startling the girl, who covered her mouth as I turned again to the board to add my pronouns. “I use *they* and *them* pronouns,” I said, continuing to avoid anyone’s eyes as I wrote out the words in all caps. As I added my pronouns in parentheses at the end of my name, I heard her again, with no real attempt at quiet in her voice, say to her friend, “Oh my god—*it heard me*,” before bursting into laughter behind her hands. I felt my body go rigid. Something in my stomach began to curdle. I couldn’t bring myself to turn around. Instead, I stood frozen, my breaths coming more stilted and shallow, my hand still hovering over the board, my fingers stiff and unmoving.

It certainly wasn’t the first time I’d been pejoratively referred to as “it.” When I still lived in New York and presented mostly as a butch lesbian, it was a way for men on the street to get out the day’s aggression against whatever it was in me that threatened their own brittle sense of masculinity. Even before I presented legibly as a lesbian (whatever that means), my body had long been the landing place for other people’s frustrations. At some point in my late childhood, I developed ways to metabolize this landing; the continuous shock of it felt too painful, taking my breath away each time. I used the X-acto knife from my mother’s scrapbooking supply box to tear thin, neat lines across my forearm, stomach, and thighs—places on my body that either held

the plausible deniability of being caused by falling down in soccer or were otherwise hidden, secret and known only to me. By the time I moved back to New York at 28, my body was crisscrossed with the fine lines of scars that I've since covered with fine-lined tattoos. When I was coming out as a lesbian, I began to hate men with a vocal, adamant unilaterality that I could convince myself was uncomplicated in its vehemence—that is, until I began to really reckon with the bits of “man” buried within me. Up until a certain point—still not too long ago—I insisted that I laid a certain, identifiable, and significant claim to womanhood, that the pain I was made to feel in my body was the direct and total fault of men, and that I could therefore justifiably direct my anger right back at them, spitting “*fuck you*” at the asshole on the sidewalk who called me “it” when I wouldn’t get out of his way fast enough, or the group of boys who resented my girlfriend’s arm in mine as we passed the stoop where they sat, meanly catcalling vaguely homophobic slurs after us. But when the boy who always lived in me persisted, when the person called “Jack” emerged, as quiet and sure as daybreak, I no longer knew where to direct my anger. Whose fault was it that this child felt justified in calling me “it”? From whom did her outrage at my ambiguity descend? What safety did her open derision of me secure for her, for others? The lines—of cause, effect, blame, self-righteousness, indignation—no longer felt as neat as they once had. What was clear was the totalizing force of our collective social conditioning to recognize and assert learned binaries in our reading of the world around us. This child, no more than 15, was so immediately unsettled by my deviation from a binary within which she’d been promised safety that she couldn’t *not* comment upon it—to, in a way, correct what she understood as a grievous misstep on my part. She, a vulnerable adolescent being as we all were and in many ways still are, sought safety in clarifying among her peers her adherence to the established social ordering of gender by flagging my divergence from it.

I spent the rest of the class on that January day pretending not to hear the ninth graders scrutinize, at first quietly and then more loudly (perhaps as my frozen silence emboldened them), the parts of my body that might confirm my gender. I opened and closed drawers of the teacher's desk, my hand roaming over fake wood grain, looking for nothing, as a boy in the class, seated next to the girl who'd called me "it," asked her, "It sounds like a dude—are you sure it isn't?"

"No, look," another girl said. My face burned as I knew she and the other children around her must be studying my chest—my tell. Seconds of silence stretched interminably beyond her directive toward my body. "It has titties," she giggled. I closed my eyes, hunched my shoulders in a long-familiar motion of reducing myself, flattening the soft, rolling planes of my visible body as much as I could through contortion: an ancient act, a memorized contraction.

"Ewwwwwww..." A chorus of disgust rippled across the group, interspersed with uncomfortable laughter. "Gross," one voice said. "I don't even want to think about that." It was unclear what the "that" was—my breasts, which may as well have been bare for how naked and violated I felt, or maybe about the sex of my body, or about a person who looked like a guy having boobs. About me.

"But they're like—boy titties, right?" one boy suggested.

"*Bitties!*" one of the girls squealed, through a burst of group laughter.

"Like those two little fat kids have, the ones in our grade!"

I knew the boys they were talking about—a pair of twins in the ninth grade who arrived on one of the earlier buses, so I always saw them on my way into school for the day, their identical forms curled sleepily over the games they played on their phones while waiting for the school bell. They dressed their short, soft, rounded bodies in matching outfits every day, from their identical brightly colored socks to their Dodgers flat-billed hats to their gray hoodies. And

as the students tendered this comparison and unraveled in a fresh peal of laughter, I began to leave my body.

I was sitting at the desk of the teacher for whom I was covering, positioned bizarrely and unfortunately at the front and center of the classroom, floating in front of the whiteboard. I stared at my laptop screen, periodically clicking my mouse at nothing, moving my hands across the keyboard in an attempt to distract from the rising bile in my throat, the growing hollowness in my stomach, and a nausea that seemed to permeate my limbs. The blood had left my extremities, my freezing fingers shook as I tried desperately not to cry, feeling pathetic at even the possibility of tears, opting to text my girlfriend from my laptop instead, reporting to her in live time the steady stream of commentary that continued, unrelenting, from the back corner of the room:

“That’s fucking disgusting.”

“I’m seriously grossed out.”

“Do you think that it can...?”

I didn’t hear the end of this question, and I’m glad for it. I heard less and less as the longest 45 minutes in my recent memory passed, the room becoming a dull buzz in my head as I looked out the window and floated away. I had covered the class on my only free window—my only time to myself in the day—because I needed the money, and because of that menacing administrative directive to be a “team player,” picking up the slack, yet again, of grave and seemingly endless governmental and administrative mismanagement. I had begun the day as the students had—tired, scared, overstretched, and critically undersupported. We were all carrying too much and connecting too little, and it doesn’t surprise me that the weight of our cumulative disembodiment made possible this vicious moment of individually acute disembodiment. My disembodiment in my trans teacher’s body was the collateral that day, the price of a series of

events much larger than what happened in that classroom and beyond any of our control. I felt wrenched apart by the eyes of adolescents around me, my parts held up for amused scrutiny. It was the kind of experience of being in and outside of my body that I hoped I'd left behind in my own adolescence, relived here as my body became a teenager's again.

Theoretical Intimacies: Dancing with Theory Toward Rehabilitation and (Re)Embodiment

My whole problem with theoretical structures has to do with their displacement of physicality, as if there is a seepage or a toxicity from the experience of the body that is going to invade language and invalidate theory.

Carole Schneemann (2002), *Imaging Her Erotics*

Weeks later, when I could begin to talk about this moment with any degree of clarity and had made the decision to temporarily (and then more permanently) take leave of the classroom, I could see the ways in which that class period encapsulated much of what it is that I had been trying to examine in the preceding 4 years of my doctoral work. And just as this moment would prove crucial in my decision to take leave from the K-12 classroom, full of its own theory, and return to my writing, a container for a different sort of theoretical rumination—about education, sexuality, gender, and schools—the work that follows is full of similarly fraught moments that propelled me toward my doctoral journey in the first place. It had, after all, been 4 years earlier that I had returned to the academy in a similarly fragile and beleaguered state, simultaneously full of hope and despair at the state of American public education. At that time, emerging from 5 years of classroom teaching at the same time as I emerged from the closet and from a marriage to a cis, straight man, and desperately emerging from my performance as a straight cis woman, I rediscovered and clung to bell hooks' (1994) description of having come to theory *because she was hurting*. “The pain within me was so intense,” she writes, “that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and

within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory, then, a location for healing” (p. 59). Though I had first read *Teaching to Transgress* as a Master’s student in education back in 2013, it wasn’t until I began my Ph.D. program—fresh from a divorce and a messy, painful coming out and subsequent years-long estrangement from my birth family—that I had any context from which to understand hooks’s words. I reread “Theory as Liberatory Practice” during my first semester in the Ph.D. program and proceeded to record hooks’s words on an index card, which I kept taped to the wall next to my desk. I would go on to include her words in the epigraph to the first piece I published and the first chapter of this dissertation, “Topographies of disruption: Queer(ed) literacy pedagogies beyond the binary.” When I looked out through the window of my Williamsburg apartment at the glittering grey stretch of the East River, I saw hooks’s words in the foreground, and I saw a way through—if not entirely out of—the sort of quiet darkness that had come to encase my life as a newly out queer person, and as a person only beginning to understand themselves as transitioning.

Four years later, after making the decision once again to step back out of the classroom and return to my writing and research, it was these words of hooks that drifted back across my mind. I’d lost that original notecard in my pandemic move across the country from New York to Los Angeles, and so I rewrote them, urgently scrawled on a folded page of a yellow legal pad that I taped above my new writing desk, a view of a littered parking lot backgrounded by gauzy brown canyons and the spindly lengths of palm trees replacing the East River. I rewrote myself back into the story as I wrote *this* story, (re)generating and (re)pairing my teaching and writing selves, my teaching and my queerness, as I undulated back out of the physical classroom, with students, into the space of the classroom that I carry always with me. Though bell hooks writes, also in *Teaching to Transgress*, that “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility

in the academy” (p. ___), I feel I have only ever experienced the truth of the axiom (and I have experienced it, so sharply, it still raises the hairs on my arms to read) if I understand the “space” of the classroom as this: the interstitial terrain between the room I occupy with students and the horizon of my own experience of it. The selves that are always occupying, exiting, recovering from, and returning to the physical classroom, experiencing a sort of radical and regenerating *classrooming* all the while. The writing of this dissertation is my attempt to record, revise, return to, and reimagine what occurs along those fault lines between the classroom and the space that surrounds it. I’m hoping to hover along the humming moments of these fault lines, capturing some of the electricity and howling wind between me and my students, my students and one another, the *me* in my classroom and the *me* standing just outside, peering quietly into it. Over and over again: an ever-ticking seismogram of a queer and trans teaching life.

Sara Ahmed’s (2007) *Queer Phenomenology* was instrumental to my understanding of the classroom space as one that was inherently regulated, operating along a rigidly coded, maintained, and surveilled set of grid lines. Her conceptualization of directionality and straightening shaped the lens by which I was first able to re-examine the *topography* of my own experience as a closeted teacher, who’d spent years by that point working in Southern classroom spaces with closeted queer and trans students. And it was through this re-examination that I was able first to discern the broader shape of what has become my research and work, the questions that I keep coming back to. What I find now, though, when I return (and return, and return) to Ahmed is that I pay attention to different things. I suppose we all pay attention differently when the interlude of space and time and, I’ll always argue especially, *more teaching* renders us different people, reading with different eyes, reinhabiting, as Ahmed suggests, our

bodies newly and newly again, reconstructing the horizon of what is possible for our thinking, our being, and our lives.

My original copy of Ahmed’s “Sexual Orientation,” the second chapter of *Queer Phenomenology*, is littered with the one refrained annotation, scribbled inelegantly in the margins and in between lines: “yes!” I thought I was understanding, with some comforting and solidifying sense of finality, what it meant to be furnished with the outline of a new body, a home I could decorate with the thoughts and pictures I’d long kept hidden, lamplight glowing into new corners of myself. I thought I understood where the walls of myself were, thought that they’d long been hidden from me by the forces to which Ahmed, and countless feminist pedagogues before her, gestured to as restricting and limiting—what Adrienne Rich (1980) first named as compulsory heterosexuality: marriage, family, a feminine sense of “duty” of which my classroom teaching was, of course, a central and “natural” extension. But as I type these words, I occupy a body that is almost entirely unrecognizable from that young researcher, teacher, ex-wife, and ex-daughter, even though I then proudly exhibited a nascent brand of *dyke* that I’d dreamed toward quietly since childhood, and which I thought at the time to be my final form. I write now from a body that has been recast and reshaped entirely through the unknowable miracle of hormone replacement therapy and through the much more knowable re-stitching of top surgery. Five and a half years ago, where the work of this dissertation begins (though the memories it depicts extend, at this point, more than 10 years into the past), I thought I was reaching the *endpoint* of my new body and all the accordingly new material realities of my new life. I thought this with all the unvarnished exhilaration that youth seems to exude in retrospect but with what felt at the time like lifetimes of hard-won wisdom. But as I read Ahmed’s words now, my body expands differently, generously, muscle and fat

redistributed in me in ways that have changed the way I sit, move, feel, walk, teach, and think. “The ‘new,’” Ahmed (2006) writes, “is what is possible when what is behind us, our background, does not simply ground us or keep us in place, but allows us to move and allows us to follow something other than the lines that we have already taken” (p. ____). The memories—the crystallized moments from my teaching life that I include in this collection—are old. But the lines I take are new.

When my body was disassembled by teenaged students on that January morning in the coverage classroom, I felt old lines of inquiry coming to bear on me in all the same and different ways. My body had become, once again, the site for students’ negotiation of what they’d learned about gender and sexuality, both within school and outside of it. The specific ways in which my body departed from their developing understanding of any number of binaries, but specifically “man” and “woman,” acted as a text for students to “read” gender: mine, and subsequently their own and others’. All of these genders were, of course, being closely surveilled in the school building, even the very classroom, that we shared. No teaching, at least in the traditional sense, occurred that day, due to a number of factors I’ve already described, but a pedagogy and curriculum were certainly nonetheless at work.

The work of my dissertation has largely taken place as I’ve been *outside of* the secondary classroom about which I write. Theorizing the teaching profession is designed (intentionally or not) for such distance; a public school teacher barely has the time to eat a few cold bites of lunch or go to the bathroom, much less the space to contemplate their work, to connect to other teachers or themselves in any sustained, meaningful way. My days as a teacher, particularly those that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, have been marked by an all-consuming mode of *survival*, virtually precluding one’s ability to reflect, process, or thoughtfully critique

the unlivability of the public school system for teachers and students alike. It has only been in these prolonged departures from the classroom that I have been able to reach back for these moments and dilemmas, darkly glimmering at me from my teaching days, turn them over, and notice some of the things that they say about the dysfunctional and violent system of schooling. What lies ahead in this collection of work are meditations on moments where I felt trapped in the nexus of rules, limitations, and regulations of American public school life, and what I postulate those moments might say about possibilities for rupturing the myriad regulatory chokeholds on American public school teachers and students—*particularly* those who identify as LGBTQ+. It is a collection that necessarily undulates, (un)shapes and (un)ravels, shimmering with resonances that might feel both old and new, depending on how the distortion of this old mirror of memory casts and recasts the classroom events of years preceding in ever-renewing light. It is, perhaps more than anything, an imperfectly reconstructed archive of the affective entanglements and experiences of transitioning in the classroom, of teaching in a body that transitions, in a space that is often designed to foreclose that very state of flux and transition which the classroom ought most to embrace and facilitate.

When I read now the first piece that I wrote as a doctoral student, I read it with a sometimes intolerably aching sense of tenderness for the person I was, both for the young teacher and for the young researcher, separated only months from that former figure, who rendered her in writing. “I tell a story,” Butler (2006) writes in *Precarious Life*, “about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by those very relations” (p. ___). Over a decade now separates me from my earliest teaching self, from the adolescent students who are now adults, who are now older than the age I was when I first taught

them. Yet, I am entangled in all those relations, all those teachers in me, all those students. I am undone.

What does it mean to be undone? What does it mean to have been, as Butler says, “gripped and undone” by the relations about which one writes? Is there any profession that leaves one more regularly and habitually gripped and undone as teaching does? As a teacher, I feel taken apart, disarmed by the brilliance and violence of my students, and of myself. The writing of this body of work has been a sort of unassembling and reassembling of the moments that have made and unmade me as a teacher, as a queer, as a trans person whose coming-out stories have, like so many of my adolescent students’, taken place within and around the classrooms in which I’ve taught, sometimes with my consent but more often without it. I have, as I’ve shared and will continue to share, experienced myself being physically disassembled by the eyes of students, colleagues, administrators, and families. Though I no longer feel the sting of these moments in the same way, I feel nonetheless gripped, and I feel in theory a place for reassembling—for patching something new together. Theorizing the classroom has been the (un)disciplinary shelter for my transition—for my becoming undisciplined. The stories contained in this body of work show, I hope, the scars, stretch marks, fleshiness, and muscled tautening of the transitioning body that has lived and continues to live those stories. The writing that follows represents moments, like the one that began this introduction, in which I could not make sense of myself—in which students could not make sense of me, and in which, sometimes, they couldn’t make sense of one another.

I was aware when I began teaching, without anyone explicitly telling me, of the lascivious conjecture that enshrouded queer teachers. The automatic assumption of my butch high school soccer coach’s degenerate sexuality, for example, and subsequently rumored—

though entirely unfounded—pedophilic tendencies, led to a full-scale investigation and, eventually, her quiet dismissal from the school. In 2007 in Tennessee, there were no legal protections for a coach like mine, who was curtly deemed “not a good fit” by the school’s administration when they were finally pressed for a statement regarding her dismissal by the legions of devoted students, players, and colleagues who found themselves in collective indignation at the coach’s renown integrity and professionalism being called into question. Three or four families, a minute but mighty faction of churchgoing presbyterians, had brought concerns about the coach’s “lifestyle” to the school’s administration. They worried at her *influence* on *their girls*, meaning both their daughters and the other girls on the team who presumably fell under their moralizing domain, and at the close relationships the coach had formed with them, which were rendered strange and suspicious when seen through the lens of the coach’s assumed queerness. This was, of course, far from the start of the dedicated legacy of cruel attempts to surveil and regulate away any traces of homosexuality in the school culture. The year before, a son of one of these same families had produced and circulated tee shirts emblazoned with “It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” from his father’s tee shirt printing business in preparation for the big rivalry football game against the city’s all-boys’ boarding school. I can still remember the crude drawings that decorated that tee shirt in 2006. Two skinny twinks were depicted huddled too close together in the too-large football uniform of the rival school, while in the foreground a couple of buff, grinning football players donned our school’s gear, the jerseys straining at their muscles, tiny cheerleader girls fawning at their sides. The phantoms of my queer teachers and coaches, none of whom I’d ever known to be publicly out, hung around me as I entered the classroom for the first time as a teacher and as I fought fervently to remain closeted within it. They’re spectral figures, disembodied and detached from the actual people I knew my

teachers and coaches to be, constituted instead of the hideous things said and suggested about them in the spaces between—in the car line, on the sidelines, in texts at night, out of the classroom, and off the field. The speculative terror of queerness and transness thrums more loudly in these same channels than it did even then, back when I thought things couldn't get worse. At this time of writing, in 2024, the United States has experienced its four consecutive record-breaking year of anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced and passed, riding on the powerful machine of transphobic discourse that renders suspect any trace of trans being within or around children. The things that had been whispered about my assumed-to-be-queer teachers were monstrous, as were the material implications for their lives as professionals. And, in this present moment, the tales of trans monstrousness proceed at a horrifying clip, with no signs of slowing. I have spent the last 10 years of my career, both within and outside the classroom, reckoning with what must, then, be the monster in me.

“The monster,” Jack Halberstam (1995) writes in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, “always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities—and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities” (p. 10). After I left school that day in early January of 2022, the day my body had been picked apart by a band of ninth grade students for 45 minutes while I sat, frozen and ashamed, in the teacher's chair, I held my limbs close against me on our couch as I told my partner at home that night that I felt like a monster. I was, at that time, 3 months out from my long-awaited top surgery. That night on the couch while I cried and my girlfriend held me against her chest, I felt disgusted at the way my body had both fallen short of and *exceeded*, once again, students' expectation of the normal—of the “real” body, either of a woman's or a man's, that might have provided me a safe, secret passage through the classroom

that day. My breasts often felt like a literal excess, a silent but powerful outing of secrets I didn't want the public to know, and I remember often wishing, desperately, especially on the days that I taught—my body on full display to a room of 30 or more adolescent students—for a sense of *containment*, of consolidation of my form into one that would have more closely matched the existing model for “man” that operated in my students' and colleagues' minds. I hoped for smoothness where there were already scars, and where I knew there would continue to be new ones, marking my body as manufactured, hurt, and healed. Though I'd been binding my chest at that point for over 2 years, the flatness it provided, with its tight straps digging into my neck, wasn't enough.

It is, though, this very excess, this very monstrousness in me and the purported monstrousness of many of my queer and trans students and colleagues, that has not only acted as my portal into the sort of pedagogical and communal work that I hope to do but has also formed the methodological shape of my research. *Excess* indicates both the affective state that so often marks queer and trans lives in schools—the exceeding of categorical lines in any number of ways—and the (un)disciplinary relationship that many queer and trans scholars occupy in relationship to theory itself, to the way they theorize their stories and the ways their stories theorize. I rely here, in particular, on the thinking of feminist curriculum theorists who have long practiced a tradition of theorizing from the margins of codified academic regimes, teasing and pulling at what strains, dissolves, and tautens there. In their 1996 co-authored article, “Excessive Moments and Educational Discourses That Try to Contain Them,” Mimi Orner, Janet Miller, and Elizabeth Ellsworth preface their juxtaposed, unresolved piece by clarifying:

We want to use the concept of ‘excess’ to call attention to the relation between particular educational discourses and repression: what becomes contained by an educational discourses and what becomes excess or excessive to it is no accident.

Excess is a symptom of histories of repression and of the interests associated with those histories. (p. 111)

Mine is a story that regenerates and fluctuates each time it is told, that proliferates, that both *exceeds* the narrative framing and language I've wrapped around it and contains figures that perhaps exceed the language they might wrap around themselves. There is, after all, no way for me to recall accurately now what it felt like to be the person who called herself a woman, no way for her to imagine me. The two of us stand assembled with all of the other iterations of gender that have seen me through the last 34 years, puzzling and curious and wondering at one another. In his 2018 *Trans*: A Quick and Dirty Account of Gender Variability*, Jack Halberstam justifies their choice to place the asterisk beside *trans*: "As we will see," Halberstam writes,

the asterisk modifies the meaning of transivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity.... *trans** can be a name for expansive forms of difference, haptic relations to knowing, uncertain modes of being, and the disaggregation of identity politics predicated upon the separating out of many kinds of experience that actually blend together, intersect, and mix. (p. 4)

If to be trans is to hold a certain and impassioned commitment to flux, to movement, to (un)categorization, to fluidity, then to "tell my story" as a trans teacher in schools is an inherently entangled project, full of diversions and departures, knit and knotted together with the threads of a number of theoretical traditions that were, themselves, founded by others at the academic margins who ruptured forth between disciplinary lines more room—this room, and its many thresholds, in which I write.

I tell these stories not to propose a monolithic representation of what it looks like to be trans, or queer, or a trans and queer teacher, but to gesture to the fault lines I have noticed in my time in the classroom—fault lines where questions emerge about what it is we're doing in the business of schooling in the first place. What are the pedagogies at work when we group things

together, as we so love to do in school, and what are the pedagogies at work when we ungroup them? What happens to the bodies that are grouped, and to the ones that cannot be grouped—that cluster at the peripheries? What marks are left behind, in the grouping and the cleaving of/from groups? What might it look like to commit to pedagogies of *excess*: to embodied modes of teaching that continuously flex toward proliferation, toward transition, toward wildness, toward monstrosity? I am often uncomfortable in reading the sound of transition in my own writing, longing often instead for a sort of mythically unified self, forevermore and definitively *beyond* a “completed” transition, cohesive, smooth, glimmering, and whole, capable of presenting an unbroken and victorious narrative of presentation beyond ambiguity, beyond pain, beyond violence. What I hope to do here, then, is to stay with the dissonant viscerality of my own constant becoming, to explain something about the beauty of my own and my students’ monstrous, gorgeous becomings in an ongoing moment in which queer and trans children and adults face systematized state violence for their being *excessive*, irregular, unnatural, manufactured, surreal. These are my days, then—and nobody else’s—in school, as a monster.

A Framing Note: Topographies of Disruption

“Topographies” was the first article I published; I was shocked by its acceptance. This isn’t a vain grasping at humility of any kind. I simply didn’t know what it meant to publish academically, and I’d been ushered along kindly by the goodwill and faith (there’s that word again) of my dear faculty sponsor, Ruth, who assured me that it ought to be heard in the world. I didn’t really understand anything about what publishing entailed or what it would mean for something I wrote down about my life to be published in the world. I began writing the pieces that would come together as “Topographies” in one of Ruth’s graduate seminars in the spring semester of my first year as a doctoral student. At that time, less than a year sat between me and the narrative vignettes I would describe in the piece. I was 29 years old, growing more butch by the second in the newfound freedom of my permanent exit from my hometown in Tennessee and my temporary exit from teaching in the secondary classroom. Years of minute, agonizingly slow adjustments to my appearance, to the way I spent my time, to the books I read, had all come barreling forth, finally unbidden, at breakneck speed in the first 6 months of my life back in New York. Single, divorced, gay, living alone in a tiny studio, and brand new to a doctoral program, the circumstances of my life had transformed wildly from the life I’d known until just months prior: safe, settled, quiet, both hidden and in plain sight within the wide and enmeshed school community of which I was a part. It was a stunning change, one I often couldn’t keep up with or understand, and writing this piece was one way that I was able to keep track of what had happened—where I’d been, and who.

I was working on a particularly robust leg of revisions for “Topographies” while on a brief vacation to the Florida panhandle in April of 2019, planned at the last-minute as a way to see and spend time with my ex-husband and our dog without having to go to Tennessee. My coming out and our divorce had led to a painful estrangement from nearly all the communities—his family, my family, my school, my hometown—from which I’d long desired some form of escape but whose absence, when it finally came, I grieved and felt cavernous and debilitating within me on the many long, bottomless nights when I couldn’t sleep in my new Brooklyn apartment. So, he and I haphazardly planned a long weekend in the same northern Florida town where we’d grown up going for beach trips in the summer as teenagers—a day’s drive from our hometown in Tennessee. It was rainy and still a little too chilly for the beach, but I sat on the boardwalk in the mornings and watched the navy-gray Gulf of Mexico thrash under navy-gray skies, thinking, and remembering, and writing. I didn’t show the article-in-progress to my ex-husband. In fact, I don’t remember showing it to anyone who wasn’t a member of the doctoral seminar in which I’d been writing it, and only then within the structure of a required peer review. The Google doc was passed back and forth between my advisor and me, and then it was gone, back to the journal and out of my hands. But there I was, back in the South again in a seemingly endless cycle of leaving and returning and leaving the South. I hated the way I was comforted by the scent of humidity in the air, the languid, familiar cadence of Southern accents, the sound of country music floating past from the open windows of a pickup truck as it shot down the 30A highway that connected the coastal towns between Destin and Panama City.

I still had one foot firmly planted in the Southern landscape about which I wrote in Topographies,” both hiding from and creeping towards the very recent events that I couldn’t even quite believe were technically memories and no longer my present. I knew back home that

people were whispering about what I'd done—and that was how it was framed when passed accidentally my way by a well-meaning friend or cousin in recounting conversations about me: that *I* had abandoned my husband, that *I* had willfully deceived legions of students and their families in concealing my queerness, harming and maybe contaminating all parties in the process. That I had fled to New York to live my wayward life, destroying the lives of the good, decent people who'd loved and supported me all my life in my reckless, selfish wake. So, I hid from Tennessee, and still often do. Yet the fact remained: I didn't know how to leave the South.

I'm writing these words now from the screened-in patio of my ex's home in Tennessee. I'm writing and watching as a cardinal lands, brilliantly red on the still-bare branches of the winter woods that surround his home, and I'm reminded of my great aunt Louise telling me as a child that cardinals are positive omens, housing the spirits of our guardian angels, come to check in on us and relay their messages of comfort. Heavenly couriers representing some amalgam of all the souls of those I've lost and loved, reminding me of who, and where, and what I am. Who is this angel coming to bless me, I wonder, as I think about how to share these stories of my life with you? Why do I still so deeply fear the repercussions of telling my stories that I cling to these signals of faith and universal trust—a being outside of myself that might confer a sense of rightness, and in which I can embed my hope that it will be all right? Perhaps a different signal, a warning of threat, is gently flaring in my being as I sit here in Tennessee, reminding me that many of the pedagogical choices I describe making in “Topographies” would almost surely get me fired now, as anti-trans rhetoric has become codified into state laws in Tennessee and many other states in the country, silencing trans-affirming teachers in even more real and terrifying ways than those which I was describing in the piece. What does this mean for how we live, write,

and theorize the lives of trans students and teachers in schools today, as opposed to how I lived, wrote, and theorized them 4 years ago?

Writing “Topographies” felt, at the time, like turning the light on in what had been the close confines of a teaching life lived in abject terror most days. It felt like cracking a window in that room, looking in on myself, letting fresh air meet some of that thick terror that certainly still lived in me, greeting myself and the years that had hurtled forth in the first moment I’d had to pause and contemplate them. The braiding of theory into my reading and rereading of these moments of classroom teaching—the ones that had seared and stayed with me—felt natural, silken, and weighty as it slid through my hands. In the first year of my doctoral studies, I’d felt that distinct and transcendent expansion that can occur when the right theory slides like a clarifying lens over the hazy image of memory, clicking itself, and some greater sense, into place. I’d spent so many years trying not to see true things about myself that everything looked so different when I stopped. The writing of this piece was my first consolidated effort at staying with those memories that had hurt me in ways that, at the time, I couldn’t think too much or too long about. Feminist and queer theories offered me the shelter under which I could finally sit, stay, consider, parse apart, gently kneading meanings from the folds of memories where previously there’d only been fear and a piercing sadness. Something else emerged. Hope glimmered at the edges of things, and it still does. The way that I’d tell these stories now is different, as are the questions I would now ask of them. I wonder even more sharply than I did then about the forms of punishment enacted on *excessive* moments and pedagogical choices like the ones I describe in this piece, and I might offer a different form of caution to the teachers looking to defend their queer and trans students now. But, as with everything, I couldn’t have arrived at the new questions before asking these questions first, which are presented here to you

untouched from when I first asked them. The girl I was when living these moments is still within me, as is the girl who paused to wonder at them.

Chapter 1: Topographies of Disruption: Queer(ed) Literacy Pedagogies Beyond the Binary

1.1 Whose Closet Is It, Anyway? Pedagogies of Silence in the 21st Century Classroom

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

Eve Sedgwick (2008), *Epistemology of the Closet*

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

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1990)

“Bullard, I got a question for you.”

The flattening of my married name, long split from its title, pelted me from behind like it did a thousand times a day in the seventh grade classroom where I spent my days (and many evenings). *Bullard*. The only of their female teachers they addressed without a title, as they did with their male teachers—Hartman, Selznick. I’d always written my name with *Ms.* in front, dodging their questions of “Why no Mrs.?” and “Aren’t you married?” with the answer that I

simply didn't like the sound of "Mrs." I should have known then, shouldn't I? I was never at home as a "Mrs."

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

"So, some of us been wonderin'," Grace began, the Tennessee country in her voice and a smirk playing at her lips, which I knew meant nothing good could follow. At 5'9", 13-year-old Grace stood nearly at eye level with me, and as I turned to look at her directly, she shoved her wildly gesticulating hands into the front pocket of the same oversized hoodie she wore every day. Grace was the sort of girl who got embarrassed in makeup, who hated wearing her hair down as her mother demanded she do for church and performances at school. One time, a friend of hers had snuck a picture of Grace, in makeup and a boxy dress with her hair neatly combed, at a school event and put it on Snapchat. Grace found her the next day at school before the first bell had even rung, easily wrested her phone out of her hands, and crunched it under her sneaker on the linoleum floor. I was glad to be on Grace's good side, even when I got onto her. She played a tough front and had begged me not to tell anyone she cried when I busted her privately for cheating. But now, as students leaked into the classroom, she was uncharacteristically awkward. She smiled at her friends that stood perched at the door, watching.

"As much as I'm enjoying whatever this is, Plott, I've got to..." I began.

"Bullard, are you, like, *gay* or somethin'?" she spat, her face reddening from her neck up to the hairline of her disheveled ponytail. Her nerves spilled out in too-breathy laughter, and I joined her, turning away toward my desk so she didn't see the mirrored flush in my own cheeks.

The increasingly familiar rush of cold spread across my limbs as I pantomimed fetching papers from my desk, taking a sip of now-freezing coffee. *Quick, Liz.*

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

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

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

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

I spoke about the between-class teacher dance, the paper collecting, the classroom reset, the haphazard attempt to assert control over the chaos—but what about this one? What about this dance, on this Tuesday, between Grace and me? Grace and I were playing a game that I now see all over the blueprint of my 4 years at this school—looking at one another slant, a queerness in between us, a question that’s not allowed. A question that seems to ask: *Do you see what’s here? In the in between of what I’m saying? In between the question I’m asking and the answer you’re allowed to give?* The game was there with every student who shuffled their way to my desk, asking for a book recommendation, looking anywhere but at me, knowing what I would include in the stack. The game was there every time I said, “This book is about a girl who’s figuring out who she is and how she feels about people,” as the church girl in the back of the room sat up almost imperceptibly taller to catch the title. The game was there in the grade-level meeting

when our principal told us a boy, who I knew to have been hiding a relationship with another boy at school, had been pulled out of school and sent to “a center for faith and recovery” that his parents felt he needed for “behavioral issues.” We all knew the words we weren’t saying, and what we were saying by not saying them. The absence of language did not mean, of course, the absence of queer discourse(s), queer existence(s), and creation and even literacies of queerness, surviving and, occasionally, flourishing in the margins of this thing we call “school.” hooks tells us that the margin is “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance...a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (p. ___). Where are the margins within our school buildings where possibility glimmers out at us, if looked at slant? Where are the queer moments in school where a marginalized but (*and?*) nevertheless potent radical possibility disrupts the “givens” of school life? Can classrooms be marginal spaces? How might to teach queer(ly) be to intentionally utilize the “marginal” as this site of radical possibility that hooks describes?

When Grace Plott challenged me that day on a dare from her friends, she saw her teacher—an adult, one hopefully with answers, in control and in command. And perhaps I’d felt that way a moment prior to her question, maybe sometime during my lesson on comma usage; but as I revisit this memory, I see myself as a still astonishingly young person, raised a girl, raised Catholic in the Bible Belt South who, for the first time, was seeing all the invisible lines that had directed her life beginning to materialize in the air around her. Grace had begun to sense the restricting lines, too, much younger than I had, and it was along these lines that we knew instinctively to dance, never letting ourselves fully question what lay outside them, never wondering why we followed them, never actually answering the silent “What if?” in both of our

eyes. But what if the classroom became the site of *what if?* What happens when we linger on the *what if?* What happens—to school, to language—when we begin to make visible the grid lines of ideology within which we all inevitably rest? What does it mean to notice pedagogies of silence—those hardened, inflexible, repeated routes—so that something else might begin to rupture forth instead?

1.2 “*What If?*” as Rupture: Pedagogies of Disruption

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

Sara Ahmed (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*

Confrontation was never my strong suit. I’ll blame it on the Catholicism, or the being raised girl, or the carefully measured and narrow acceptable forms of “Southern professional woman,” or any other social machination that taught me being a good girl meant keeping my mouth shut. As a little girl, I felt an indebtedness to God, and as a 27-year-old teacher, I felt indebtedness to a social order that I was only beginning to understand as being very like that thing I was taught to call “God” as a child in Bible school. Like generations of women before me, I’d learned all the other ways to say “No” without actually saying it, so as to preserve the happiness of others. And as a young teacher in my mid-20s, I began to learn all the ways to resist without declaring much of anything at all, but by asking questions instead, by *holding* a moment—by not letting things recede. And in the recess of memory comes another that, importantly, won’t recede.

Andrew Hackworth sat across from me, his giggles echoing in the clinical, sparse room occupied by the school’s Gifted coordinator who apparently found wall decor to be a disruption (pause for irony) to learning. Andrew had just finished telling me a story from his lunch table

conversation that day, wherein Patel, an otherwise shy, quiet, and brilliant fellow seventh grader, had schooled the popular girl (remember Grace Plott?) who'd come over to insult his "gross smelling Chinese lunch" (Patel is Indian). There were bright pink splotches high in Andrew's cheeks as he told the story, his shoulders loose and shaking as we laughed, and I hurriedly ate the remnants of my own cold lunch. As he told me the story, Andrew's nail-bitten hands danced in large gestures, and the staple yellow and grey flannel he wore flowed behind his large movements. "I don't know what she was thinking, coming up to you boys' table in the first place," I said, shaking my head. "She should've known she was out of her league." Andrew's eyes were sparkling as the doorknob to the classroom turned and everything changed.

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

"Mrs. Bullard, this is Dirk Hackworth—Dirk, Mrs. Bullard is our seventh grade English teacher." Mr. Hackworth's hand was rough and calloused in mine, and I was immediately reminded of my then-husband's grandfather, a gruff man from Iowa who called me "little lady."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am." Mr. Hackworth's eyes, crinkled with deep creases at the corners, were brilliantly blue, and his sun-weathered face split into a wide smile that I couldn't help but return. "And you, Mr. Hackworth," I began, as Andrew's father made his way over to him, putting his wide hands squarely on Andrew's diminished shoulders.

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

“Who?”

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Hackworth cleared his throat and turned to Mrs. Raymond, asking her logistical questions about the upcoming state tests, at which point she happily, finally, came back to life,

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

Sara Ahmed (2007) writes, "if a world can be what we learn not to notice, noticing becomes a form of political labor. What do we learn not to notice? [...] If we have been taught to turn away, we have to learn to turn toward...even if this turning can at times feel like we are making life more difficult for ourselves" (p. 32). Though Mr. Hackworth chose to turn away from me for the remainder of that IEP meeting (its own sort of discomfort for a teacher who prided herself on cultivating positive relationships with students' families), his disapproval at my choice to refrain from calling Andrew "Abigail" did not end there. Mr. Hackworth left that IEP meeting after a much more terse and cursory handshake and marched directly down to the principal's office, where he filed a complaint at my inappropriate and unprofessional intervention at calling his daughter *Andrew*, a mistake for which he made clear I should be reprimanded immediately. I had barely begun my third-period class before the office secretary's scratchy voice came across the intercom, ordering me to the principal's office, my students *ooohing* and playfully asking me which kid's head I'd stuffed in a toilet.

This chain of command, from Mr. Hackworth to my principal to the office secretary's voice audible to my entire third block class (who would, of course, tell my other students in the next passing time), is one that exists in many schools, and it served to reinstate the school's

hegemony and approved power structure that I had, however unknowingly, troubled in that moment in the Gifted room. The moment had been fleeting—a turning toward Andrew where I might have quickly apologized and turned away a few years prior—but it represented a form of pedagogical disruption that was immediately noticed and reprimanded in an attempt to *straighten* behavior (Ahmed, 2007), both Andrew’s and mine, back to what was considered “appropriate” and “professional.”

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

How do these words—“appropriate,” “professional,” “protocols”—become the convenient disguises for “straightening devices” in schools? In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed (2007) investigates the etymology of the word “direction” in her examination of what it means to be orientated—in life or, more particularly, in a certain space, like school:

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

(p. —)

Implicit in the notion of direction is a need for continuity, smoothness, repetition—a path at once well-worn and undisturbed. To threaten the “professionalism” or “appropriateness” of a teacher is a mode by which systems of education might smooth, or straighten, out the problematic and disruptive nature of anything that questions, however minutely, the aims of that

system. Political, oppressive systems of society—public education included—function and rely on the unmediated and unexamined (ideally unconscious) following of given lines by its participants. Later in the same passage, Ahmed writes:

lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of repetition. (p. 10)

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

The trip to the principal’s office to talk about Andrew was far from my first. But something *turned* that day; in the days following my meeting with Andrew, his father, and the stern finger of my principal, other visits to the office came leaking back to me, cast in new light. There had been so many moments wherein, as a young teacher, I’d hurriedly changed my behavior and curriculum so as not to suffer the stain of being called “unprofessional” or “inappropriate,” the worst words I could imagine being called as an educator new to the game. I

remembered an attempt in my first year to screen *Dead Poet's Society* at the end of our poetry unit, and my principal told me it was entirely inappropriate filmic material for my students—that they didn't need to be “getting any ideas” about the “dramatic” measures taken by students in the film in the name of poetry, creative expression, and the critical necessity of art (she delivered this message to me as the principal of a fine arts-focused public school). I remembered my instructional coach pulling me out of class in the autumn of my third year (again, in front of my students so they could see the punishment that befalls wayward behavior, even to their teachers) to ask why in the world I was teaching a mini-unit on Ferguson and the shooting of Michael Brown. When I responded by telling her that it was a critical news literacy unit that met a plethora of Tennessee state standards, she waved it off, saying that the school had plenty of nonfiction materials that were far more “appropriate” and “in line” with the parameters of English class.

The following spring, my seventh graders were excitedly preparing for the performance of our recently completed class text: Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The room was buzzing with thoughts of glitter for the fairies and real foliage for the enchanted forest when I assigned the reading of Robin Goodfellow, or Puck, to children of all genders in class, noting that Puck was historically seen and played as a sort of genderfluid character in the history of the play's critical readings, performances, and filmic depictions. This choice resulted in another mid-class intercom call and another well-publicized visit to the principal's desk, where she shared her concerns that I was encouraging gender “confusion” by straying from the established path of roles for “boys” and “girls.” Hearing these words, I tilted my head, furrowed my brow, and opened my mouth, at which point she hurriedly rushed to her more general concern at why we were reading Shakespeare in the first place, seeing as how the state test was the following week

and my primary “professional” responsibility was to be preparing my students for that, not “playing dress up” and reading material that “they can’t understand anyway.” A concern at my “encouragement” of non-normative gender play was quickly folded into a larger, much more sinister (and legitimately punishable) offense of my having shirked my “professional responsibilities” to my students. In this way, straying from gender norms was linked to my effectiveness as a teacher, an offense that might very well have resulted (and often does, for many teachers) in district-sanctioned, policy-protected punishment, ranging from a strike on one’s record to a Personal Improvement Plan, a withholding of advancement, a delay or threat to one’s tenure, or termination of employment altogether.

Sara Ahmed writes about the “brick walls” of institutional life—the ones very like those path barriers I described earlier as keeping one “straight,” “in line,” and “on course.” Brick walls, as she contends in her writing on diversity work, remind us of “our place,” much as my principal reminded me of mine that day in her office (Ahmed, 2012, 2017). While these “brick walls” are often metaphorical, encoded into perhaps seemingly progressive policies and initiatives, they are also physical walls—the more porous walls of a classroom, say, or the decidedly less porous ones of an administrator’s office, where coded threats make their clandestine cuts on the skin of students and young teachers alike, unbeknownst to the world outside. “All around you,” Ahmed (2017) writes, “there is a partial sighting of walls...and those who know it is wrong even when they try to persuade themselves otherwise, even when they try to minimize a mountain of abuse, can feel all the more wrong, can feel the full force of it, when the wall finally does come into view: she is not okay; I am not okay; this is not okay” (p. 11). As I sat in my principal’s office following the meeting with Andrew’s father, the walls were beginning to come into focus for me, and things were becoming increasingly and resoundingly

not okay. Whereas before my struggles with those irascible notions of “appropriate” had seemed merely personal to me, or particular to my relationship with a literacy coach or an administrator, I was beginning to sense a trend to these disciplinary proceedings—a well-worn path, perhaps. Who, I began to wonder, is being protected within these walls of institutional life—within the walls of a public secondary school? And who is being wounded? How might the sighting of these institutional walls be, in the first place, a *queer* phenomenon and the beginning of a queer(ed) politic and pedagogy?

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

1.3 Min(d)ing the Gap: Toward Queer(ed) Pedagogies

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

José Esteban Muñoz (2019), *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*

In the final publication of his career, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz gestured toward what would become not only a trademark component of his work, but of the project of queer politics more largely: that of utopia, or those imagined new worlds to which he points in the epigraph of this section. Earlier in this document, I recalled the words of bell hooks on the marginal (and the classroom) as being the site of radical possibility—a space in which we might collectively imagine *new worlds*. It seems obvious to me that young people are quite ready to engage in this work of an/other world-making, whether through drawing dragons on the corners of their notes or mobilizing through social media with students who, a generation prior, might have remained strangers to them. This capacity for world-making—for imagining both within and against the dominant norms of schooling and society—is where I believe the work of queer pedagog(ies) begins.

In his earlier 1994 text, now central to studies of queer theory, José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Disidentifications* of how it is that marginalized and minoritized performers of color interact and forge resistant subjectivity/-ties within dominant ideologies and regimes of representation. Muñoz posits that, rather than simply accepting or outrightly denying the dominant culture, queer and marginalized thinkers and performers often practice a process of “disidentification” wherein they queerly repurpose the dominant modes of representation to offer both a slant reading of society's lockstep norms as well as a glimmering glimpse of queerer

future possibilities. Disidentification, then, is neither an abject surrender of queer personhood nor a bland assimilation, but rather a powerful assertion of one's queer subjectivity that requires a deep and critical reading of, and engagement with, normative modes of representation, including approved forms of literacy.

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

To enter into the ELA classroom today is to enter into an essentially straight(ened) space; everything from the posters on the walls to the texts on a standard high school English syllabus

endorses a specific brand of literacy, and any deviations from this are typically noted in the tones of careful sanctions (i.e., slight literary departures from “the real stuff” being briefly made in the name of “African American History Month,” “Women’s History Month,” post-state testing time, etc.). In her spatial theorizing of normative space, or these “givens” by which I’ve contended we operate in school, Ahmed (2007) writes, “spaces and bodies become straight as an effect of repetition. That is, the repetition of actions, which tends toward some objects, shapes the ‘surface’ of spaces. Spaces become straight, which allow straight bodies to extend into them...” (p. ___). To queer literacy is, then, to literally and figuratively rupture these spaces of whiteness, classism, racism, and hetero-/cisnormativity to disrupt the unquestioned repetitions of school. Though queerness itself eludes any instinct toward categorization, there are, I believe, some formative principles of what a queer literacy pedagogy might do, be, or seek to imagine in the *un-straightened* classroom space. To understand these principles is to more intentionally construct spaces that disrupt the given lines and straightening devices of “school,” and not only to encourage, but also to teach disidentificatory practices as modes of powerful self-actualization, self-ownership, literary and creative expression, and radical change.

1.4 What Is/Are Queer(ed) Literacy Pedagog(ies)?

A queer(ed) literacy pedagogy is intersectional. A queer(ed) literacy pedagogy recognizes that, as Audre Lorde (YEAR) writes, “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (p. ___). We know that queer students of color and trans/gender nonconforming youth represent the most targeted group in schools and are the most underrepresented in their school curricula (Tuttle, 2018); we know this, even if we haven’t read the data or the latest survey, because we’ve seen them. Maybe you, like I, have watched anger build inside the Black child who fears home and who fears school—who can’t tell his father that

he likes boys, who can't explain to his teachers *why* he acts out, who can't control a shred of the narrative that's been typecast to his body as a *troublemaker* since the day he started schooling. Maybe, like me, you had no clue what to do with this boy's rage that felt so big it both filled the room and silenced both of us; it was easier to call him "one of those kids" than to seek out the multiple ways in which his Black, queer body was being actively, daily harmed. Just as oppressions can be and are multiple, so should our pedagogies encourage multiplicity—in form, in representation, in identifications. In our construction of our syllabi, we should seek to privilege no one form/type of literacy, text, or author over another, but should instead quilt queer literacy frameworks by which *all* our students might see angles of themselves reflected—in which there is curricular room for both powerful *disidentification* and affirming *identification*.

A queer(ed) literacy pedagogy is future-oriented. Muñoz (2019) writes, "queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (p. ___). Through studying the disidentificatory practices of elders, scholars, activists, writers, and artists before them, students might begin to see their work in the world as both a continuation of a storied legacy (of people who actually look, live, and love like them!) and an imaginative world-making—a sculpting of queer(er), freer future lives for themselves and for others. So many of our students learn early to see their future in tunnel vision: that is, to see only the future that has been so readily scripted for them, if to see it at all. For education to be a healing, liberatory practice, we must be not only willing but adamant to reimagine futurity with our students, particularly those for whom fate seems predetermined in the form of a school-to-prison pipeline or an unwanted, lockstep following in the footsteps of one's father. In situating ourselves as future-oriented educators and mentors in the lives of our students, we commit to constantly interrogating the status quo, both in and out of the classroom, and asking ourselves

and our students: Whose voices are still not being heard? Who is not being represented? What might representation look like? How might things be different than what you've been taught to expect? In short: What *might* be?

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

A queer(ed) literacy pedagogy is expansive. A queer(ed) literacy pedagogy continuously seeks to (re)imagine language beyond the tired binaries of our past: boy vs. girl, good student vs. bad student, “at risk” vs. “advanced,” literate vs. illiterate. Instead, the queer literacy pedagogue models linguistic innovation and truth-seeking in a determination to push beyond the dangerously shallow, restrictive language of school. This determination manifests in a cautious unwillingness to categorize or jump to labelling as a way of sorting students (without knowing them more thoroughly); it manifests in a deep commitment to understanding human experience and expression as existing on a nuanced, expansive, and ever-shifting spectrum. It also means to remain constantly observant and reflexive of one’s language use; as a new teacher, I was handed the language of schooling and teaching, language I knew well from my own student days: “good reader,” “good student,” “bad kid,” “those kids.” I took the mantle and I wore it, carrying on the legacy of white supremacy and the myriad other oppressions that these labels veiled.

I remember sitting down with a mentor teacher, a few days before I began my first year of teaching and would meet my first group of students, to receive a “run down” on the rising seventh grade students that he had taught the year prior in their sixth grade. As we arrived at one of the names on the list, he said to me, “Oh, this one’s a flat-liner.” When I asked what he meant by that, he said, “You know, like when the heart monitor goes flat on someone—there’s nothing going on in there with this kid. He just doesn’t care. Don’t expect much out of him.” The teacher—a man I knew to be otherwise kind, caring, and attentive—proceeded to point out a number of other “flat-liners” on my rosters, many of them Black and Latinx children who had arrived to our magnet school with no general support or resources for transitioning into a very different school environment. He pointed out “flat-liners,” and I took notes. I was new and young—what did I know? This must be the way of school. And sure enough, the first time one of

my new “flat-liners” (a *child*) didn’t turn in the first reading log of the year, my assessment was verified and complete: Don’t expect anything from him. I was complicit in this violent language of schooling—the man who had used the term was not a monster, and neither was I; but we had inherited the monstrous language of school, and it was in our lack of disruption of this language that two good people and committed teachers perpetuated something horrible. *These* are the daily stories and choices that constitute the continuation of racism, oppression, and violence in our schools, much more so than the outrageous headlines about Betsy DeVos that fill our news feeds and make us feel comfortably separate from the toxicity of schooling. To disavow harsh labels and incomplete stereotyping in educator talk is to realign and recommit oneself to the multitude of students whose lush, fluid identities are left not only wanting but wounded by the language of normative education. It’s to realize that the “flat-liners” are only seen as “flat” through the angled and pernicious eyes of schooling—that they, like their well-regarded peers, have beating hearts, too. I later discovered that that “flat-liner” who didn’t turn in his reading log was the eldest child of a family of five children who were living in homelessness, moving from place to place each night to seek safety and shelter for themselves. My 12-year-old student was the primary caretaker in his family of younger siblings and his mother; his heart beat for those he kept alive each day.

A queer(ed) literacy pedagogy can be a silent one, too. Like the dangerous silent pedagogies to which I referred in the beginning of this document, queer(ed) literacy pedagogies can be, perhaps paradoxically, powerfully silent, too: They’re communicated in the layout and design of one’s classroom, in the dress, style, and presentation of one’s body, and woven into the text selections of one’s syllabus and classroom library. They’re visible in gestures: maintaining eye contact, sitting or shifting to decenter one’s physical authority in the room, opening one’s

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

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

sliver of a space, the light got in, bringing myself, my students, and the possibilities of our future(s) into view, lighting our way together into a queer(er), brighter future.

**AN INTERLUDE:
I DON'T REMEMBER A TIME BEFORE PENITENCE**

How soothed I was by the rosary—the clarity, the cleanness, the methodical hushed motion as I fingered the pearl beads. *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.*

On the first day of my senior year of high school, my AP English Literature teacher assigned us a close reading of a poem, which we were to read and annotate before commencing a discussion of it while he sat in the corner and silently observed, taking notes. I remember the faces that he made as we grasped at smart things to say, raising his eyebrows, long loud sighs that conveyed his disappointment punctuating the lulls in our conversations. I remember how electrically mortified I felt. My skin burned with the familiar old heat of shame. I don't remember the poem and doubt I ever will. *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.*

This same English teacher would later assign us *Wise Blood* by Flannery O'Connor. The copy I read at the time was an FSG edition that it seems is now out of print, with a folk-art sacred heart emblazoned bright red against a black cover. Barbed wire, rather than thorns, adorned and encircled the heart, not unlike the flaming sacred heart I would, many years later, get tattooed on the back of my right hand. For someone who writes a fair amount about education, I remember very little about my own school days, at least in comparison to others (my partner says she can remember walking into her Kindergarten classroom as though it were yesterday, seems to remember every lesson ever taught her). Perhaps this has something to do with why I fold and

unfold the same memories, passing my hands over the things I *do* remember, retracing and rewriting the reasons why.

I'd come to English class that first day of twelfth grade holding a copy of *Crime and Punishment*—our summer reading assignment. I'd stayed inside for much of our family's annual trip to the beach that summer, much to my mother's chagrin, furiously annotating the bible-thin tissue pages of a book with a blood red pen. The novel haunted me with its themes of alienation, fatality, obsession, guilt. I was transfixed. I read it twice.

It was months after the discussion of the nameless poem that had left me so humiliated in what I'd at least imagined to be its overwhelming disappointment to my English teacher, only a few months until graduation, that my teacher assigned *Wise Blood*. I don't remember the actual reading experience of the book whatsoever. What I do remember is that after I finished it in one hungry gasp of an evening, I named it my favorite text that we'd read that year. For a while after I graduated, I'd respond that it was my favorite book when asked. Strangely, in the 16 years that stand between then and now, I'd never reread it, not even portions of it, not once, and yet the feeling has stayed with me always—of having been pulled in, sliding darkly into O'Connor's undulating world, at once disturbing and familiar.

In her introduction to the 1997 collection, *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wonders about “what makes the queerness of a queer reading.” She writes:

Often, these readings begin from or move toward sites of same sex, interpersonal eroticism—but not necessarily so. It seems to me that an often quiet, but very palpable presiding image here—a kind of *genius loci* for queer reading—is the interpretive absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (yet?) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification. Such a child—if she reads at all—is reading for important news about herself, without knowing what form that news will take; with only the patchiest familiarity with its codes; without, even, more than hungrily hypothesizing to what questions this news may proffer an answer. (p. 3)

I'd been rereading this essay of Sedgwick when I attended the first Catholic mass of my own volition in years, on Christmas Eve of 2023. I was in Tucson, my girlfriend's hometown, surrounded as we often were at these holidays by her many siblings and their partners, several dogs, her parents. The usual holiday commotion. I went to church alone, at the general bemusement of my girlfriend's siblings, who hadn't grown up as I had, in confessional booths and in hushed, heady-aired sanctuaries shrouded in ritual and suspicion.

I settled myself alone into a creaky wooden pew at the back of the church, thick golden light refracting through the stained glass, casting dramatic shadows across the desert mountains that were just visible through the large arched window above the pulpit. As the service began, a child, no more than 7 or 8, processed down a nave decorated with holiday hangings of blood-red chile ristras. They were dressed as the archangel Gabriel. The child seemed to take their role, their holy news, seriously; their brow was furrowed underneath a silver tinsel halo, and their arms were held out open wide as they made slow steps through the church, feathered wings trembling at their sides. And as the opening notes of "O Come All Ye Faithful" surged over the organ and the first fingers of incense smoke curled toward me, I thought of *Wise Blood*.

Wise Blood follows the journey—one of many—of an ex-army, small-town Tennessee man named Hazel Motes. The grandson of a God-fearing preacher who instilled the same fear of God in him, Hazel Motes is described as having long had "a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin" (p. 16). Equally fearful of Jesus and of the sin that would propel him further from Jesus, Hazel Motes leads a restless life, drifting away from his rural Tennessee hometown and, as the novel begins, back again, fueled by the agitated desire to outrun sin (even as this run leads him back home), to outsmart the evil his grandfather preached about from the pulpit as being already somehow present within his young body. The

scenes and characters that greet Hazel upon his return home are archetypically O'Connor's: haunted, disfigured, unsettled and bizarre, murmuring and yearning and convicted, none of them good and none of them bad. Hazel professes himself the founder of the "Church Without Christ," and he caustically cites its tenets wherever he goes, both mocking the religiosity for which the South is known and barking the same dogmatic, fervent rhetoric housed within the land's many steeples. He traverses a terrain filled with false prophets—though he wouldn't consider himself among their number—driven by an insatiable, jagged longing for wholeness, safety, and, perhaps, the redemption he adamantly proclaims is a mirage.

Raised Catholic in the South, Flannery O'Connor's work would go on to serve as some of the most well-known examples of that genre of American fiction known as the Southern Gothic, an intellectual and literary tradition that she describes as playing in the fields that lie beyond logic, reason, order, in the murky backwaters of a region of our country haunted by evil acts and populated by folks who flaunt something they call faith, *silence* operating as the barrier between the two. In her 1960 essay entitled "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor writes about what animates the writer that one might call Southern Gothic; she identifies him as being principally interested in the unresolvedness of the *mysteries* that operate at the center of human behavior and human drama, in all their ugliness and transcendence—perhaps the only muddy affective overlap where one might ascertain understanding of how such heinous acts of cruelty can coexist with the persistence of images of purported godliness. "For this kind of writer," she writes,

the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than in probability. He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves—whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not. (n.p.)

In *Wise Blood*, these characters are fumbling toward the answers for questions they haven't yet articulated and wandering blindly (literally—some of them have blinded themselves in God's name) across one another's paths, reaching desperately for a faith, belonging, and redemption that continuously eludes them. And, like the meandering, hungry paths these characters take, it was with a "trust beyond myself" that I read these characters with a fearful fascination, that I sought and found something I was looking for: something it would take me years to articulate and act upon.

By nearly all the usual social markers, I generally found myself as a student situated safely within the various in-groups that make middle and high school relatively bearable, if not altogether like the movies. I'd been an athlete since the time I could walk, coming by it honestly from a family of hardy, jocular, crude Irish Catholic jocks, and sports were generally the criterion by which one was judged as popular or not—even more true within my family than it was outside of it. I made good grades, kept myself out of trouble (at least on paper—more on that later), could easily render myself silent and still as a mouse, and went a full 16 years on this earth without knowing that it was an option to disobey one's parents. And that spring of my senior year, as the last light of my childhood clipped below the sight line of the horizon after a year spent secretly in love with and having sex with my best friend, a girl, I found myself transfixed by the figure of the freak (interchangeable in the historical period of these texts with the identifier *queer*) in literature. Hazel Motes was isolated, lonely, wounded, secretive, searching, and though I don't remember where I was when we read each set of chapters or what lessons my teacher drew out of the text, I remember clearly the way I recognized him. Something aches in me now to picture the 17-year-old girl I was then, somehow both accidentally and intentionally

ensnared in so many secrets that I couldn't see my way out, afraid of God and afraid of myself, searching, as Sedgwick says, for myself in the pages of the books assigned to me without knowing what I was looking for. I had spent my childhood so terrified of being bad, so tirelessly working—as Hazel Motes had—to stay clean, to stay upright and good, that something important had begun to fracture and fragment within me, the cracks running too deep to repair. The sense of having passed a point of no return was then, and has remained, a central affective force in my life. The underside of piety that I so immediately recognized in O'Connor's surrealist fiction was the same demented darkness that I feared was at the core of myself, in my case marked by a sexuality popularly characterized in the Southern landscapes around me as deviant and dirty, and by an abiding *want* for things I wasn't supposed to want.

In her introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Sedgwick (1997) writes about two orientations towards reading that she calls *paranoid* and *reparative*, not as a binary but as a shifting set of positionalities that a queer reader might bring to their reading of a text. Both orientations are, of course, marked by a sort of *looking*. That is, a paranoid reading practice “places its faith in exposure,” scanning the horizon and scanning the past for indicators of *wrong* or *bad*, a lurking truth waiting to be brought to light. A reparative reading practice seeks, by contrast, pleasure, possibility, and something that Sedgwick calls “amelioration.” Of the two, she supposes paranoid reading practices to be the set of practices most clearly privileged and represented in purportedly “learned” academic spaces. I think here of the many English classrooms of my youth in which the indicator of a successful “close reading” was a bloodied page: red pen scratches dissecting the various literary devices that make manifest an unassailable “theme” or “message” of a given literary work, the *author's intent* a gripped prize in the fist of the top student. Certainty, an unquestioned indicator of brilliance, was marked by this

evisceration, this *revealing* of truths that left no room for the sense of surprise that Sedgwick writes is so intolerable to the paranoid reader. Whereas reparative reading practices move toward, and operate along, positive affective states, “the only sense,” Sedgwick writes, “in which [the paranoid] may strive for positive affect at all is for the shield which it promises against humiliation” (p. 15). The paranoid reading stance is characterized by a state of constant vigilance for surprises, for threats, for potential opportunities to act as the detective who unveils an untruth, who *exposes*. In the opening of *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes is described as looking, intently, at an indeterminate object on the opposite end of the train car in which he rides. He becomes fixated on exposing the “real” identity of a porter on the train, delighting (as much as this sort of character can be said to experience anything close to delight) in being the one to look, to find, to find out, to expose. Inculcated in dogma that taught Hazel he ought to be on the lookout at all times for evil, including the evil that was surely already present within him, Hazel hunches through the world with a furrowed brow, dark eyes, assessing and never quite finding, but convinced nonetheless of his *rightness*.

I spent all of my school years working to never feel the way I felt that day in my senior year English class, my head hanging with humiliation as our teacher sighed loudly and shook his head in the corner. I grieve the years that I spent outrunning this feeling instead of playing in the playgrounds of unknown that reading and learning and growing up ought to be. My shoulders hunch so easily now, and I am still trying to unlearn it: this posture of defense, of a hunter who simultaneously feels himself to be perpetually hunted. Sedgwick describes paranoia as possessing a “rigid relationship to temporality...at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise” (p. ___). When I first read *Wise Blood*, at the tender age of 17, I’d already built a life founded on the assumption that I was sickening, that my desires were sickening, that

the only mode of survival for me was to skillfully remain in hiding, avoiding exposure and ceaselessly scanning the horizon for threat. Even now, I traverse the same circular paths, seeking to understand where things went wrong, and where, with enough tracing things through with gentler hands, things might still go right.

We wrote a lot about “foils” that year in AP Lit (mostly in our discussion of *Crime and Punishment*) and the ways in which characters mirrored and contrasted with one another, throwing one another’s characteristics into greater relief. It was one of those terms I immediately grabbed at and overused in blue-book essays to sound smart, but I wonder now what so fascinated me about this literary construction of the foil. When I met Hazel Motes that last spring of my childhood, I saw myself: warped, wounded, and wounding. It didn’t make sense to me. As I’ll recount in the next chapter, I was the best little Catholic girl you’d find. I was obedient, cleanly combed and wearing white, smiling with prayer hands pressed firmly in front of me as I recessed from my first holy communion. But I felt for most of my childhood that I’d fooled everyone so heinously, that there was an undiluted blue-hot flame of evil that licked at the center of me, and which I must endlessly guard from sight, for the rest of my life. At the same time, I was experiencing the first throes of a love and sensuality and care and intimacy and euphoria that I’d only known in rare moments of unguardedness in my entire life: the first breeze of spring; the dim yellow light of giggling blanket forts with my little brother; making a clean assist on the soccer field and watching it connect and soar into the back of the goal. In my emerging consciousness of my queerness, I felt I suddenly understood all the best things I’d ever been taught to see in religion, and I felt too the devastating weight of their purported wrongness.

Towards the closing of her essay, Sedgwick writes about “that intimate anachronism by which a queer grown-up can sometimes keep drawing on the energies, incredulous, and

discoveries of an earlier moment of passionate, incompetent reading and recognition” (p. 31). I am still that girl, sifting through the pages, handling the books with the same reverence, fear, and longing with which I handled the freshwater pearl beads of my first rosary. I still pray for forgiveness. What’s perhaps changed is that I pray with a body turned toward the possibility of redemption, eyes on the horizon, tracing my finger along the practice of *repair*. Sedgwick cites psychoanalyst Melanie Klein in her description of reparative reading practices, writing: “among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love” (p. 8). What carries us toward repair carries us toward love—for one another, for the young people we usher towards love, for the young people we once and still are.

A Framing Note: Trans/School

When I submitted “Trans/School” to *English Journal* for their consideration in the fall of 2019, “Topographies of Disruption” still hadn’t been published, and wouldn’t be for another 6 months. Uninitiated into the processes of academic publishing, as I have previously noted, I was surprised at how protracted the time had been between when I’d begun writing “Topographies” and when it would finally make its debut. The momentum that had seen me through the writing and revising of “Topographies” petered to a slow stop, and I worried that all the conviction I’d had in writing the piece—all that I knew about teaching and learning—had been used up and finished. I felt increasingly self-conscious to be writing about secondary education when I was no longer a secondary classroom teacher, as a number of my doctoral cohort members still were. The imposter syndrome that I knew marked the experiences of many early-career doctoral students (that I hoped I’d miraculously evaded) settled around me uncomfortably. I wondered if I actually had anything interesting or important to say at all about schooling, students, classrooms, queerness. I can hear that uncertainty, that hesitancy in my voice, when I read “Trans/School” now, the outrage and forthrightness I felt when writing “Topographies” having slowed and transmuted into quieter musings, doubt, and the gathering sediment of unformed questions. Unlike with the other published articles in this collection, I remember the night that I submitted the final manuscript on “Trans/School.”

By the fall of 2019, the start of my second year in the doctoral program, I had stopped wearing makeup and continued to cut my hair shorter and shorter—at this time, it fell in a messy cropped shag around my ears. Nothing I dressed myself in felt good anymore. I vibrated with an

aversion to what I named and resented as my persistent femininity. Following a long-desired, expensive, and immediately disappointing breast reduction earlier that year, I found myself often awash in a hot mixture of groaning dysphoria and self-disappointment for not having known earlier that what I really wanted was top surgery. After a lifetime spent secretly dreaming of being with women, I found that, upon coming out, I was utterly disoriented and aloof, unsettled by the sharp, fraught tension I encountered in my relationships with other out queer women. This dynamic I would only later understand to be a central characteristic of a previously unknown phenomenon to me: *dyke drama*. I had not anticipated that, after all my time in the closet, I wouldn't know how to have relationships outside of it. I knew secrecy so well that honesty came at a greater cost than I could tender. Most bewildering of all, though, was the fact that, just over a year since my return to New York following a fiery exit from Tennessee and my marriage, I found myself unexpectedly, desperately in love. I was 30 years old, but falling in love with a woman for the first time since I'd come out, and moving through the murky early stages of what I'd soon understand to be the emergence of a gender transition of sorts had left me feeling as young and raw and afraid as a child. It was a soft opening in my life I hadn't expected, having operated under the assumption that the hardest work—decades in the closet, coming out, getting divorced, moving away—was behind me. But in November of 2019, as I sat on my partner's sagging full bed in the small bedroom she sublet from a married couple in Bushwick, I remember my finger hovering and hesitating over the cursor to submit the article, caught in the brambles of new anxieties.

My girlfriend had fallen asleep an hour earlier while I continued to frown at my manuscript, doubting if it was ready and fussing over minor details as the midnight submission deadline loomed. *English Journal* is historically a journal focused chiefly on classroom practice,

written largely by and for in-service English teachers. I'd started this piece months prior as an essay about what I was learning as a new teacher educator—about how the experience challenged some core beliefs and, if I'm honest, confidence, about who I was as a teacher. In the final years of my closeted life, I'd held fast to my identity as a teacher to anchor me to myself and to the world around me. After leaving the classroom, I could feel life as I knew it beginning to drift under me, and the realization of that irrepressible fact both thrilled and terrified me. Throwing myself into my classroom teaching, I'm sometimes embarrassed to admit now, was as much for myself as it was for my students. Many of my students, as I've written about in this collection of work, needed a safe harbor, and I did, too. I needed a safe place where I could hide from myself and from the life I'd accidentally built or let build around me outside those classroom walls. I painted the walls green, I filled it with books, and I found every excuse I could to stay there, in that space of possibility—both tucked within and just outside of the rest of my life—where I asked my students to imagine more for themselves. Where I could, then, quietly do the same. I had left the secondary classroom with a host of fears about who I was, but I felt quite certain of the fact that I was a very good teacher. Becoming an educator of teachers—good, smart, in many cases more experienced teachers than me—troubled my surety of myself as a good teacher. It became quickly clear to me how thoroughly I'd organized my adult life around the foundational belief in myself as a good teacher, and also how tied as it was to being a good woman, a good wife, a good girl. The intellectual and professional hesitation that I felt in the second semester of my doctoral studies unmoored me arguably as much as coming out did.

English Journal had a much shorter page limit than *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, and I felt anxious that my manuscript was neither theoretical nor practical enough to satisfy the requirements of good teacher research. It was, I can see now, a writing and submission process

that represented a much larger suite of anxieties that I was navigating in the beginning of my *out* life—about being gay enough, butch enough, hot enough, experienced enough, androgynous enough to call myself nonbinary, and womanly enough to still qualify as *dyke*. It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that I gravitated in this piece toward the examination of category and subjectivity: tracing my identity as a *good girl*, one that I'd always found safety in, and how that category came to be produced within school and mean so much to me, and how it still does, even now. There are things that I've recovered since I wrote this piece—tentative threads of a new kind of relationship with my parents; pieces of me that felt suspended from my life for the 4 years following my coming out. I now have the physical copy of the childhood photo I write about in this piece, along with others. Hopeful repair remains much more elusive work to me than fearful suspicion. I can see the caution in my mother's eyes when we meet on occasion, can hear it in her voice. Along with these tender first steps towards repair (in any number of areas and relationships across my life) comes rippling waves of guilt: Have I been unfair in these chapters to people who were, at the time, doing their best? Who will it hurt to see how glaringly and baldly I've cast them? I feel the need now in ways that I didn't 5 years ago to clarify that I don't think Andrew Hackworth's father was a monster, nor my former principal, nor my mother or my students' mothers who did and might still see a monster in me. I understand more now about how crucial our illusion of certainty is in surviving an often unsurvivable world. I don't make any excuses for the adults who have not known how to show up for the queer and trans children in their lives, but I do see them more clearly now and feel a more complicated mixture of pain, frustration, sadness, and fear. I feel myself in many ways to be the figures in the Greek chorus I go on to describe in "Trans/School," ghosting around the shoulders of my younger self

as she continues to haunt me: *You're doing your best, they're doing their best, it's okay that it's not enough.*

As more time distanced me from my adolescent students and from the person I was as their teacher, I wondered more at the creation of this identity of teacher that I'd needed to eclipse my life and hide me safely away from myself. I wondered at the new terrain in which I then stood, as a doctoral student in education and teacher educator, and the space it afforded for me to examine more closely the construction of the *teacher* identity, to question what it meant and might mean to others. I had pitched "Trans/School" to *English Journal* as being about YA literature in teacher education, but I read it now as being about what we do with the marker of "teacher" altogether. What does it mean to build a teacher? What does it mean to take one apart? What happens when we take a teacher apart? When we take a person apart? In the latter half of 2019, when I wrote this piece, all the colors of me were running, as the person I'd been my whole life both melted away and began to take new shape. I was disassembling; in love, in transition, in the undefined new course that my life was taking. Collectively, unknowingly, we all stood on the eve of a global undoing. When I read this piece now, it feels undone. At the time, it was enough. I wonder if this is all we can ask of ourselves in our continuous becomings and unbecomings, in all that we learn and unlearn: letting things be done until they're not again, having the wherewithal and the faith to begin anew. Like Levithan's chorus, I am filled with sadness reading this piece, and filled with hope.

Chapter 2: Trans/School Across and Beyond Queer-Inclusive Pedagogy

2.1 Queer(ly) Timed: My Trans* Teaching Life

There's a picture of me that was taken in the closing days of my second grade year, on a day of celebrations meant for kids with summer birthdays. I was 7 at the time of the photo, weeks away from 8, and I'm smiling dutifully at the camera, my hair a little disheveled and my fingers poised on a fork, hovering over the last bite of cookie cake. I no longer have the physical copy of this photo—my guess is that it's buried somewhere in the annals of pictures now

inaccessible to me, or at least complicatedly accessible, in the basement of my parents' house in Tennessee. But I somehow ended up with a phone picture of it; a slight glare glints across the surface of the photograph itself, casting light against the smudges, scratches, and a puncture mark from where the photo must have once been pinned to something.

I'm wearing the heavy plaid uniform jumper of my Catholic school childhood—my chest itches at the



memory of the scratchy, dense fabric; my body remembers the hanging weight of it before I do. A Peter Pan collar peeks neatly out from the neckline of the jumper, buttoned at the base of my throat, and the impression overall is one that was carefully and collectively cultivated across my elementary school years to then follow me, it seems, for life: a good girl. I view this photo now as a doctoral student in English Education, wearing an outfit that has brought me a particular, unplaceable pleasure these days: a light blue Oxford shirt, navy pants, and men's dress shoes—the exact school uniform of the boys who sit around me in the photo.

In all the ways I've changed (and all the ways I haven't—namely, that level, close-mouthed grin and the undying love of cookie cake), I wonder if I've ever really left this good girl behind. I was an obedient student, daughter, churchgoer: I was well-trained to say “yes ma'am” and “yes sir,” to kneel when the priest said to, to keep my hair out of my face and my long, lanky legs closed, to neatly write my cursive and to smile for the camera. It is this pervasive conditioning, toward rule-following and sticking to the scripts given to me, that has made every tiny slip since then—in my presentation, in my teaching, in my unending life as a student still—feel like a thrilling rebellion. But I wonder what hangs between us, that good girl in the jumper and me. I wonder, in all my purported transgressions and little defiances, accumulating in volume and velocity as time has gone on—I wonder if I'm still just that good girl, dressed in boys' clothes.

The meaning of the prefix *trans* is notably unfixed and flexibly defined as “across,” “beyond,” and “through.” I look at this picture and feel myself both connected and disconnected from the kid who studied hard at the role of good girl. I wonder what connects us, across, beyond, and through time, this child and me—between the girlhood I learned to perform and something like boyishness I often find myself performing now, as an adult teacher whose gender

expression doesn't adhere neatly to what many still might call "masculine" or "feminine." When I look at this picture, I see all the ways I was trained to be a girl, but I also see something else behind the dark brown eyes: wiliness, hidden curiosities, a kid who got in trouble for laying their girl barbies on top of one another in intimate embrace, the dolls' stiff plastic limbs pressed against one another—me, pressed into the corner of my closet where I kept them, and myself, secret. I see a kid who learned what the gender rules were in the same room I learned my times tables; whose knees became less muddied throughout the years as my desires—to play football with the boys at recess, to play "doctor" with my best friend Hannah, to try and fail to wear this boy's uniform I now wear as an adult—were checked.

Time, in the linear sense, falls away here: I am, was, will be that kid from the scuffed-up photo with the scuffed-up knees. Sometimes, when I'm reprimanded by an administrator for my "unprofessional dress" or jeered at by the teenager on the sidewalk who loudly asks his friends, "Hey, is it a boy or girl?"—sometimes, I feel only and exactly like the 7-year old in that photo, and I am made newly raw and remote. Following the great bell hooks, I wonder how the queer/trans teaching life like mine might be one inherently situated for *resistance*, and how their classrooms might operate as distinct sites of *resistant possibility*. English teachers—those in my discipline—know that *everything* is a text, available for critical reading. In any given English classroom, students are surrounded, ideally, by texts of all kinds: digital media, art, music, and, yes, literature. The teacher's body, very often the primary vehicle itself for the delivery and distribution of these texts, is, crucially, a text in and of itself. How, then, might the *texts* in any given English classroom—the body of the teacher included—serve as sites for resistance to the lockstep oppressive regimes (of cisnormativity, heteropatriarchy, racism) that public schooling systematically perpetuates?

2.2 Teaching Teachers, Adolescents, Literature: Queerness in Literature and in Our Classrooms

On the first day of the spring semester in January 2019, I entered a room of student teachers in a Master's seminar entitled "Adolescents and Literature," a class I teach to preservice MA students in my university's English Education program. There were 20 sets of eyes on me as I placed a thick stack of freshly printed syllabi on the table at the front of the room and leaned myself against it—a pose of feigned confidence and competence. I wore a black sweater, black pants, black boots weathered by the late January sleet outside on that New York City night—the product of a shifting teaching wardrobe over the years that had become incrementally neutral in all manners of the word. My students, fresh off their first day of student teaching, made conversation, ate their packed dinners, watched me curiously.

I had decided to structure the course as a hybrid of a Methods course and a literature elective; it was many of my students' second or third semester as graduate students, and only a few of them had spent much time "just" reading and discussing literature in their MA program. I hoped to cultivate a space for this very task—one that, both troublingly and understandably often, falls to the wayside in the lives of preservice and in-service English teachers' alike—while attending to the subtext of all our literary conversations: the roles of such texts in our classrooms and the lives of students who populate them. As a former seventh and eighth grade English teacher, queer- and trans*-identifying myself, I had found in my own teaching years that YA literature possessed perhaps the most diverse and prevalent representations of LGBTQ+ characters of any media I consumed. The YA novels that my Master's students and I read in class themselves mirrored the lived realities of my adolescent students: negotiating the fraught, joyous, beautiful, and painful existence of a prematurely politicized body, whether that body be a queer one, black one, trans* one, Latinx one, or all four. I attempted to capture, however

problematically, slices of the different identity labels that any given student might bear, and how those identities would impact his/her/their schooling experience; each week we read one book that spoke from and to a particular cluster of subjectivities. We read titles such as Jason Reynold's *All American Boys* in a week focused on political activism and racialized adolescent bodies. We read Elizabeth Avededo's magnificent *The Poet X* in a week focused on poetry and family. And, in the third week of the course, after two sessions enmeshed in conversations around what "the adolescent experience" means right now in this country and this political climate, we read a book I'd always kept tucked away innocuously in my Tennessee classroom library, hiding its purportedly "provocative" cover: *Two Boys Kissing* by David Levithan.

Two Boys Kissing is narrated, Greek drama style, by a chorus. It's a compelling framing device immediately, and one that dispels persistent rumors about the supposed narrative flatness of YA literature. The foregrounded action seems, perhaps, overly cute: two boys decide that they're going to break the world record in the category of "longest kiss." But this decision is embedded in a network of storylines and ensemble characters that, across the brief novel, eloquently address a host of complicated questions about queer identity. The chorus that opens the novel is made up, though never discretely named as such, by the men who died in the AIDS crisis, speaking to a generation of young gay boys—positioned in the novel as descendants, of a sort, of the older generation of men who perished. The novel begins with the tying together of this intergenerational community and sense of harrowing legacy:

You can't know what it is like for us now—you will always be one step behind. Be thankful for that. You can't know what it was like for us then—you will always be one step ahead. Be thankful for that, too. Trust us: There is a nearly perfect balance between the past and the future. As we become the distant past, you become a future few of us would have imagined. (Levithan, 2015, p. 1)

Levithan's opening to *Two Boys Kissing* is a poignant tethering of "past" to "future," a temporal tension in which all teachers exist, navigating their own student days and the futures they want to help engineer for their students. I remain as continuously struck by the haunting truth of these opening words now as the first time I read them: to be a queer and/or trans* teacher is to uniquely navigate the pain of one's own past and the hope for a different future for one's queer and/or trans* students. Some of the first openly queer people I knew and spent time around were my students. Most of these students were only safely and openly "out" while at school. As a closeted teacher during the entirety of my 5 years teaching in the South, I often could not comprehend the boldness with which my young students expressed their queerness. I could not imagine a youth in which I'd have personally wrested the freedom to self-express my burgeoning sexuality and gender non-conformity, both of which were with me at the same age and younger than my students, and with far fewer circumstantial risks on the line than many of them faced in their home communities, churches, and families.

I had discreetly recommended *Two Boys Kissing* to a plethora of students throughout my 5 years teaching in the South; I couched it in a short stack of "to-read-next" recommendations for a kid who generally took a couple of weeks to complete novels but had finished *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* in a day. I slid it across my desk to the boy who had come out to me in frantically scrawled words on a post-it the week before, his words hastily and painfully scribbled in dull pencil: "I think I'm gay but my parents would kill me if they knew." I pointed it out to the church-going girl who tugged uncomfortably at her paisley cardigan, who once told me that her parents only allowed her to read the Bible at home (as dutifully and neatly recorded each day on her required reading logs), but who made it her mission to inhale as many of the books in my classroom library throughout the school day as

possible. As English teachers, we know that books are sometimes oxygen. But for my queer students, many of whom could not imagine a future in which they were both adult and queer (much less happy) at the same time, queer YA literature might be the only sign that there's a future in which they might live and breathe at all.

There was never a time for me in which my queerness was not fraught—a thrilling secret at best—and so I didn't imagine a queer future at all. My future, as I saw it, had to be a straight one in order to be a livable one. My imagined queer life became, for me, a shadow life: an impossible, haunting companion to the one I felt I had to lead. Queerness occupied similar spaces of inhabitability in the lives of many of my young students, and so it wasn't until I returned to the classroom that January night in New York City that I worked with students for whom that was not necessarily the case: for whom queerness had been a lovely but somewhat unremarkable thread in their journeys to adulthood. It was the largest group of openly queer students or colleagues I'd ever worked with, and what they began to demand—of queer representation and of the ways in which we consider queerness with our adolescent students—shifted my understanding(s) of queer identities in schools yet again. My Master's students asked questions about what we should even call “queer” YA literature, noting the dangers that could come from potentially reifying existing binaries such as “normal” versus “gay” books in any given classroom library (as opposed to, for example, simply including all “romance” titles in one section, regardless of the gender identities or sexual orientations of the book's lead characters). They worried at the potential for queer YA literature to perpetuate this notion of queer unlivability in its historically fatalistic plot lines, involving characters whose non-normative sexual desires often resulted in catastrophic, tragic, or otherwise depressing ends. They questioned the general white, cis-maleness of the subgenre even now, both applauding

books like *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens' Agenda* for offering a gay protagonist who has a loving family and supportive friends and school (for the most part), and still calling out the undeniable racial and class privilege of a novel set in white suburbia.

What *Two Boys Kissing* offered us, then, was a lens through which we might examine a few threads of contemporary queer life that presented important considerations for our work in the classroom (with all students, not just queer-identifying ones). The book neither shies away from the very real continued pains that mark the existence of young queer people today nor does it refute the effervescent joy and belonging that queer community and existence often provides. It problematizes the idea of a single, unified “queer community,” the oft-presumed simple binary of being “in” the closet or “out” of it, the reigning and sometimes toxically reductive axiom that “it gets better,” and even the flat, unexamined homophobic villainous “bully” character that we see so widely represented in media about queer youth. And, particularly for the number of queer teachers among us in that class, *Two Boys Kissing* had us continuously questioning the temporal spaces that separate us from our students—and how to utilize that space to forge community, purpose, and possibility. Toward the end of *Two Boys Kissing*, the chorus refrains, to us and to its young audience:

What a powerful word, future. Of all the abstractions we can articulate to ourselves, of all the concepts we have that other animals do not, how extraordinary the ability to consider a time that's never been experienced. And how tragic not to consider it. It galls us, we with such a limited future, to see someone brush it aside as meaningless, when it has an endless capacity for meaning, and an endless number of meanings that can be found within it. (p. 155)

What is the work of English class if not this: imagining other possibilities, richer futures, and an “endless number of meanings”—in the texts on our syllabus and those lived in our very bodies?

2.3 Beyond Queer Pedagogy: Critical Trans Pedagogy and Teaching “Off-Script”

In his 2017 article, “Unscripting Curriculum: Toward a Critical Trans Pedagogy,” Harper Benjamin Keenan writes about the ways in which schooling typically functions as a process of disembodiment. The system of schooling makes “little room for adults to engage in thoughtful dialogue with children about the meaning of their bodies in the world,” he writes. “Schooling currently functions to categorize children’s bodies in all sorts of ways from the moment they are enrolled...” (p. 541). Writing out of, and in response to, the current political and cultural climate in which queer and transgender bodies continue to be dehumanized and subjected to alarming acts of violence, Keenan calls for a pedagogical response that extends the reach of the now well-established path of queer pedagogy, pioneered by teacher-researchers like William Pinar, Dennis Sumara, Deb Britzmann, and Susanne Luhmann, who write about the capacity for a queer(ed) pedagogy to be one that makes visible what has been previously (and dangerously) invisibilized. Crucially, Keenan notes that his critical trans pedagogy is built from his own queer and trans life; while all forms of critical pedagogy ask us to consider the ways in which our own subjectivity informs our pedagogies, a critical trans pedagogy asks us to specifically attend to the ways in which our *particular bodies* can be, and are, read as texts.

Conversations about queering curricula, and particularly queering English curricula, often end up becoming conversations about where and when to include what we might categorize as “queer” texts, and it’s a conversation that was justifiable in its inception—and remains so—for its attention to the cis- and heteronormativity of the traditionally taught “canon” texts. However, while the inclusion of “queer” texts, such as *Two Boys Kissing*, for example, in classroom spaces is critical to the work of queer pedagogy (and emancipatory, social justice-oriented education at large), it is not the entirety of the work to be done. In fact, a

pedagogy overly focused on this mode of queer “inclusion” could run the risk of perpetuating an assimilationist narrative of queerness in society, wherein difference is flattened as minority groups are encouraged to mimic “normal” (read: hetero- and cis-normative) cultural practices as supposed means of “inclusion.” By contrast, a critical trans pedagogy asks us to attend to, through our own reflection, and to share with students, the ways in which both *our* and *their* bodies are situated, affected, and made legible/illegible by language and the society that has constructed it. The bodies of our teachers and of our students are the most important texts in the classroom; to inhabit that site of “radical possibility” that hooks (YEAR) calls for, then, is to continuously acknowledge the urgent importance of our selves as the central texts. So, while the proliferation of YA titles containing queer characters is indeed a movement to be celebrated, it should not be conflated with the entire project of queer pedagogy. We, as English teachers, can include all the “queer” titles we want, but if our modes of instruction, language use, and personal ways of moving through classroom space remain hegemonic—namely, here, cis- and heteronormative—then so too does the curriculum. To fully embrace the “critical” part of critical trans pedagogy, or any related queer pedagogical practices, we must embrace the self-reflexivity that such a descriptor implies; in the case of examining how our students get schooled in normative regimes of gender and sexuality, this necessarily involves the lifelong work of (re)examining how we ourselves were, and continue to be, schooled in them ourselves.

When I began teaching the Adolescents and Literature course to my MA students, I brought into the classroom some calcified ideas around queerness and gender, even as an educator who openly claimed a queer identity. Because my queerness, in terms of both my sexuality and my gender identity, had remained silent during the entire duration of my tenure as a secondary teacher, and because that represented the case for the vast majority of my middle

and high school students and certainly my district colleagues (none of whom I knew to be openly queer-identifying in any way), queerness for me was shrouded in mystery, pain, shame, and an angry, defiant brand of pride. Just as it was not until I began teaching that I could start unscripting my schooled understandings of gender and sexuality in the first place, it was not until I was in the company of my MA students, my English Education colleagues, that I was able to begin unscripting this problematic, limited picture of queerness—and continued shame about my gender identity—that I had constructed during all those years in the closet. The pedagogies that my MA students and I co-constructed were the first to take a shape that I could perhaps call critical. Particularly in examining *Two Boys Kissing* and queer YA literature, we collectively agreed to sit in the literary, cultural, and pedagogical murkiness that the book's themes left us in; there were no clean answers—about queer identity, about shame, about community, about pedagogy—but there seemed to be an agreement that this complexity was the point. Just as the meaning of *trans* is unfixed and undefined, so too should a critical trans pedagogy seek out the discursive moments in classrooms where we are all a little less certain, a little less rigidly defined, a little more nuanced and complicated and unclear.

What does this mean for us, for English teachers and for those of us who are so privileged to train English teachers? In many ways, it means nothing at all—it means doing exactly what many of us know English class to do, and who seek out this profession for that very reason: English class is, after all, precisely the space where there are no clear answers, where language is both only ever an approximation and also a lifeline in terms of how we come to understand and express ourselves as social beings. Judith Butler, in their 2009 meditation on gender and sexuality, *Undoing Gender*, writes “there is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human. I may feel that without some

recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable” (pp. 3-4). A critical trans pedagogy is one that embraces all the tensions that make cultivating a “livable life” so simultaneously fraught, beautiful, difficult, and exhilarating; it therefore is not a body of pedagogy that can come with steps, specific strategies, or posters for our classroom walls. What it can offer us English teachers is, though, is a reminder of our call to this profession in the first place—our commitment to what English teacher and curriculum theorist Janet Miller calls “radical indeterminacy” (J. Miller, personal communication, June 2019): a thorough and renewed commitment to all that is indeterminate in the human experience, from our gender to our sexuality to the messy, tender world of our students’ and our emotions. A determination to place stated and public value on all that cannot be known with certainty, but instead can be explored, pondered, played with, and revealed in. A willingness to be seen in the classroom as ever-evolving beings ourselves, to disrupt that which might limit us, to be unscripted by and with our students in the things we once took to be certain truths, to let literature—and the texts of ourselves—be the means by which we attain something like recognizability in one another, in all that is unrecognizable beyond, across, within ourselves.

AN INTERLUDE: WHAT'S LEFT AFTER FIRE

The first and only time I've ever seen anyone slapped, snow was falling outside. I remember this because, in shock, I instinctively looked away, my eyes resting on the bare branches outside my high school best friend's bedroom window. We didn't get a lot of snow in Tennessee; it was always a point of hilarity for my friends who'd moved to the South from the Midwest or Northeast, the fanfare that was made over a half-inch dusting of snow that would cancel school and bring normal life to a thrilling halt.

After all this time, and spliced through all that I don't remember, I can remember her bedroom perfectly. Her room was painted a shade she'd chosen, one I'd never seen on the walls of any of my friends' rooms. I envied their royal blues, lime greens, electric purples. There was a lot of oversight on the color of my bedroom walls, and my mom preferred the soft shades of what I always imagined would have complemented the life of a sensible young professional in her 30s somewhere: a soft cornflower yellow, various shades of beige and tan (who knew there were so many?), pale grassy greens that I often saw in the copies of *Real Simple* that my mom subscribed to.

My best friend's room was a vibrant dark fuschia that glowed warmly at night when her lamps were lit. She had a few concert flyers, programs from our high school plays she'd starred in, photos with friends neatly pinned in the places her mom would allow her to, though I knew she wished she could've covered the walls in posters of the bands that filled our days: Radiohead, Sufjan Stevens, Nick Cave, Bright Eyes, The Strokes, Modest Mouse. Her drumset

was tucked into the corner of her bedroom that faced the bed, and in the blissfully rare occasions when we were alone at her house, her siblings at their friends' houses and her parents out to dinner, she would set herself up on the drum throne in her underwear and play for me while I watched, naked, from under our messy warm covers where we'd recently been touching. Something electric ran through me at the knowledge of her hands having just been on me, so soft and careful, before she would strike the drums with skillful, sharp force, her gripped fingers competent and commanding.

We were together secretly for around 2 years, the entire duration of which I couldn't acknowledge being in a real relationship with her. It wasn't until I was in my late 20s, at the gentle encouragement of my partner and my therapist, that I would finally admit the weight and impact of that earliest of loves on the entirety of my adult life that would follow. At the same time that I was with her, I was dating a boy who I deeply loved and couldn't bear to hurt—the boy who I'd go on to marry. It couldn't have been an option to come out even if I, and then also later her, hadn't been in relationships with boys. It was 2006 when I began falling in love with her, both of us 17 years old, our playful friendship deepening and transmuting into something else as we stepped into the eve of adulthood. A boy in the year above us, a friend of ours from theater, had, earlier that year, been the first student to publicly come out as gay in the history of our high school. He was brave and cool and smart and kind, and, as the editor of the school newspaper, he'd written an Op-Ed about the much-debated upcoming release of *Brokeback Mountain*, announcing to the school that he was gay. A few weeks later, my friends and I huddled outside the local movie theater watching as he stood facing a crowd of people protesting the movie's screening and gave an interview to the local news station about the importance of the movie. He was the son of a county commissioner of one of the most conservative subdistricts of

our Southern city, and as I shivered in the January cold waiting for him, I remember how clear he sounded. How full. He was tired of hiding, and his voice didn't waver. I was amazed by him and knew with an unquestionable, unconscious certainty that I would never be brave enough to do the same.

Somewhere in the fall of our senior year, my best friend and I began keeping the habit of writing to one another in a shared composition notebook that we'd pass back and forth throughout our school days. Both of our cell phones were monitored by our parents, so the question of sending flirty texts, or even too many texts, to one another that might raise our parents' suspicion was out of the question. We pretended that the black-and-white flecked composition book was just another notebook for class, and we filled it: with questions, with letters about our days, with inside jokes and song lyrics and drawings and daydreams about our fast-approaching college futures, and also whispered fears that neither of us were ready to articulate of what it would mean to separate when that time came. As time went on, the letters to one another became increasingly intimate, and we guarded the composition notebooks carefully. I don't remember the first time we had sex, but what I do remember now is a montage of mornings in the empty pre-first period school chapel pews, the backseat of her car in the school's lower parking lot, the locked dressing room of our school's theater—furtive, increasingly knowing hands and mouths, quiet laughter and gasping. The first embers of a sweet teenage love burned into something that we each knew was important, real, big, and consuming. We were in love. We were utterly entranced by the magic of our sex in the way that teenage couples in love for time immemorial have thought themselves to be the first people to have discovered the magic of sex. And we documented it all, in our notebooks, accelerating in both the pace and volume of their written pages back and forth between us. When each notebook was finished, my best friend

would hide it in a box at the base of her messy closet, tucked away safely underneath untouched boxes of childhood mementos—Kindergarten drawings, elementary school awards, old report cards.

It was one of these notebooks that my best friend's mother was holding in one hand, in the doorway of that warm safe bedroom, when she slapped her 17-year-old daughter hard and loud across the face.

Eve Sedgwick (2003) writes in *Touching Feeling* about the performance of shame, the routinized pathways it takes to forge not just an individual experience, but a collective one:

Shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication. Indeed, like a stigma, shame is itself a form of communication...But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating. (pp. 36-37)

The somatic experience of shame lives so intimately, so familiarly, in my body. Blushing and, more embarrassing, sweating seem to rise more immediately in my body than in others'. I sometimes think I knew what the expression of shame felt like in my body before I knew anything else at all about my body. It's only been in my adulthood that I have learned that there is, in fact, a difference between my-body-as-shame and my body apart from it. They have always been intertwined—one and the same. My looking away, to the cold damp winter outside from the rushing heat inside, was instinctive. I remember I had to make myself look back, had to convince myself to meet her mother's eyes in the moments where silence rang out loudly as my best friend clutched her cheek. Her left cheek was bright red, and I watched her work to keep from crying, her mouth a thin line as she stood trembling in front of her mother. The three of us stood triangulated, breathing fast, shame—hers, mine, ours—forming a moment that would brand us

each differently in the skin of our respective identities. Her mom's hard gaze listed away from her daughter's face, over her shoulder, to me. I felt burned by it—burned on the outside, on the inside. This moment would, I knew, coalesce into a dividing line in my life, coal-black, silently parting everything that came before it and everything that would come after.

“Get out,” she whispered to me. When I didn't answer her—too afraid to say anything but too scared for my best friend to leave her alone with her mother—her mom took two long, fast strides toward me and grabbed me by the wrist. She still held the notebook, *our* notebook, tight in her left hand as she gripped me so hard it would later bruise, and she pulled me downstairs to the front door. “Get out,” she repeated as she kicked my shoes at me. “You're never coming to this house again.”

I drove my car in winding paths around the city that afternoon, avoiding home and barely conscious of my movements. I pulled over once to throw up, before I knew I had stalled as long as I could, that I had to return home to whatever was waiting there. I'll spare the details of everything that came next, but know this: When I descended the stairs into my parents' bedroom, I could make out in the dark the rounded figure of my mother, hunched over her phone. And even before she lifted her reddened, wet face to me, before she read lines aloud to me that I'd written privately to the first girl I ever loved, about all the ways I'd touched her and all the ways I wanted to, as they'd been recounted to her, rendered foul and terrifying, by that girl's mother—before all of it, I felt the cords of shame that connected us tightening: hers, and mine. Ours.

Shame is itself a form of communication. After high school ended, after the months of our respective groundings and mandates to not see one another (we did) or communicate (we did, though more complicatedly), my best friend and I would begin to slowly float away from one another, never to speak again about the story we'd lived together, that smoking crater at the

center of our lives. Something had ruptured in me that day in her bedroom, and though it wouldn't be the last time we had sex, or kissed, or loved one another, it had ended something in me—a capacity for pleasure and presence and joy that could only be experienced before our being discovered, before the private life of my shame ended and its public life began. I would go on to spend years working to forget the words we wrote in those notebooks, the ones my mother said disgusted her before she asked me plainly who I was. I will never forget the way she took me in then, horrified and unrecognizing. Another point of no return: I knew then I was entirely, irretrievably alone. I convinced myself I could forget those silent spells cast between my best friend and me since we'd made another silent promise to one another: to pretend none of it had ever happened. The words themselves were gone; my best friend's mother had made her burn every notebook we'd filled, excavated from the back corner of her closet by her mother on her hunt for secrets. The text between us had been incinerated, leaving only memory in its wake. It's been 18 years and I still know her handwriting. If shame is a form of communication, what is to be made of these paths it's made in my life—the written and the unwritten? The ghostly outline of a handwriting I worked so desperately to forget, and couldn't? If, like so many lesbians before me, the sacred tracings of my love were gone, what did that make of me? Of everything that had happened within me and between us?

Incidentally, many years later when I had returned to the South and was teaching, I bore witness to similar stories among my queer students that they shared with me: diaries discovered that they were made to burn; sacred letters from their queer crushes, forgotten and found in the pocket of their jeans by their mothers as they went to do the laundry. Of the many things that I'd been quietly gathering that connected me to my queer students, this particular performative rite of shame—a ritualized burning of loving evidence, a complete erasure of days and months and

generations of record of queer love—struck me in its viscerality. I hadn't had anyone in my life to reach for in an effort to understand my shame, or to relate to it differently, after the burning of my own love story that remained, even then as I was teaching, even still mostly now, a complete secret. What stretched between me and my students in these stories they shared with me, hands in their laps and heads hung as they stayed behind during lunch or while waiting for the bus, forged a different sort of archive. Sedgwick (YEAR) writes, "one of the things that anyone's character or personality is is a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion of shame has instituted far more durable, structural changes in one's relational and interpretive strategies toward both self and others" (p. 62). The ritualized burning of the evidence of young queer love sat between us, and I remember wanting to move differently around that pyre, wanting to offer something I'd needed to the first student who ever disclosed this shared story to me. "Hey," I said quietly, to that student and to the others. "Look at me. You have nothing to be ashamed of." These were the same words my beautiful ex-husband would say to me when I came out to him, finally, later, brave in all the ways I thought at 17 I never would be. Look at me.

"The forms taken by shame," Sedgwick writes,

are not distinct 'toxic' parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration... but perhaps all too potent for the work of purgation and deontological closure. (p. 63)

I am drawn here to Sedgwick's use of the word "purgation" in remarking upon the indelible prints that shame leaves on us. It was, after all, an attempted purging by fire that instilled in me the weight of a great shame that, it's true, has shaped me. For the many years that would lie ahead of that moment in the bedroom, the many years before I'd come out as an adult, I sought out every measure to purge, to excise, to vanquish what I saw as an implicit aberrant dirtiness in

me. I don't think I'd have survived if I hadn't come out, if I weren't able to live my life as I am now, queer, out, alive, in love. And yet, I can feel on me always the residue, those old dark stains of shame, forming an alternate archive to what was burned away. If I could, I'd gather up all those things I spent so much of my life being glad were burned and destroyed, erasing evidence of my shame: the burned CDs, a blooming crush indicated via Regina Spektor lyrics. The tissue-thin old tee shirt of mine from a bar my mom used to work at, my best friend's favorite shirt to borrow. The marginalia in the copy of *Angels in America* she loaned me, an attempt to communicate something disguised as literary interest. The ticket for the last flight I booked to see her, from LaGuardia to O'Hare in the winter of our sophomore year of college. The promises and stories and dreams we shared—the notebooks. Ann Cvetkovich (2003) writes, about the lesbian and gay practice of archival:

In insisting on the value of apparently marginal or ephemeral materials, the collectors of gay and lesbian archives propose that affects—associated with nostalgia, personal memory, fantasy, and trauma—make a document significant. The archive of feelings is both material and immaterial, at once incorporating objects that might not ordinarily be considered archival, and at the same time, resisting documentation because sex and feelings are too personal or ephemeral to leave records. (pp. 243-244)

The notebooks, my students' diaries, the letters—they're all irrevocable now, as is the sense of shame that they instilled. I live with and around that shame every day. We tread softly towards one another, holding the immaterial ephemera that my memory proves is real, braiding, braiding, braiding together this new material, this record.

A Framing Note: Butch Pedagogy

It would be boring to say that 2020 remade me, so I won't. What I'll say is that, upon the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, my partner and I left New York for what we (what all of us) thought would be a short stay with her parents, in the desert foothills of Tucson, Arizona. I had only recently met her parents for the first time at the previous Thanksgiving and traveled to her hometown for the first-time moments before we knew of COVID, in mid-February of 2020. It was the first time that I'd spent any time in the Southwest, and I remember feeling flabbergasted at the unreal landscape of the desert, laughing goofily like a child at how nakedly the craggy mountains stood out under the flat brightness of the Arizona sunshine. I embarrassed myself attempting to pronounce "saguaro" for the first time, never having had need for it before. The saguaros dotted the dusty hills everywhere, standing tall and proud like silly soldiers. I'd never seen anything like their rounded green shoulders, and I was delighted.

The visit to Arizona that weekend in February, and then later for much longer, was my introduction to many things. My girlfriend taught me the name of creosote, the desert bush that fills the air with a heady, sweet, earthy smell when moistened by rain or humidity. She taught me that the scent, which I'd found immediately delicious, could be reproduced in miniature by cupping one's hands around the stem of a creosote bush and sighing a warm exhale against it, the scent pluming forth in the small desert world of one's palms. Being in Arizona was also the first time where I'd spend prolonged time with parental figures who opened their arms widely to queerness—their daughter's and, by proxy, mine. When I'd been on my way to meet her parents for the first time, the Thanksgiving prior, I asked her nervously if she thought they would like

me. She laughed and joked that her parents “loved love,” and that the pathway to my acceptance was, then, paved quite clearly already by how abundantly and openly I’d fallen in love with everything about her. A month after returning to Arizona, in March of 2020, I sat in a kitchen chair on the patio of her parents’ house and her dad buzzed my head, which I reference in this article. By that point, I’d been binding my chest for a number of months, and something succulent was blooming within me under that unrelenting Arizona sun. In the fall of 2020, when I wrote this next chapter, I began hormone replacement therapy.

Reading “Butch Pedagogy” now, I can hear the cheekiness in my tone, the loping swagger of the 31-year-old teenager that beginning testosterone had rendered me. I was back in New York when I wrote this piece, the city beginning to gather the pieces of its shattered self from the traumatic early devastation at the start of the pandemic. I would spend the first 2 years of what is now the COVID-19 *endemic* flying back and forth between New York and Arizona, and in October of 2020, when I sent the abstract of this article to the editors of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, I was exactly 1 month on testosterone. I’d gotten my first proper fade and haircut after months of jagged touch-ups from my girlfriend’s dad’s clippers, and new tattoos decorated the swells of muscles that created new bulges along my arms. The effects of testosterone had been fairly immediate: My voice dropped quickly, disarming the people in my life when I answered the phone. The hair all over my body was suddenly thicker and darker, and I puzzled over each new sprouting change like a child observing the fresh growth of spring in the ground. More complicated feelings about transition would come later, when I’d gain 50 pounds in a matter of months and no longer recognize my face in the mirror. But this sliver of time, in the fall of 2020, was a season of miracles.

Perhaps because of some of these long-desired changes in my appearance bringing me closer to the boy I'd long felt myself to be, or perhaps due to the simple balm of time, I felt ready to write in "Butch Pedagogy" about themes and experiences I hadn't known how to name or contemplate before. I had never written about my first year of teaching, for example, which had been at a private school in Alabama the year after I graduated from college. As I discuss in the article, it was a school and wider setting in which I felt the surveilled regulations of womanhood on my body more viscerally than I had in my young adult life thus far. That had also been the year that, at age 22, I'd become engaged and then married just 6 months later. I have lived for all the years since then with an acute sense of guilt that, by accepting that proposal, by playing my part as a girl so thoroughly, I had betrayed the people I loved most in this world—chief among them my now ex-husband and, in a heavier and more complicated sense, myself. Stepping decisively into my gender transition lent me a gust of temporary brazenness that parted the clouds of this ruminating guilt and allowed me to write for the first time, with what I felt to be a safe, comfortable distance, about (re)learning womanhood in the South as a first-year teacher.

At the very beginning of my journey on hormone replacement therapy, I write wonderingly in this article about how my future students, colleagues, and administrators might perceive me when I re-entered the secondary classroom, as I still thought at the time I might want to do full-time upon the completion of my doctoral studies. As the introduction of this collection can attest, I learned very quickly what school can and would do with the embodied ambiguity, the blatantly patched-together form of the transgender teacher. Nearly everything written about in this dissertation occurred prior to the most visible (in some senses) procedure of my transition, which was the double mastectomy—commonly known in the trans community as "top surgery"—that I underwent in 2022, after 3 years of recouping savings from a disappointing

breast reduction. As I'll write more about later, in the conclusion of this collection, top surgery changed—literally overnight—the ways in which I was read and coded by the public, and that has subsequently shifted my priorities considerably, in terms of my presentation, my politics, and my personal commitments regarding my queerness and gender. I feel myself now, in the early spring of 2024 as I write these words, longing again for the visible *butchness* that I describe longing toward in this article. Time is funny that way, as is transition; I grow closer to the sweet young butch I describe in this piece, and I grow further away. I can't believe there was ever a time when I wore a women's size 8 pencil skirt and silk blouses to work, and I can't believe that body is still housed safely within mine. Perhaps one thing I'm learning about gender is that something always aches a little bit inside. Something is always lost. But equally true, in my experience, is the possibility for that which has been lost to be found again.

Chapter 3: Butch Pedagogy: Tracing Lesbian and Trans Becoming in the Classroom

3.1 Hemmed In: Performing Woman/Teacher

What are the words you do not have yet?

What do you need to say?

Audre Lorde (1988), “The Transformation
Of Silence into Language and Action”

The joke I like to tell is that I got more butch each year that I taught. It’s a joke because I was deeply closeted in my years as a middle school English teacher in suburban Tennessee, and because had I heard the word “butch” whispered anywhere around me in the seventh grade hallway, it would’ve disturbed me, terrified me, unraveled the few remaining threads of the feminine schoolteacher façade I’d carefully cultivated and was working desperately hard to protect. It turns out, the threads would unravel on their own, and I’d find a way to laugh at the fact that students used to call me “Mr.” behind my back, reading, as they did, something queerly unnamable but decidedly *wrong* in my relentless decision to wear chinos to school and to sit on the backs of desk chairs, my suede desert boots propped up in front of me while I taught. The first time I called myself a lesbian was long after I’d begun sleeping with women as a teenager myself; it was through and with the teenagers in my English classroom that the *language* of lesbianism made its way to me for the first time, resituating myself in my body, in my intellect, in my desire.

But before that teaching post in Tennessee, I’d first held a teaching position for which I was in no way qualified—a position, in fact, that solidified my decision to apply to graduate school so I could hopefully learn something about how to teach. Shortly after graduating from

college, I took my first teaching job at a small private school in Huntsville, Alabama, and my mother celebrated the job offer by showering me with wool pencil skirts and silk button-front blouses in various shades of plums, mauves, creams, and deep emeralds. She drove me to the interview, an hour and a half drive from the city where we lived in Tennessee, my clothes hanging in the back of the car so as to maintain the careful steaming she'd done of them the night before. I arrived at the school in the early morning as the sky was still lightening on the yawning faces of middle schoolers trudging into the school building, and I walked nervously among them, careful on my new heels and in the close confines of my starched skirt. I felt in that moment as I'd feel for much of the time I taught there: like a doll playing the part of the young lady schoolteacher, like a fraud that had tricked my way to the front of the classroom each day facing 17 sets of eyes, each of them expecting something from me.

In her essay, "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process," bell hooks (1994) writes:

the public world of institutional learning was a site where the body had to be erased, go unnoticed. When I first became a teacher and needed to use the restroom in the middle of class, I had no clue as to what my elders did in such situations. No one talked about the body in relation to teaching. What did one do with the body in the classroom? (p. ____)

It wasn't until I was teaching that I was able, for the first time, to see more clearly the ways in which school operates on this understanding that hooks highlights of a mythical mind/body split—and had operated in my own learned performance of femininity. The teaching profession is historically, and remains, a "feminized" one (Cortina & San Román, 2006). In the socially, politically, and religiously conservative region of the American South, where I was born, raised, and have spent the majority of my teaching life, the woman schoolteacher is her own intensified archetype, and the rules that govern her existence are as unquestionably solid and confining as the four walls of her classroom. Where I had assiduously studied the role of "good girl" throughout my school days as a student, my return to the classroom as a teacher signaled the

unexpected continuation of this lifelong course of gender study. At this first school where I taught, I arrived to school each day in the prescribed “professional dress” for female teachers; if the pencil skirt wasn’t enough to limit my range of movement, the accompanying heels and gauzy silk blouses solidified a level of delicacy in my status as a woman teacher that was not similarly accorded to my men colleagues. My department chair and my dean, both men, dressed daily in professorial pale blue Oxford shirts, khaki chino pants, a tie, and jacket. They sat in their classrooms, leaned back in their chairs, their feet propped up on their heavy wooden desks, sleeves messily rolled up and ties slightly loosened, as boys surrounded them with admiring looks and loud laughter at lunch or in between class periods. My dean, a young, handsome man who students fell over themselves to impress, had one of those plastic basketball nets attached to the back of his office door; after meeting with students for disciplinary meetings, he’d rouse laughter and goodwill by crumbling up their demerits and shooting them through the hoop before loping out of the room, genial smiles on everyone’s faces. Meanwhile, I tottered around on heels, my already tall frame leaving me towering over my middle school students. The men on faculty enjoyed a level of casual, sanctified, boyish repose and rapport that I was both culturally, and certainly sartorially, denied. Still, I frequently felt as though I was falling short of femininity: My Social Studies colleague next door breezed into school each day in tailored satin dresses and perfectly lined lipstick, her enormous diamond engagement ring catching the light as she wrote the day’s agenda on the dry-erase board in neat lines. I found myself suspended somewhere between these two colleagues of mine—the dean and the history teacher—in a way that threaded my days, even the good ones, with a low thrum of distress and ill-at-easeness, both in myself and in my students.

Like many first-year teachers, I was young and felt certain that my students could tell as surely as I could that I was out of place: in this uniform and in this role. But in free time, during lunch, and in between classes, I began to notice a pattern among my students. My girl students were obsessed with the details of my personal life—most particularly, with my then-boyfriend. They wanted to know why he hadn't proposed yet (at the advanced age of 22), what his work was, how many babies we wanted to have (despite there being no engagement as of yet—or mention of interest in childbearing, for that matter). My boy students alternately muttered about me behind my back, cracking jokes, as I could discern it, about my height, my stature, my readiness to serve as the volleyball coach and the faculty player on any given soccer match—and chatted with me about SEC football, specifically regarding my opinions on the rivalry of the land: Auburn versus Alabama. In the celebratory lead-in days to winter break, the school hosted a faculty-student basketball game; I juked the eighth grade captain of the middle school basketball team in a drive down the court, and as he sat back up from having fallen flat on his back, I watched pass across his reddened face a look that I've seen on boys' and men's faces at me for as long as I can remember: disgust, rage, surprise. His teammates laughed at him, purpling his face even further. Some of the bolder ones high-fived me, a mix of incredulity and admiration on their sweaty young faces. Even in my carefully selected wool skirts and silk blouses, I was failing something assigned to me, helplessly and seemingly out of my control. Something like masculinity frayed at the edges of my studied role, and the children in my care noticed immediately. They seemed equal parts thrilled and troubled by it, as I would also be for years to come.

It wasn't until after I left the middle school classroom that I would “come out,” as it were, but it seems to me that I was coming out in any number of other ways over the course of

my 5 years of teaching middle school. My first teaching post, with its gendered uniforms (for students and faculty alike), which was just one of the more visible ways that gender and sexuality were regulated and carefully monitored, was the first time in which I became conscious of the rigid lines of gender socialization in school. Standing at the front of the classroom in my prim little uniform, my hair expensively and regularly dyed, the angles of my hip bones poking into my waistband from any number of diets and pricey fitness trends to which I faithfully adhered, I began to see how thoroughly I myself had been schooled in the gender presentation expected of me. Importantly, of course, I don't remember being schooled in the subject of girl- and woman-hood alongside my lessons in long division and metered rhyme. It took teaching to make visible what had, for all my life, lurked just below the conscious surface for me: The "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1968) of gender in school only became clear to me once I had a hand in writing it.

3.2 (Be)Coming Butch: Meeting My Body in the Classroom

To write or speak *as a lesbian* appears a paradoxical appearance of this 'I,' one which feels neither true nor false. For it is a production, usually in response to a request, to come out or write in the name of an identity which, once produced, sometimes functions as a politically efficacious phantasm...this is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies."

Judith Butler (1990), "Imitation and Gender Insubordination"

I took my first public school teaching job the fall after I completed my graduate studies in English Education. I cried in my car after the interview, though perhaps not for the reasons one might suspect. The end-of-day school bell had rung as I'd been entering the building for my interview, and I was temporarily shocked into silence by the outpouring of color and variety that surged forth: bright blue-dyed shaved heads, glittering dresses and chunky combat boots, sparkling septum ring piercings and high laughter, singing and smudged eyeliner, plastic stick-on

gemstones shimmering underneath hand-knit beanies. The kids I met on my first day at this new school, and those I'd go on to meet over the course of my 4 years there, were my great teachers in the opening course of unlearning everything I'd been quietly instructed about gender and its embodied presentation in school. I was their student in at least as many ways as I was their teacher, and it was under their unspoken daily tutelage that I dis- and re-membered my gender presentation and undertook my unofficial introductory study of queer theory. Where my own schooling (spent entirely in Catholic or otherwise Christian-affiliated schools) and my first year of teaching in Alabama had taught me the purported rightness and naturalness of my own femininity—a guise that I'd never been able to make “fit”—the fine arts public magnet school where I went on to teach was filled with young dancers, artists, actors, writers, and instrumentalists who experimented loudly, daily, and variously with Butler's precept of gender as *drag*. For many of them, their gender presentation each day was just another of their many bright and brilliant art projects: an opportunity to play with and explore all that the constructed continuum of gender had to offer them.

By the fall of my fourth and final year at this school, I had slowly and quietly drifted back in the direction of a butch presentation that, upon reflection, I'd say matched my preferred presentation as a child, before I'd learned to feel ashamed of it. With my students as my models, I recovered my love of sneakers, boxy tee shirts, looser-fitting pants slung lower over my waist, a way of moving in my body that reminded me of pictures of myself as a kid playing soccer: hands on my hips, baggy Umbros hanging just above my knees, hair messily pulled back from my ruddy face. Each October during Spirit Week, the student council sponsored a “Dress as a Teacher” day, wherein students donned their most ridiculous wigs, pillow stomachs, and drawn-on mustaches to parody their teachers. Each year, I'd felt a curiosity I couldn't quite name stir in

me to dress up as one of my beloved men colleagues, but it wasn't until my last year that I took the opportunity to actually do it. I spent the week prior carefully culling the items needed to faithfully portray my colleague Mark, the adored sixth grade English teacher whose tall, lanky frame, sonorous voice, and playful spirit had been my steady companionship throughout the years, bringing comfort to my days as much as they did to the 11-year-olds Mark taught. The night before dress-up day, I diligently ironed the purple gingham Oxford shirt I'd taken from my then-husband's closet, and laid beside it the pair of navy chinos I often wore myself, a purple knit tie I'd borrowed from Mark, a new pair of brown lace-up wingtip shoes I'd been too afraid to wear, and the various accessories that made up Mark's daily minutiae: wire-rimmed glasses, a worn canvas-band wristwatch which he wore with the face on the inside of his wrist, a purple lanyard holding his school ID, a purple pen to tuck behind my ear. The next morning, I pulled my hair back into a low bun and dressed myself with a delight and excitement that bewildered me in their unfamiliarity.

In her essay, "Precocious Education," queer pedagogue Deborah Britzman (2000) writes, in defense of teaching from and with one's erotic, creative life force:

living creatively requires a self who is not overwhelmed with blind compliance to outside demands. One cannot live creatively if the only relationships offered are authoritarian. The self must have opportunities to make her or his own demands to live creatively, to create something more than what she or he finds in the world. (p. __)

Looking back, I can see the entire single day that I was dressed up as my colleague Mark as my first conscious experiment in *drag*—in creating a version of myself through the vehicle of imitating Mark, patching together a butch presentation that still felt beyond my reach at the time. The dress-up day gave me an allowance for this gender transgression, this act of self-creation, that I was too afraid to enact myself in my everyday life, a temporary lift of the sanctioned gender "rules" that were written into any number of regulatory systems in and outside of my

school, including the dress code for teachers outlined in the handbook, wherein women were encouraged to wear “Sunday dress”—a dress or skirt. All day long, students laughed, wide-eyed and pointing in the hallways, at my purple pastiche of Mark, and I laughed with them in the authorized play that the day permitted, thrumming inside with the electric delight of my butchness, of how broad my shoulders felt in an Oxford shirt, how clipped and sure my shoes sounded against the hallway linoleum floors, how, for once, I felt myself lengthen into the fullness of my tall frame rather than hunching over. One of my lesbian former students, then a high schooler and one of the many queer models for me in her flannel and languid swagger, raised a pierced eyebrow upon stopping by my classroom at lunch that day. “Damn, Bullard,” she said, with a laugh. “You look good in a tie.”

Judith Butler famously writes in her now-foundational 1990 *Gender Trouble*, “there is no original or primary gender a drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (p. ___). After my imitation of Mark that day in early October, it became increasingly difficult to return to my teacher wardrobe of the last few years: the bright, flowy tops, heat-styled hair, and meticulously applied eyeliner. The exhaustion of performance was wearing on me, and I couldn’t forget the thrill that had coursed through me while in drag. If we are to follow Butler’s theorizing of gender, also in *Gender Trouble*, as a “script,” I was finding it hard to remember my lines—I couldn’t locate the “original” from which I still understood myself as somehow deviating. Already I knew that rumors about my sexuality floated throughout the halls, students taking note of my persistent positioning of myself as a particularly enthusiastic queer “ally,” of the rainbow flag on my wall and GLSEN “safe space” sticker on the classroom door. Somewhere in between my colleague Mark and my imitation of him hovered a butch presentation that I’d been fumbling toward for some time, accompanied as it was by a more conscious understanding

of my long-present queerness, and my students watched in live time as I found my way, peeling back the layers of conditioned femininity in a quite visceral fashion, as my clothing, appearance, and mannerisms shifted or, rather, deepened into a brand of “female masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998) that I’d been working to hold at bay for some time.

3.3 Teaching While Trans: *Eros* and the Trans Body as Revisionist Text

“I care so much abot the whord that I cant reed / it marks mye bak wen i pass”
Jos Charles (2018), *feeld*

In “Precocious Education,” Deborah Britzman (2000) writes, “in bringing pedagogical content closer to pedagogical relations, education, itself a site of popular imagination, can also help the popular imagination ready itself to view knowledge as changing, as subject to revision, and as never completed” (p. ___). One of the original scholars to employ the term *queer pedagogy* to refer to the arm of critical pedagogy that explored the questions queer theory brings to bear on education, Britzman wrote widely of the implications of the AIDS pandemic on schooling and teaching. In her earliest writing, investigating the relationship between AIDS and education, Britzman engages precepts of queer theory, including destabilization, disruption, refusal, and the notion of “unthinkability” as possible pedagogical methodologies for troubling fixed subjects (both in terms of individuals and academic disciplines), fixed categories, and fixed norms that she saw the classroom as virulently reproducing (Britzman, 1995). This reproduction of “normalcy” was, she wrote, critical in facilitating the degree of catastrophic negligence and wide-scale dehumanization present in the United States’s response to AIDS, a response that rings not altogether unfamiliarly in the midst of our own abysmally managed pandemic and accompanying crises that explode outward from and beyond the epidemiological—cultural, political, and environmental ones. If, as Britzman suggests, we are to reimagine education as a place for “troubling” knowledge rather than delivering it; for inculcating the skill of constant

revision rather than solidification of one's interpretations and views; for the proliferation of identities rather than the consolidation of them, then how might the *body of the teacher* operate as a mentor text in such intellectual processes? What might it mean to model the queer art of self-creation through one's embodied presence, offering, in this choice, possibilities to, every day, disrupt notions of representation, expression, and knowledge formation? In short, how might asking hooks's question, "what to do with the body in the classroom?" act as a powerful queer and trans pedagogical tool to destabilize the "conceptual geography of normalization" (including the reproduction of "normal" gendered subjects) in which school is so toxically invested?

Since leaving the secondary classroom over 2 years ago, I have increasingly come to disidentify with the label of "woman," but have identified perhaps more strongly than ever with the label of being a "lesbian." I became a girl and woman in my own school days, a lesbian while teaching in the classroom with middle schoolers—through the lesbian literature written for them and the gendered expressions modelled by them—and I've become trans since leaving it. I choose the word "become" in all of these instances because it has been through the portal of my profession—my vested interest in pedagogy—that I have come to understand the nature, as **de Beauvoir (YEAR) wrote,** of my own gendered construction: the ways I was first built as a girl and a woman by others, and then a lesbian and a trans person by me.

Over the course of this pandemic, out of public sight in ways I haven't been in nearly a decade (or perhaps ever), my body has borne the marks of rapid transformation as I wrestle with/in womanhood and the new ontological conundrums and dazzling entanglements of nonbinary identification and embodiment. On a fresh bright day in late April of this year, my girlfriend's dad rested his rough, gentle hand on my shoulder and ran clippers over my head,

leaving my once curl-filled head shorn down to my scalp, then just 6 weeks into the pandemic (a figure that feels impossibly small now, eclipsed as it has been by the many grueling months to follow). New tattoos decorate new muscles along my arms, which I've attended to with as much (or more) devotion as my writing, nursing them with the same meticulous care as I might a child growing into his body for the very first time. My veins have been opened and closed and opened again to check the levels of my blood under hormone replacement therapy, which I began in September to elevate the amount of testosterone inside of me. My body is changing rapidly, quietly, deepening and darkening and expanding in the privacy of the home I share with my girlfriend—the only person able to closely witness these changes as we move through yet another round of full quarantine in what's being touted as the last (and perhaps deadliest) wave of this pandemic. Where my body was once hyper-visible in the role of classroom teacher—to middle schoolers and then to the undergraduate and graduate students I taught after leaving the secondary classroom—I transition now in a state of near-complete isolation, and I wonder what it will mean to emerge back into the classroom next fall in a different body, with a different voice and different lines along my face. In the fabric of my teaching life, there is the tear of this year: Before it, I was slowly, steadily, more butch in ways that once raised the eyebrows and hallway whispers of my students. Already, the school where I taught didn't know what to do with my undisciplined body that, however minutely, was transgressing norms of feminine presentation and teaching. Yet, when I look at pictures of myself then, I find myself astonishingly femme; it's sometimes hard to recognize myself in the eyes of that person, and often I feel it's easier to position myself then as a beloved but decidedly separate sibling of mine who's since passed away. What, then, will the classroom do with my trans body when I return, in a culture and a country that doesn't yet know what to do with trans bodies other than hurt them?

What will I do *with* it? Each day, I reconsider newly my relationship to gender, to clothing, to ways of occupying space with my body. What will it mean to do this, to live trans and hence live the daily act of revision and self-(re)creation, in an institutional space where the teacher's body, as hooks noted, is expected to remain stable, "neutral," and legible?

A decade before Britzman began theorizing on the educational imperatives that AIDS made plain, Audre Lorde (1984) wrote in her essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," about not only the benefit, but the necessity of, the presence of the erotic in her creative life as an author, theorist, feminist, and activist:

the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. (p. ___)

As perhaps the most foundational arm of American public life, school is, as an institution, designed to manage, subdue, and regulate the collective *eros* of children's bodies (and those of the adults who teach and learn alongside them). In the long scope of curriculum theorizing and the history of American public schooling, it is only recently that the body became a recognized entity in school at all, beyond its capacity to act as a motor vehicle for the brain. Still, it remains standard practice for kids to have to check their bodies at the door of any given classroom, where they are often expected to remain still and as *disembodied* as possible; in school, we reward children who are perceived to be "in control" of their bodies and punish the ones who aren't. We place a premium on quiet, low voices, and a judgment (very often threaded with unnamed racism and sexism) on loud ones. We demand straight lines on the way to lunch, straight backs in straight rows of desks, straight faces with eyes locked straight ahead on the (hopefully straight) teacher. Such physical compliance facilitates the categorization system with which public

education is so thoroughly obsessed, and which Britzman describes as rendering the business of schooling “radically insufficient” to meet the social and political needs of the day, and certainly to meet the spiritual needs inborne in all of us. If we follow Lorde’s conceptualization of *eros* as being that spirit within us which fosters all creative force, enabling our most generative and powerful work in the world, then the repression of *eros* in school ought to be understood as a national crisis. And though it’s been clear since at least the AIDS pandemic, as Britzman outlines in her body of work, that our schooling system has failed its constituents in its grave neglect of the body (in, perhaps one of the more mainstream examples, American sex education’s deep ideological commitments to Judeo-Christian heteronormativity and indoctrinated disdain of our deeply human need for pleasure and sensual connection), the novel pandemic—and the corresponding revolution for racial justice—in which we find ourselves mired now demands a revisitation of these fundamental questions of both the Black feminism that Lorde represents and the queer pedagogy that Britzman does. What would it look like to bring the body back into the classroom? And how might the *trans* teacher’s body act as a powerful pedagogical model in disturbing the norms of disembodiment to which education is so rigorously committed? How might we, as Britzman suggested, enact in our pedagogy a “queer politic” that “is meant to disturb and provoke pleasure”?

3.4 (Un)Disciplining Bodies: From Queer Pedagogy Toward Critical Trans Pedagogies

I am living through the second pandemic of my lifetime, though it took a long time for me to learn about the first. I remember watching Princess Diana’s funeral, remember the portraits of Mother Teresa that began to dot the hallways of my Catholic school somewhere during my second-grade year, remember my mother’s fervent love of Elton John: all figures who surrounded the pandemic of AIDS in some way, and yet AIDS itself—the disease and the

hundreds of thousands it killed—was kept quietly out of sight in the white suburban schools and households in which I was raised as a child in the late 1990s. My knowledge of AIDS has been almost entirely self-directed, patched together beginning in late high school, when the thrilling darkness of my own queer desire blossomed secretly inside me as I read *Angels in America*, wet-faced and copying down every other word in my journal. The amorphous shape of this self-education is perhaps representative of the act of queer archival and representation itself: undulating, cyclical, defiant of any attempt to categorize or organize, chronologically, stylistically, or otherwise. Like many young queers before and after me—perhaps most especially those coming of age in the churches and rolling hills of our country’s conservative suburbia—I’ve sought to make sense of myself in the stories of people like me, before me.

Reading the origins of queer pedagogy, as I have this year, my third in a doctoral program in English Education, is, as I see it, the latest wave in a lifelong act of queer self-creation and (re)creation. As my city shut down in March, gripped by the epidemiological and humanitarian disaster of COVID-19, I was reading Deb Britzman’s ‘95 piece on the impact of AIDS on education. And in between the protests against police brutality that raged through the streets of Brooklyn in June, I was reading Bryson and de Castell’s (1993) meditation, written within a year of Britzman’s first essay coining queer pedagogy, on the role of higher ed institutions in the continued marginalization and subjugation of minoritized racial, gendered, and sexual groups. I found their questions—formed at the disciplinary crossroads between queer theory and critical pedagogy—to be presciently aligned with the ones I, and many others invested in the business of education, seemed to be asking: About the ways in which this pandemic cast glaring light on the existing inequities in our educational system in many of the same ways AIDS did in the 1980s and 1990s; about how we made decisions about who was

worth educating and, hence, living, and who was not; about how teachers' and students' bodies were and are often viewed as nonexistent and disposable. I found my intellectual footing as a lesbian teacher educator in the essays of the lesbian teacher educators who founded queer pedagogy, but I also found the tradition of "queer pedagogy" that followed it to be lacking.

Britzman writes in the opening of her 1995 "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight!":

...what if gay and lesbian theories were understood as offering a way to rethink the very grounds of knowledge and pedagogy in education? Conceptually speaking, what is required to refuse the unremarked and obdurately unremarkable straight educational curriculum? At first glance, these problems may seem situated solely in the small spaces of classrooms and educational studies. The stakes, however, are raised when the absence of gay and lesbian theorizing in education is set in tension with crucial cultural and historical changes that concern the constitution of bodies of knowledge and knowledge of bodies. (p. ___)

Though Britzman names the "knowledge of bodies" here as a notable void in the proceedings of American education, much of her, and other queer pedagogues', work would go on to wrestle (importantly) with the ontological complications of *language* as it pertains to normative regimes in school, and of reading practices associated with that fraught relationship to language. What is left behind here, and in much of the writing that would go on to be written within the field of "queer pedagogy," is *the body* itself—the ways in which schools operate as a site for the organization, regulation, and disposal of bodies, and how egregiously we indoctrinate schoolchildren from a young age in the mythical and false separation between their bodies and their more valued "knowledge," or intellect, in highly regimented and particularized ways that intersect with students' racial identities. And so, it is at these disciplinary crossroads that I ask the very same question that Bryson and de Castell (1993) asked in their earliest queer pedagogical writings: What difference does difference make in the classroom? What difference does it make that I revisit these foundational queer pedagogy texts not only as a lesbian, but as a

trans person? How does my transness allow me to, perhaps, recognize and forge more room for the *body* in the classroom? What capacity might theorizing formed from this trans embodied experience have to further disrupt the normative regimes of schooling in ways that queer pedagogy doesn't quite reach? Knowing that my bodily difference remains powerfully protected by my whiteness, how might educational researchers center the voices and experiences of BIPOC queer and trans educators—whose pedagogical theorizing and criticism have attended to the body in necessary ways that queer theory hasn't—to generate the most potent and necessary disruptions of toxic oppressive cycles reified in the institution of American public school?

I introduce the problem of my trans and queer body in this essay not as any sort of monolithic representation of trans educators' experiences, even those for whom the words "butch" or "lesbian" or the poetic "transmasc" might apply or resonate, but as a possible opening to consider the potentiality for disruption that the trans body carries in the classroom. I do not wish to romanticize this disruption, as it carries alongside it the harrowing statistics of violence against trans people—particularly trans people of color for whom I cannot speak or seek in any way to represent—that remind us daily of the inhumane precarity of trans embodiment and existence. However, I offer these moments of gender transgression in my own teaching life as portals for grasping the extent to which we have normalized, surveilled, and protected binaristic modes of gendered and sexual identification in and through schooling so that we might more intentionally notice and harness the pedagogical power of these moments of disruption. Diana Courvant, in her 2011 essay "Strip!" writes: "we must create a specific trans pedagogy" (p. ____). I do not yet have specific precepts for trans pedagogy to offer here: only the specificities of my own body in specific classrooms, and the specific ways in which I found it to be disruptive of students' (and my) ability to *know* anything definitive about gender or sexuality. It seems to me

that the writing of the “specific trans pedagogy” for which Courvant advocates must necessarily be borne forth in this way: in the methodology of attending to the local, to the individual teacher and student body in the individual location in which they are situated; in naming the capacities for single trans disruptions in single classroom locations to act in concert with one another, tearing across the systematized “geography of normalization” that is American public school.

Conclusion: Codes of (Un)Discipline: Wildness, Pedagogy, and Un-natural Bodies

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself.

-Susan Stryker (1994), "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above
the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage"

There can also be great pleasure in being, or beholding, an individuated, contained, self-sufficient unit coming apart upon contact with another; the physical undoneness is the (shaming, thrilling) mark of the encounter.

Maggie Nelson (2022), "The Call"

When I was 11 going on 12 years old, the boy I'd nursed a crush on for much of elementary and middle school asked me to be his girlfriend. I was elated, acting as a walking, primly uniformed conduit for the late spring air that buzzed along the hairs of my forearms, my throat, my cheeks. It was in the final weeks of the school year; I'd soon be entering the part of middle school that used to be called junior high, and I felt it. Though I'd been given construction-paper valentines and lawn-picked dandelions at recess by the boys who said they liked me for as long as I'd been in school, the title of "girlfriend" conferred unto and within me an electric sense of my emerging adulthood. I felt the word thrum around in my ribcage as I stood looking at myself in the mirror of the damp, aged bathroom of my school's gym where it

was common for the older kids to hang out at dismissal time. I was carefully unrolling my uniform skirt so that it hung at the length my mother and God had intended it to when she'd hemmed it to graze the top of my kneecaps, and not a centimeter higher. The zip of transgression in this simple act—the studied, daily practice of unrolling my uniform skirt, once, twice—thrilled and nauseated me. I feared and loved my mother with a devotion so fervent, so steady and true in its application that the priest mistook it for religious piety and enlisted me as a servant at the altar (the advent of another practical theology that would go on to become an organizing force and ritual in my life). I craved her approval desperately and, perhaps because of this, sought in equal measure the terrified ecstasy of willingly, secretly, defying it. This tension that matured within me as I matured, and the dominating fear and love that my mother instilled in me, was the primary reason that my father, years later, would bitterly cite as the cause of my lesbianism. Perhaps he was right.

The practiced, manual shortening of my uniform skirt each morning, and re-lengthening of it in the afternoon, was just one in a series of the rituals that gave shape to my days and that proved critical in my securing this much-desired boyfriend. My legs were long and, in these last moments before the full weight of puberty would land with a catastrophic finality and weight on my unsuspecting body, they were still thin. I knew enough about boys to know the power I held within and between the slender, tanned stretch of my thighs. It was this power that I was still learning and toying with each day when I broke my mother's rules and rolled up my skirt so that it hung much higher on my thighs. At the end of the day, basking in the absorption of the new hungriness in boys' eyes on me all day, I unzipped my skirt in the bathroom and stretched the dark, thick fabric over the edge of the ancient porcelain school sinks, smoothing it out like a dollar bill to ensure there were no lingering signs of my transgression. My mother had eyes like a

hawk, which produced, of course, the same eyes in me. To this day, no one sees the remnants of my own sins, the hanging warm scents and faint wrinkles of it, like I do.

Satisfied with my work, I left the bathroom on the day I'd first become someone's girlfriend and skipped out to wait with my friends on the ramp to the school's parking lot, the winding line of school buses and grown-ups' cars still forming. I arrived pink-cheeked and breathless into the line of my friends pressed along the exterior wall of the school's gym, young women against red brick, nylon backpacks slung over their shoulders and bundled at their feet. My cousin, the almost comically prototypical Most Popular Girl in School, the nexus of desire for both the boys and the girls of the sixth grade (a feat that has, I think, some interesting things to say about gender—for another time), turned to assess me. I lived for this moment: being captured in the window of my cousin's unbroken gaze, the sole object of her otherwise diffuse, unsettled, perennially unimpressed attention. I remember how ready I felt for her pride in me, for how proud she'd surely be that I'd procured for myself that long-awaited and richly imagined figure of our shared childhood, the prized endpoint of our innumerable games of pretend: a *boyfriend*. I waited. I stopped breathing, so as to absorb fully, undiluted, the anticipated euphoria of her praise. She held my eyes, unsmiling, and tucked a perfect lock of hair behind her ear, the strand a shade of dark honey none of our friends' boxed attempts could ever match. My mother, of course, did not permit hair dyeing, another of the great disappointments of my puberty, which I watched transform my once shining blonde curls into an indistinctly mousy brown mass of frizz.

“You know the reason he asked you to be his girlfriend, right?” she said, loudly enough that our friends, her evergreen acolytes who were hunched anxiously behind her, could hear, but quietly enough so that the words would bite me sharpest in their closeness, in their intimacy. I'd

spent my entire life whispering with her in pillow forts, in the middle of the night at sleepovers long after our friends had fallen asleep, on the couch at our family Christmases where we made fun of our little sisters who clamored for our attention. Her voice was wound up in mine; I'd never not seen myself with her eyes.

I looked at her, waiting, my mouth dropping open slightly with nothing to say. My stomach twinged, my body's warning light that I'd already, at 11, learned to override, the flashing light I pushed away, telling me *no*, or *leave*, or *don't*. But I did, I stayed, I waited, as her eyes passed so slowly over me as to feel like hands, rough and appraising, that stopped once they reached my chest. My breasts, which had been successfully bound against me by a flimsy training bra upon their first horrifying appearance in the fourth grade, and then the tight polyester sports bras that my mom bought on sale at Marshall's as they continued their determined growth in the fifth and sixth grades, had recently defied even the strength of this industrial-grade spandex. My chest now spilled, irrefutably and, much to my dismay, uncontrollably, over the tops of my sports bras, forming a cleavage that made my mom wrinkle her nose in distaste, just before she reached out and gruffly pulled my shirts up and across—any direction that would cover the unsightliness of the woman's full chest that marred my 11-year-old body. By this point, I'd already made my first haphazard, tear-filled attempt at binding, encircling myself with an ace bandage I'd pilfered from my pediatrician father's medical kit that was stored in my parents' closet. I can still remember how my hands shook as I inhaled and held my breath while watching my movements in the mirror—hoping that the suspension of breath might somehow make the bandage compress my breasts more effectively—only to have the flesh of them bleed out the moment I finally exhaled. And it was at this already-contested, despised site that, for

what was probably several seconds but what feels still, in the fraught reconstruction of my memory, like minutes—*hours*—that my cousin’s eyes hovered.

Her eyes flicked back up to meet mine. I watched her take in the dumbfounded flush beginning to rise in my pale cheeks, and a smirk twitched at the corners of her mouth. She knew, from my color and my silence, that she’d already won.

“He only asked you out,” she said, slowly and carefully enough so that each word would land with its intended cut, “because of your boobs. You know that, right?”

The last pocket of air I’d held in me sluiced its way out, and I pursed my lips hard, biting the insides of my cheeks as I often did (and still do) to hide the tears that have always come easily to me, and have always gotten me in trouble. My cousin’s eyes roved one final time over my face, placidly taking in her work, knowing she didn’t need to wait for an answer, before turning away from me to the string of girls who, for all their effort, could never reproduce the casual cruelty in her limbs. She leaned against that brick wall with all the confidence and self-possession of a miniature queen, surveying with boundless disdain and delight her own adolescent kingdom. There is no neat comparison to say what I was in this private universe—I was her handmaid, I was her prince, I was Viola-as-Sebastian meeting her brother for the first time, I was Nature’s fool and the forest that housed him. Everyone around me seemed to know their roles, or at least the ones they wanted, but at age 11 it was dawning on me with a sickening clarity that my body was delivering me into a role that I didn’t want, that I didn’t understand, and I was trapped, suspended, spliced, and disfigured by the lines being drawn faster than I could erase (or even *see*) them—by hands other than mine.

The most devastating part of that afternoon on the school ramp with my cousin was that she confirmed something that I feared, more intently than the many other things I feared at 11

(the sudden death of my parents in a car crash, brown recluse spiders, disappointing my teachers, needles, the dark, running out of time). It had only been a few years, after all, since I'd first sat enraptured and breathless, a strange and alarming warmth spreading between my legs, as I secretly watched, rewound, and rewatched the VHS tape scene of Kate, naked and splayed on a tasseled chaise, for Leo's eyes. I was alone in my living room, a rarity for the eldest of three children and de facto babysitter throughout my youth. My siblings played upstairs, and I grew nauseated with a fecund curiosity and the knowledge of there being something deeply, terribly wrong with me. Some of my earliest memories—some of the only clear ones from my childhood, for that matter—are of this recurring bodily response to what I understood as women's bodies: a dull pulsing that moved through me upon seeing rolling planes of flesh at the waist and along the horizon of their hips, the alert pinkness and bruised peach tones of their nipples, the startlingly bright purple of new stretch marks, eventually fading to a translucent whisper that I wished to trace with my fingers, my lips. I would lie in my paisley-quilted bed at night, skin still damp from my shower, and replay all of the moments during the day that I'd pretended to feel nothing about at the time: the heady, sweet smell of the girls' locker room; my best friend's hand, impossibly soft, sliding over mine as she passed me a note in science class; the tangled limbs of the older, cooler eighth grade girls reposed in a mass on the sidelines of the boys' lunchtime football game, their fingers deftly sliding through locks of one another's hair as they braided. When my breath hitched at the thought of one of these images, guilt blanketed me with an unshakeable, nauseating weight, and I sometimes cried. This is how it always was for me: unyielding desire shot through with unyielding disgust.

When my cousin located the sole, indisputable source of my desirability as my breasts that day in the sixth grade, the problem was not that I didn't understand. If anything, I

understood perhaps *too* clearly the certain sort of newfound power that my breasts bestowed upon me. I had no shortage of my own reference points to make sense of what she was alluding to, of what sorts of experiences my breasts made available to me and made me available to. The problem was that I couldn't comprehend how this bodily change, and its associated affective experiences, could possibly be mapped onto *me*. This recent augmentation to my body—the unconsented arrival of my breasts, sore and unbearably soft where I'd previously enjoyed feeling taut and hard—seemed to operate simultaneously as both clinically apart from and shamefully *a part of me*. That is: My cousin, a child like me, was no stranger to the curse that had been inscribed onto me earlier than the other girls, and she was maybe even keenly aware—in the way that children who grow up together often are—of the particular sharpness with which *I* felt the sinister gravity of that curse. Though my other friends expressed envy at the newfound way my shirts and boys' attention clung to me, my cousin knew as well as I did that this envy was complicated and laden, fraught with an amorphous sense of terror I couldn't yet name.

In his 2022 collection, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*, trans scholar Hil Malatino carefully teases out the suite of “side affects,” or bad feelings, that can characterize the experience(s) of being trans, organizing each chapter around a particular “bad feeling,” including envy, numbness, and rage, among others. He introduces this study, and its theoretical and personal necessity, by observing the overwhelmingly binaristic modes by which trans lives are often portrayed, commonly falling into terms of either overtly victorious celebration or ominous demonization, doom, and despair. “The genres of trans living,” Malatino writes, “are whittled down to just a few: hero worship, demonology, and victimology” (p.). Indeed, my own social media platforms are filled to the brim at this moment of accounts of transmasculine influencers whose bios often follow a somewhat consistent structure. Emojis are used to demarcate points on

the neat timeline of their transitions: A cartoon syringe indicates when they began hormone replacement therapy, comically blunt scissors signify the date of their top surgery. Some accounts include the playful bulbous eggplant to denote the date of their phalloplasty. A trans life, in brief, distilled into a sort of sanitized, colorful, cartoonish linearity for online consumption, comparison, conscription. And while many other trans users' accounts attest to some of the more complicated affective states that have accompanied them through this otherwise seemingly uncomplicated transition timeline, the modes of self-representation available to trans writers and artists remain largely limited to, and guided by, the cis-heteronormative structures within which they are produced, circulated, and popularized. This limitation, which often requires trans artists and writers to reconfigure the ambivalence of their transition experiences into one of the two aforementioned binaristic modes, is felt especially by those wishing to publish or "share their story" in any public realm that might be designated as "mainstream." Even those most staunchly committed to nuanced portraits and representations of trans experiences often find themselves, in their attempts to access everything from medical care to a wider platform from which to advocate for trans lives, grasping for tired and flattening aphorisms about being born in the "wrong" body or feeling the "opposite" gender from an early age.

Though no longer classified in the DSM-5 as a *disorder*, "gender dysphoria," a condition which arguably afflicts most people from time to time in their lives—cis and trans—is still often required to be listed on a patient's medical records as a prerequisite for trans and gender nonconforming adults to access hormone replacement therapy from their physicians. In my initial visit to my primary care physician to seek hormone replacement therapy in 2020, I was asked to provide evidence, whatever that might look like, of my having long suffered from an

irrepressible desire to become a man. The first therapist I saw, a butch lesbian in her 60s on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, told me flatly (and not without a trace of contempt) that my interest in top surgery indicated my inevitable progression toward becoming a man. “You may as well accept it,” she grumbled, crossing and uncrossing her legs uncomfortably. “You may like to think of yourself as a lesbian now, but if you’re wanting to get this surgery, you’re probably just a trans man.” This conversation put off my interest in pursuing top surgery for at least another year. Still newly out at the time, I felt proud to finally call myself a lesbian; what was I supposed to do with the fact that this therapist, a professional supposedly trained specifically to treat LGBTQ+ clients, told me that my ambivalence about a certain part of my body indicated that I was actually, secretly, a man? What might she say now if I told her that having top surgery made me feel both more the boy I’d always felt myself to be and more the girl, too? Where is the room for a complex, fluid, expansive understanding of gender in this framework wherein one is barred from the care they deserve until they can *prove* how egregiously they’ve suffered, how deeply they hate the person that they are? The rhetorical questions here grow, of course, increasingly moot in a country in which, at the time of this writing, 23 states ban best practice medical and surgical care for transgender youth? In a country where six states and counting have passed bills that make it a felony to provide best practice medical care for youth, making criminals of the doctors and parents who seek to secure healthcare for their patients—for their children? How is a young person to navigate all of this in grappling with the evolving, formless beauty within them that they’re taught to neatly classify (and classify correctly)? How am I to now explain, in ways I couldn’t have when I began this collection, as Preciado (2013) writes in *Testo Junkie*, “I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender

that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave the right way. I don't want any of it" (p. ___).

Malatino refers often to the plane of social media as the discursive space within which clean models of transition are often reified and reproduced, and in a country that continues to regulate away the visibility of transness in schools at alarming rates, social media is understandably where most young people turn to make sense of themselves. Indeed, if one's individual brand has become a (*the?*) dominant mode of one's social (and literal) capital, then it behooves the trans "creator" to render their experience legible to a wider audience by conflating transition with visible, physical, and (importantly!) chronological transformation. This transformation is, of course, problematically tethered to a class apparatus reliant upon the aforementioned forms of medical intervention inscribed by a deeply transphobic healthcare system that still prescribes transition as dis-ease and dis-order. The trans body, understood thusly as wayward and unnatural, then necessitates artificial manufacturing to generate a scientifically patched-together *other* that might restore the appearance of "naturalness" to one's outward gendered expression. Within a capitalistic culture founded on self as product, Instagram is the natural rhetorical vehicle for documenting a "transition" made possible by surgeons profiting lavishly off of trans folks' desire to bring their bodies into closer alignment with their insides, with the unspoken goal for many being the degree to which said transformation "looks natural." I say this not to cast condescension on social media portraits of transition and the trans folks that produce them—I am certainly among this number, one whose GoFundMe link for top surgery was slapped across their Instagram stories to generate crowdsource funding to pay for the prohibitively expensive procedure, and whose recovery was shared in somewhat regularly posted images of gradually softening scar lines across a chest I intermittently described as "new" and

“right.” The allure of wholeness, while certainly not an exclusive phenomenon to our experience of gender, is rendered particularly trademark of a “successful” gender transition. And in a society that casts queer and trans folks as failures—to their families, their state, their God, and their God-given biology—it’s hard to resist the opportunity to have been seen to *succeed* somehow.

The fear and suspicion of the depiction of trans lives on social media I share with Malatino, and include here, extend instead from my position as an educator, and as a person deeply invested both in the well-being of trans youth and of the quality, complexity, and variety of trans narratives available to them. To suggest that a successfully trans figure is a seamless one denies the beauty of the sutures themselves and the importance of the process by which we are stitched and unstitched. I chose my top surgeon based on the fact that his patients’ results looked the most “natural” to me; the lines his incisions left behind were impressively faint and thin, and I envied it. Yet, the more that I am read now as a cis man, the more I long for visible markers of my transness. It’s a contradiction that I sometimes feel guilty about and would have balked at prior to surgery, in the years that I longed for a boy’s and then man’s chest. How is it that I’d find myself now longing for more visible sutures, proof of the surgery required to procure this chest I love for the first time since I was 8 years old? But I’ve been astonished at how quickly and efficiently my body has been recast into a new category for reading, assessing, wanting or not wanting, commodified or not. In the weeks following top surgery, my fresh and fragile chest lined carefully with scar tape, I walked down Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood on a Saturday afternoon with my girlfriend and some of our friends. I was wearing what had become an LA uniform for me in its perma-summer: nylon shorts and a breezy button-down shirt that I delighted to feel against my bare skin. As we were crossing the street, a group of gay men passed us in the opposite direction, and I watched as one of these men looked at me coquettishly and

slowly, from my top to bottom, and brazenly licked his lips before smiling broadly and winking at me. I was shocked; my girlfriend and I looked at one another and laughed at such an overt display of desire, which neither of us was accustomed to in the, generally speaking, much (*much*) quieter, less visceral codex of lesbian desire.

That moment would go on to be, now nearly 2 years later, the first of many loud expressions of desire that cis gay men have felt comfortable directing at me. Before top surgery, I largely navigated gay bars unbothered, clustered with my little group of lesbians or the side character to my gay guy friends' nights out. I now regularly am felt up as I make my way across the crowded dance floor at Akbar, the gay dive bar in Silverlake my friends and I frequent. From the muggy shadows and strobe-lit depths around me come strangers' hands rough across my chest, grabbing my ass, feeling between my legs to quickly assess if I hold what they want. Though I'm not nearly as shocked by it as I used to be, the experience propels a confusing maelstrom of feelings: irritation, curiosity, fear, excitement, sexiness, grief. What do they see in me? What do others no longer see? Who is the *I* being desired or not desired, when the game of sexuality—even homosexuality—becomes reduced to the parts that I do or don't possess? It doesn't feel as important to me anymore to appear "natural," and, in fact, I often find myself longing for a previous time in my life when my gender identity was less easily assumed—when strangers would puzzle over the mixture of elements in my presentation that muddied the waters of what they discerned to be either definitively the qualities of a "woman" or "man." To make a statement like that, though, to admit to feeling grief at the loss of my visibility as a lesbian, to secretly long to take back some of those qualities of womanhood like pieces of debris among a forgotten rubble that I so readily (and understandably) felt the need to cast off—none of it adheres to the narratives of the complete and fulfilled linear transition that populate our general

cultural understanding of transgender identity. What I feel is much more complicated, wild, uncomfortable, and unruly. Is it too much to long for both ambivalence and safety? Fluidity without the violence of its punishment?

I got a tattoo across my neck that reads “God is Trans” after a friend, another transmasculine person, confided in me that it saddened him to feel like he no longer belonged in lesbian spaces because he was often regarded (again, understandably) with suspicion and, sometimes, outright hostility because he was assumed to be a cis man. In the summer, I wear my shirt unbuttoned comically low so that my scars are visible. I find myself now, perplexingly, grabbing at signals of my ambiguity, looking for more ways to visibilize the scars and marks it took to get me here. Yet, it’s the visibility of these very scars, rather than the quiet delivery from “woman” to “man” that popular trans narratives continue to prescribe, that marks a target on my back. It was the man’s Oxford shirt over the slightest swell of my bound breasts that marked me as available for vocal sexualization and dehumanization by teenagers that day in the ninth grade classroom that I described in the introduction to this collection. The popular misreading of Butler’s (YEAR) most famous precept goes something like this: If gender is a performance, then we can choose to decorate our blank-slate selves each day however we want to. Easy, right? Yet, the point of Butler’s theorizing couldn’t have been more grave: I sense the danger and the gravity of these choices everywhere I go.

Trans theorist Susan Stryker writes in her 1993 essay “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage”:

A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity; having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one’s personhood cognizable. I stood for a moment between the pains of two violations, the mark of gender and the unlivability of its absence. Could I

say which one was worse? Or could I only say which one I felt could be best survived?
(p. 253).

I think often now of the sentiment of Butler's that seems present in these words from Stryker, too: the pain of living outside of legibility and the pain of living inside it. My vantage points of how efficiently the social machine of gender works have varied starkly as I've undergone transition (and, as the stories in this dissertation attest, long before, too). The schema by which we are conditioned to automatically code and sort others (and ourselves) is so silent and so unconscious that it never ceases to astound me, and I find myself daily making choices both small and large to blur the outlines of my own legibility. I have chosen for myself a "man's" name, but I have always, and continue to, want to be referred to as *they*. The meaning being inscribed onto my body every day is a different sort of unnerving from the inscription that occurred when I first grew breasts, when I cosplayed as the married woman teacher in the South, when I presented as a butch, a masculine woman. Being gendered in this world has brought about a roving suite of feelings and affective states both good and bad and everything in between, and I wonder (erroneously, I know—that's the whole point) about a time before gender made its first major marks on me, when I was just a kid whose body grew wild and like a weed.

In the months approaching my top surgery, I found myself often revisiting the same phantasmic set of memories from my childhood: When my parents would let me play in the backyard by myself, blissfully and briefly relieved of the task of caring for my younger siblings. I would stomp and rove through the dark and damp Tennessee woods, snapping the heads off dandelions and smudging their fluorescent color onto my skin, pinching the juice from honeysuckles against my lips, rinsing the stones I collected in the vein-like creeks that rainwater sometimes formed. There's one memory that comes to me often and which has accumulated the

lazy cadence and haze of fantasy around it over the years. On one of my forest walks, it began to rain gently, and then heavily, before the echoes of thunder made clear it was a storm. I'd felt an initial flash of fear before something animal surged in me, and I proceeded to strip off all my clothes in a sudden need to feel the cool rain against all of my skin. As I began trudging back toward home, the forest grew muddier, and I longed to cover myself in it. I knelt down to the forest floor, scooping gentle handfuls of mud onto my skin and spreading it across the backs of my arms, my legs, my chest, thrumming at the way that the mud formed another layer on top of the light fuzz of my leg and arm hair. When I emerged from the forest, I was covered in it, and my mom, waiting for me, sighed and went for the hose. I wasn't allowed to come back inside until she'd hosed me off entirely and I dried. I giggled as the water tickled my skin, and I shook my wet head like a dog. My mother laughed at my laughter, and something else strung between us, something that I have known all these years connects us, more tenuously and more delicately, perhaps, than the heavy coils of shame that she foisted onto me, a weight that we've carried together for as long as I can remember. Strong as the glistening threads of a spider's web were the whispers of my mother's fierce love for me, of her protectiveness, and of her fear. I wonder at the sharpness of this memory for me, and the importance. I wonder at the terror that keeps my mother up at night, the mother of a trans child she cannot understand and cannot *not* love. I wonder about the last time in my life when my wildness felt more like a holiness and less like a monster.

In *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, Jack Halberstam (2020) writes that the wild is “not simply... a space beyond the home but also a challenge to an assumed order of things from, by, and on behalf of things that refuse and resist order itself” (p. 3). I return, again and again, to the landscape of school in my theorizing of gender. School: A place for order, for classification,

for the weighted blanket of *structure* and *discipline* and *goodness* to firmly drown out the frenetic movements of refusal and resistance. I think we all dreamed, at one time or another, during a monotonous round of geometry proofs or a droning history lecture, of a portal to another world that might transport us—that might hold behind its veil possibility and exploration and boundlessness. But what about the portals that already exist within each one of us? Where do they and all their wildness go in school? I do want to be careful to underscore here my reference to the aforementioned forest dreamscape as, indeed, a *fantasy*. While it's true that it lives in my memory, and I know that I took these forest walks, I acknowledge wholly that the force with which they have amassed the gorgeous blurriness of a dream is due in large part to the fact that the scene represents an equally unattainable and enchanting fantasy: a life and being that predates my gendering in the world. A life and being that, by extension, predates my being categorized in any number of ways that dimmed what I imagine to be the boundless wild brilliance of my youth. To fall under such a spell is of course tempting but rather beside the point, at least for someone whose mind is always on the praxis of liberation through education, namely here liberation from stultifying gender regimes and the very real forms of violence they impose and reify. It is not my wish to construct as my, or our, intended point the supposedly *natural* and preordained world of wild, innocent youth. That world does not exist, I know, and to chase it is a fool's errand, or at least the errand of someone for whom the matter of daily survival for queer and trans folks, specifically children, is less urgent. Perhaps, in line with Sedgwick's suggestion that shame cannot be excoriated but instead incorporated more gently into a complicated, loving understanding of one's various traumas, I want to consider the ways in which an innate sense of wildness—however incomplete and specious our understanding of that state might be—can be recovered, reworked, and rehabilitated. It's been 2 years now that I've

been out of the classroom and, with all the terrible and beautiful memories I hold of it, I continue to believe that it's a place where we can learn into our own wildness, powerfully if not as readily as we're so often schooled out of it. If it's possible to stay with the stories of what hurts so much about and within school, might it be possible to mine from them a recovered wildness: an alternate archive of what can and ought to be?

“The history of trauma,” Ann Cvetkovich (2003) writes,

often depends on the evidence of memory, not just because of the absence of other forms of evidence but because of the need to address traumatic experience through witnessing and retelling...subject to the idiosyncrasies of the psyche and the logic of the unconscious, emotional experience and the memory of it demand and produce an unusual archive, one that frequently resists the coherence of narrative or that is fragmented and ostensibly arbitrary. (p. 242)

This archive, “my story,” is a strange one. My memory waxes and wanes and undulates, even across the 5 years that I wrote the pieces included herein. The touchpoints between my life have overlapped, distanced, and collided in new ways with the lives of the queer and trans youth and adults who I've written about here. As I write this, I am nearly 35 years old and I am still a student, still a teacher. My vantage points have shifted overlooking the landscape of my own long life in school. Much like Frankenstein's monster who Stryker recalls first speaking back to his maker, professing himself to be something other and larger than Dr. Frankenstein intended, I too exceed the various categories that I and others have used to describe me. Perhaps what all of this has come to mean for me is cultivating the practice of forging and finding a home in the name that I have long feared, that they so often call us trans folks, manmade, stitched, exceeding and wild and scarred as we are—perhaps I am finding a home in my being a monster.

“Monsters,” after all, as Stryker writes, “like angels, functioned as messengers and heralds of the extraordinary. They served to announce impending revelation, saying, in effect, ‘Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening’” (247). I won't go so far as to cast myself as

the heavenly messenger here, but I will confidently put forward the names—unruly, various, invented, and lovingly hand-sewn—of the legions of queer and trans children who are busy remaking the world, whether we permit them to or not. Like the child playing the archangel Gabriel I described in the first interlude of this collection, they proceed forward with an announcement I hope we can be wise enough to heed. Fierce, wild, eyes on a queerer, better horizon, they bear their message: Pay attention. Something of profound importance is happening.

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