How the Life Histories of Queer and Transgender Youth Compel Pedagogical Transformations

By

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Abstract

This study explores the life histories of five queer and transgender youth and is comprised of three different articles. Each article addresses the theoretical and practical in order to create a queer and transgender pedagogical praxis. The first article follows the protests of one youth, Sam. It showcases how they navigate and resist standardized schooling, forward tenets of black feminism, and push for pedagogical transformations. The second article discusses the act of cutting and positions cutting as a queer and trans literacy practice. It then examines the narratives that surface from the act and how these narratives demand that we create space for discussing rage and desire in schools. The third article demonstrates how to produce and use student life histories in an English Language Arts Classroom. I contend that by addressing the bodies, hearts and minds of students, English Language Arts classrooms can create space for critical conversations around students' lived lives.

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Introduction

This dissertation explores the life histories of five queer and transgender youth - Jay, Sam, Harper, Jacob and Draco. Jay is a pansexual, transgender, female to male (FTM), Latinx/white, sophomore at an alternative school in a city. Jay uses the pronouns he, him and his. Harper is a genderfluid, pansexual, Latinx/white student that recently graduated from a rural high school. Harper uses the pronouns they, them and theirs. Sam is a genderfluid, pansexual, black/white student who is in their senior year of high school in a suburban school district. Sam uses the pronouns they, them and theirs. Jacob and Draco are both pansexual, white, transgender, FTMs who recently graduated from different rural high schools and use the pronouns he/him/his. I got to know each of these youth through a community storytelling program where I was their mentor. After stepping down from the position, I asked each of them if they would be interested in creating their life histories for research in education. They all graciously partnered with me to do the research. After working with them, I came away with an immense amount of data, questions and wonderings. I used this information to answer two research questions:

1. What issues and ideas do the life histories of queer and trans youth invite us to explore?
2. What does this work compel educators to (re)consider when thinking through pedagogical practices?

These research questions guided my thinking and writing. Three papers were produced as a result of this research.

The first paper, “Imagining Otherwise: Listening to the Protests of Queer and Transgender Youth in Secondary Schools,” focuses on the protests of Sam. Sam cleverly and steadfastly mediated violence in their school through critique, playing along, leaving when necessary and maintaining their sense of self in the midst of a school environment that was unwelcoming. The paper grew out of a phrase that Sam kept saying during our interviews. Sam repeatedly mentioned that they would "go with the flow." In one sense flow seemed to benefit Sam as it gave them alternative ways to think through embodiment. For example, in one interview they stated, "I'm a blob flowing through space. It's me in my meat sack. That's what I call my body, it's my meat sack, basically." This statement read as libratory and allowed Sam to think of themselves beyond the confines of how bodies are typically constructed. They also used flow to describe what they dress like on the weekends. In contrast to the shirts, sweaters and sweatpants they wore to school, Sam stated, "Like, most of the time on weekends and, like, on spring break and stuff, I wear long skirts because I like my long skirts, because they're flowy and comfortable." Again, flow seemed to describe warm and relaxed feelings where the structure of school fell off of Sam's body.

However, flow was not always indicative of good feelings. Instead, it was the way that Sam described surviving moments in school where they felt disengaged. For instance, when they talked about their sex education course, they mentioned that when they saw the diagrams of male and female reproductive parts they thought, "yeah someone has these," and then further elaborated by saying,

> **Sam:** It's someone else.
>
> **Bess:** That feels very disconnected.
>
> **Sam:** Yes. And it's much easier that way. But it's still, like, you should, kind of, connect it to yourself, at least a little bit. Because I certainly didn't…Yeah. I was just, kind of…I was just, kind of, like, floating in the sea of 'I'm here… kind of.' for many years. Just, kind of, like… go with the flow, kind of… Kind of… Yeah.

In our final interview, we went back to the idea of flow. Sam began by discussing how they were nervous about the future, graduation and having to figure out the next steps in life. They immediately followed these thoughts by saying that “you know, I just go with the flow.” So, I inquired,

Bess: It’s so interesting that you always say ‘Go with the flow.’ because I realize it’s just not what it, like... Go with the flow is, like, a result of, like, not feeling settled, you know? It’s, like…

Sam: I don't know…

Bess: Yeah.

Sam: I just, kind of, go with whatever is happening. If it’s happening, I’m just, like, alright, cool, let’s go with the flow. To me. It’s just happening. Alright.

Bess: So, ‘go with the flow’ that’s how you described yourself in the first interview.

Sam: Yeah. I just, kind of, I don't like planning things. So, I, kind of, have to just go with the flow. If I’m not going to plan anything, I might as well just… whatever. For example, I always forget that we have this [interview] and then I’m, like, ‘Oh, that’s right. Let me just go change.’ I got to shower and change and shove some waffles in the toaster oven…And then we’re good. I’m glad I woke up on time.

Bess: But, in terms of, like, going with the flow and then talking about the anxiety of the future, like, those two things don't necessarily add up. This is more of, like, ‘I just move with whatever is going to go.’

Sam: Because of the anxiety of the future.

Bess: Because of the anxiety of the future?

Sam: Yeah. I don't like the future, so I don't even think about it until it's happening. Then it's not the future.

Bess: Right.

Sam: It's present.

In the conversations around sex education and the future, flow became a means of survival. It allowed Sam to be in school even though they did not see themselves represented in school. This was enough for Sam to get by and pass. It also allowed them to brush off violence that the curriculum was imposing on them by being disconnected, which was far easier than combatting the violence head-on. Flow allowed for what Audre Lorde (2001) describes as self-preservation. Flow also functioned to ward off future-oriented anxiety that comes with having to communicate what one is going to do next in life. Flow contests the teleological, straight and narrow focus that schools often push (what do you want to be when you grow up?). Finally, flow forces the future to remain in the present. It disrupts time in a way that benefits Sam's sense of well-being so that they can revel in what is happening in the here and now.

Throughout "Imagining Otherwise: Listening to the Protests of Queer and Transgender Youth in Secondary Schools," I further explore how Sam used flow as a way to both see where violence was happening and to subsequently mitigate the violence of school. Of course, school and schooling practices are not kind to the embodiment of flow. School architecture, bell schedules, structured conversations and the Advancement for Individual Determination (AVID), a group Sam found themselves in as a result of a teacher's recommendation, all necessitated a strategic intervention on Sam's part. I further elaborate on how Sam's use of flow, as it comes up in their notion of weird, echoes the desires of black feminists who have found that our current notions of time and space do not allow for the transformative grounds needed for black bodies to thrive (da Silva, 2014). I then take some time to think of where Sam's school provided a space for flow. For Sam, this happened in a creative writing classroom where a teacher's curriculum allowed Sam to feel like the possibilities were endless.

The next paper, "Queering and Trans*ing Education with Rage and Desire: Opening up Conversations Around Cutting," grew out of a need to grapple with an immense amount of data that discussed the act of cutting. The paper does not condone the act of cutting. Instead, it seeks to understand the relevance and utility of cutting so that schools can be restructured so that students do not need to cut. More specifically, the paper argues that educational systems need to embrace youth desire and rage.

There were many times throughout the process of writing this paper where I wanted to quit. The first time I discussed the data I was at the May 2017 Working Conference on Discourse Analysis in Education. I nervously presented my findings and found myself overwhelmed. First, I started to get worried about my research participants. Even though the data was from past cutting experiences, the thought of them hurting themselves again came over me and made me feel like I needed to bury their stories. In a way, I felt like if I did not talk about it, then they wouldn't hurt themselves again. My colleagues in the working group at the conference gave me a different point of view. They found the data to be compelling, telling and necessary. I then felt that I needed to continue researching cutting and spent the summer examining the concept in the field of psychology. Cutting is one of the many behaviors that psychologists call, "non-suicidal self-injury" or NSSI. This does not mean that the person who cuts is also non-suicidal but instead that the cutting itself is not used to commit suicide. I was disappointed by what I found because, like most psychological literature, the focus was on rehabilitating the individual. From what I could tell from my own data, cutting was a result of the violence of a cruel and uninhabitable world for queer and transgender youth. In particular, it seemed especially poignant in the lives of my three research participants that were biracial and who grew up in predominately white areas. While the other two participants both practiced different forms of bodily modification (one cut and the other did their own piercings) the consistency of the practice was not as strong and the meaning did not seem to be as valued. As I read back through to do a closer reading of the three participants of color, I found that cutting was one way where they were expressing desire and rage. As such, their scars and cuts bring to the fore the violence of everyday life for queer and transgender youth of color while also providing an avenue for connection and pleasure. *In the paper, I further explore how I came to these conclusions and how the humanizing trend in education may need to be revamped in order to allow space for queer and transgender youth of color*.

The last paper, "Exploring and Analyzing Our Bodies, Minds and Hearts Through Multimodal Life Histories," brings the pedagogical potential embedded in student life histories to the foreground. As I analyzed the data for this project I often lamented that I had not done something like it when I was an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher. The process of doing something as grand as a life history with my students felt like it would not be possible given the constraints of standards and testing. Having the chance to step back from the classroom and review the ELA standards in conjunction with the life histories, I realized that it was possible with a few alterations. In the piece, I breakdown my methodology in a way that is accessible and manageable for ELA educators. I also expose how I pieced together a multimodal life history and subsequently used literary analysis to showcase how the text would function in an ELA classroom. In doing so, I argued that centering our students' bodies, minds and hearts does the same critical work that the standards ask teachers to do, except in far more tangible and meaningful ways.

The conclusion attends to some of what was left behind in the process of analyzing the five life histories. With each paper, two life histories were consistently cut: Jacob’s and Draco’s. This decision was made in an attempt to make room to elaborate on the takeaways from the other three participants. I take the time and space in the conclusion to piece together two of the biggest questions that arose from Jacob’s and Draco’s stories. I specifically look at how Draco and Jacob discuss reality, fantasy and online presence in order to think through how educational systems can provide different avenues to explore oneself.

Before the papers, and in the following sections, I detail the theoretical framework and literature that framed the making of this project. I then delve into the methodology that was used to gather and analyze the life histories.

Theoretical Framework

Before reviewing the literature on queer and trans youth, it is essential to unpack how their bodies are produced. In order to fully conceptualize how these terms are mobilized in the flesh, I will initially explore how queer and transgender subjects come into being by attending to discourse and performativity. Using these theoretical frameworks, I will explore how the interplay of gender, sexuality and race are understood over time and how bodies that take up or are given the mark of queer and/or transgender form differently from others. Then I will propose a way to operationalize queer and transgender in order to give form to the terms while leaving space for difference over time. Finally, I will unpack how the concept of youth comes into play as it occupies space alongside transgender and queer. This theoretical framework will lay the groundwork for both the literature that I engage with and the methodology that I deployed.

There is not solely a single signifying notion that encapsulates queer and transgender subjectivities. The idea that one is queer because they are interested in the same sex or that one is transgender because they have transitioned from one gender identity to another is far too simplistic. These frameworks do not fully capture the tedious and tender contours of being queer and transgender and are wholly reliant on notions like a binary sex system and a clear divide between sex and gender. As many feminist theorists have argued, sex and gender are both constructed facets of bodies that are produced through institutions like medicine and that play off of one another (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Halberstam, 1998; Butler, 1990). The nuanced interplay between sex, sexuality and gender is lost when the terms are solidified into two discrete entities.

Reducing the terms also invisibilizes the complex processes of differentiation produced over time through a constant negotiation between normative and non-normative discourses that circulate and sediment in the flesh and our commonsense. Michel Foucault (1970) attends specifically to the power of discourse and explains that there has always been a, “multiplication of discourses concerning sex,” (p.12). By engaging discourses around sex, anyone can participate in the “will to knowledge” or the pursuit to fully understand core identities through notions of sex and consequently sexuality (p.13). In this way, discourse becomes a productive lever that forms and reforms subjectivities at an institutional, familial and individual level. Forming new knowledge rests on the temporary discursive consensus of all actors involved, which means that while institutional discourse may take up more space, its power is dependent on continued acknowledgement at the individual level. As such, it takes a profound amount of cultural labor to incite subjects into being – to make subjects like queer and transgender biologically and psychologically bound.

Foucault’s theory helps to denaturalize the idea that queerness comes from the interior and instead locates queerness as a discursive production. Foucault explains, “Homosexuality appeared […] when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (p. 43). This often-cited quote illuminates how the discourse around acts, sexual practices and gender performance work to label and sort out non-normative individuals.

Siobhan Sommerville (1994), taking another moment in time, utilizes Foucault’s notion of discourse and pairs it with an intersectional framework in order to further our understanding of queerness and gender through the lens of scientific racism. She explains that the scientific investigations of sexuality relied heavily on inciting into discourse the quantifiable difference between black and white as they related to the gendering of women’s aberrant sexualities. For example, she discusses how medical journals in the 1920s focused on the size of the female clitoris as it related to lesbian subjectivities. What scientists claimed to find was that the clitorises of white lesbians were larger than their respective white, straight counterparts and those of African American lesbians were even larger than the clitorises of white lesbians. These distinctions, Sommerville argues, “literalized the sexual and racial ideologies of the nineteenth-century ‘Cult of True Womanhood,’ which explicitly privileged white women’s sexual ‘purity’ while implicitly suggesting African American women’s sexual accessibility” (p. 12). What Sommerville’s work illustrates are the complicated processes by which subjectivities arrive and that it is through intersectional frameworks, and race in particular, that taxonomies of difference come to the fore.

Psychological and popular discourse continue to infiltrate the ways in which queer and transgender identities are understood today. Identity models created in the 1970s are still widely cited in the social sciences. One model created by Vivian Cass (1979) was reserved for lesbian and gay identity development and detailed the following stages: identity confusion (am I G/L?), identity comparison (am I like other G/Ls?), identity tolerance (I seek out others who are G/L for support), identity acceptance (I am comfortable with being G/L), identity pride (I want everyone to know that I am proud of who I am), identity synthesis (sexual identity is only one part of who I am, I am more complex than just my sexuality). Because of its linearity and focus on coming out, Cass’ model was questioned by many including Anthony D’Augelli (1994) who suggested that a lifespan model would be more appropriate. He identified the potential processes entailed in reaching a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity including: exiting heterosexuality, developing a LGB personal identity, developing a LGB social identity, coming out to parents, developing an LGB intimacy status, entering an LGB community. In D’Augelli’s model there is no expectation of sequentially passing through each phase as each one is tied to the sociocultural surroundings of the individual and their choices. Still, the discourse around what is deemed the lesbian and gay experience point to a very specific form of embodiment and life experience.

Coming out narratives have been and continue to be a popular trope for queer and trans adults to reflect on how they developed in their youth. In the edited volume, *Growing Up Gay/Growing Up Lesbian: A Literary Anthology*, many of the contributors echo the usefulness and necessity of coming out in their youth. Linda Heal (1994) states that coming out allowed her to live a "full, honest life" (p. 8). Kevin Jennings' (1994) story of understanding himself is framed as discovering "his true dreams for himself as a gay man" (p.2). Furthermore, the text situates coming out as the most important political move for lesbian and gay people. Tennis player Martina Navratilova's (1994) forward tells people to "come out and let all the people see what, for the most part, straight and square and normal and sometimes boring lives we lead" (p. xvi). She ends by urging all who are "still in the closet to throw away all the excuses" (p. xvi). In these narratives one can see the compulsory discursive terrain that reproduces Foucault's concept of the "will to knowledge," where one must speak out in order to fully embrace their true self.

The contours of transgender identity have largely been produced through medical literature, most notably the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). In an attempt to destigmatize and de-pathologize the fourth version's diagnosis of GID (Gender Identity Disorder), the fifth edition, DSM V (2013), changed the diagnosis for transgender individuals to Gender Dysphoria. In order to receive the diagnosis, transgender children, teens and adults must all exhibit "a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, of at least 6 months' duration" (p. 452). Along with the overarching diagnoses, they must also exhibit at least one of the secondary characteristics which include behaviors like, "a strong dislike of one's sexual anatomy" or "a strong preference for the toys, games, or activities stereotypically used or engaged in by the other gender" (p. 452). In addition, the DSM V warns that youth who exhibit Gender Dysphoria also, "show elevated levels of emotional and behavioral problems—most commonly, anxiety, disruptive and impulse-control, and depressive disorders" (p. 453). The psychological discourse of the DSM V is telling as it claims to be less egregious than its former diagnosis. However, the language that surrounds transgender subjectivities still paints a bleak picture of life.

Foucault (1970) and Sommerville (1994) have been critical in describing concrete ways to see discourse in action and read through the ways in which language constructs subjectivities. What their work also reveals is the power behind the performative or acts of constructive and authoritative speech that exercise power byway of citation. J.L. Austin's (1962) work was key in describing how the performative works to create and incite subjects. One of his examples shows how the phrase and authorial use of "I now pronounce you husband and wife," is a performative where what is said enables the creation of the subject, the husband, and the counterpart, the wife. Similarly, the notion that language constructs reality over time rather than merely describing it can be seen in the performative of coming out or the psychological diagnosis of gender dysphoria.

However, Austin's work has been criticized for being too structured and many argued that his desire to clearly delineate language's performative effects was far too essentialist. Thus, while the phrase, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," still holds a certain kind of performative power, that power looks strikingly different over time. The reason for this comes from the inability to pin down language at any one moment. Language, as it is used over and over, loses its origin and thus can never simply stand on its own and house only one meaning. As language gets taken up, it refers to a deep and contradictory citational history that can never fully be explicated. As Jaques Derrida (1981) explains, "the play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself" (p. 26). As discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002), antiessentialists like Judith Butler and Derrida push the concept of performativity to its limits by illustrating how all language is performative, not just authoritative language, and that language is most performative, “when its performativity is least explicit – indeed, arguably most of all when it isn’t even embodied in actual words” (p.6). It is in the mundane acts of our everyday lives that gender and sexuality are consistently cited. It is these acts that bring our bodies into incomplete intelligibility.

Butler’s (1990) work has been central in forwarding these ideas through a deeper look at gender. She explains that because “gender is an identity tenuously situated in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 220) gender has no specific origin Thus gendered acts are in a constant cycle of failure where one can only mimic a copy of a copy, but never perform a distinct original act. Still, there is a general consensus around acts that fit within the normative and so producing an act that appears to be out of the ordinary creates a moment of ambivalence where the origin is questioned – where the copy of a copy comes to the fore. She states, “The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (p. 224). She often uses transgender subjectivities to situate this kind of gendered work. Her work reflects Derrida’s notion that, “the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral” (p. 29). In this way, Foucault’s homosexual subjects or Sommerville’s black lesbians are still implicated in the formation of deviant subjectivities today. Each body bears the trace of what has come before. However, as bodies continue to act they cannot be caught by a single notion of sexuality or gender. As language multiplies around them and alternative performatives become available, the subjects they once were morph into something different.

While the subject may always be deferred, this does not mean that both power and violence are not central factors in the production of subjectivities. In fact, the attempt to sort and order bodies has had and continues to have deadly consequences. The impetus to cure such non-normative behaviors for the common good can mean a life of medical intervention, institutionalization or, at its worst, "wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity" (Foucault, 1978, p. 137). Foucault argues that sex is the most productive site for managing populations as it is linked to the concepts of blood, reproduction and inheritance. He explains that, "sex is the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations and pleasures" (p. 155).

At the same time, those who push for positive ways to develop identity (coming out, finding oneself) also play a dangerous game. Each time a marginalized group decides on the contours of their identity, an other is produced. As Butler (2004) explains,

> If the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that 'undo' the person by conferring recognition, or 'undo' the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not. (p. 2)

Thus, any attempt to qualify language through the body runs the risk of dehumanizing those who cannot or will not perform within a given set of discursive or performative options. Knowing this, how does one move forward in framing queer and transgender subjectivities?

Queer Subjectivities

As a queer teacher I am still asked by students if using the term queer is okay. Queer, to many of them, signifies a derogatory term used to shame those who participate in same-sex relationships. This is one historicized vision of the word. Some see it as a reclaimed term that speaks to the proud contours of those who partner with the same sex - shame be gone. Others think queer is simply a catch-all phrase for those who call themselves lesbian, gay, bisexual or even transgender. There are many other ways in which queer has been mobilized: as an academic way to think about the fallibility of heterosexuality, a way for straight people to claim an anti-homophobic stance, etc. These are all ways that queer has been taken up and used to define a person or group of people.

Queer, for many queer theorists does not have a single meaning but instead works as a mobile interface. José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Butler (1993) forward similar sentiments around the word queer. Muñoz's work offers a way of thinking about queer utopias. His central argument posits that queerness is not a reality that is touchable or seeable in the present. Instead, it is an "ideality" and that "we are not queer yet" (p.1). Desire is produced in the "then and there" or nostalgia for the past and visions of the future (p.1). As such, queerness is uncatchable and resists the progressive and anti-relational tides of neatly packaged historical movements and identity-based politics. There is no diversity initiative or policy that can attend to queerness because it refuses the administrative pull in favor of community building that can be painful and joyful all at once. Similarly, Butler explains that queer is, "never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (p.19). As such, queerness is always a site of becoming.

The redeployment and reimagining of queer subjectivities can be seen in Muñoz's work on disidentifications. Mobilizing Foucault, Butler, and theories of intersectionality and essentialism, Muñoz (1999) describes a "third mode of dealing with dominant ideology" that focuses on the labor of identity (p. 9). He states, "I understand the labor (and it is often, if not always work) of making identity [and that the intersections of essentialist and constructivist narratives are] precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid racially predicated and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation" (p. 9). Muñoz suggests that these "identities in difference" (p. 10) are always on the cusp of emerging, pushing through to materialize between dominant ideologies and self-definition. This particular work is largely done by queer people of color who have historically and presently been left out of LGBT politics, feminist politics and politics that forward anti-racist sentiments. While queer people of color pick up on and use the ideas presented by these progressive groups, they often use them differently and defiantly, "teasing out the ways in which desire and identification can be tempered and rewritten not dismissed or banished through ideology" (p. 15). What Muñoz's work gives us is a way to understand how ambivalence is used to disrupt and redefine both subjectivities and space. It also shows us that queerness is constantly on the cusp and being renegotiated through performative and discursive routes.

Each of the aforementioned theorists argue that queerness is not simply an identity but a political and temporally located act. Summing up these ideas, Sara Ahmed's (2006) work suggests that we think of queerness as something that is embodied or lived. She forwards the notion that being queer means being, "oblique or offline…which as we know involves a commitment to living in an oblique world or in a world that has an oblique angle to that which is given" (p.161). She also offers that living queer means living, "odd, bent [or] twisted," which often results in disturbing "the order of things" (p.161).

Transgender Subjectivities

Transgender, as a term, gained popularity in the 1990s. Susan Stryker (2006) notes that, the idea of transgender evokes, "a wide range of phenomena that call attention to the fact that 'gender,' as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity" (p. 3). However, as previously noted in the section on Gender Dysphoria, some believe it to be a strict diagnosis. In this way, academic entities and transgender communities alike all have a stake in the meaning behind the word. Similar to queer, transgender changes over context and time. However, queer and transgender are not the same. In fact, transgender theorists have pushed back against queer theory's movement toward deliteralizing the body and have advocated for centering on the legitimacy of feeling, materiality and realness. Still, other transgender writers and activists have voiced concern around these frameworks as they have the tendency to privilege some narratives of transgender experience over others. In response to this ongoing debate, transgender theorists have incorporated affect theory into their work in order to forward a definition of transgender that is both mobile and material.

Some have explicitly argued that queer theory cannot account for the realities of being transgender. This is especially evident in Jay Prosser's (1998) *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. Prosser begins by positing that he will risk writing essentialist narratives in order to bring back material reality and create a space for trans identities. He details that the vision of the disembodied trans identity in the field of queer theory has been used as a means to support social constructivist theories. At the same time this vision has also been used to illustrate the grossest form of essentialism. At times queer theory celebrated the trans body for disrupting the intricate ties between sex and gender, proving that they were not dependent on one another.

Alternatively, dissenting voices in the field asserted that trans people were simply duped, buying into a binary sex system and further entrenching gender stereotypes. This libratory/hegemonic binary has been imposed on trans bodies without any attention to the body as real and material. Judith Halberstam's (2005) interpretation of Prosser explains that at the heart of Prosser's argument lies the idea that, "many transsexuals do not want to represent gender artifice; they actually aspire to the real, the natural, indeed the very condition that has been rejected by the queer theory of gender performance" (p. 45). Prosser contends that we must divorce from these misconceptions by looking at trans narratives and reconfiguring the material, somatic, and embodied as suggestive of a new way to conceptualize what it means to be trans. By attending to the narratives of trans individuals, Prosser hopes to illuminate and re-center the trans body as a material body - not just a discursive production.

These are valid arguments, however they also privilege a specific kind of trans narrative - one that favors passing, access to surgery and the academic avenues to produce and publish narratives for an audience. The tension that arises from this privileging is showcased in David Valentine's (2007) ethnography, *Imagining Transgender*, in which he discusses the concept of violence as it relates to academic rape. After meeting a trans woman named Cindy at the Gender Identity Project support group, Valentine relayed that she reminded him of his friend Riki Wilchins, a trans academic. Valentine decided to send Cindy an article describing Wilchins' workshop, "Our Cunts Are Not the Same," where Wilchins invites people to examine hir genitals. Cindy's e-mail response revealed a deep hurt regarding Valentine's collusion of herself and Wilchins who she understood as a, "middle class punk" whose "definitions rape me because they undermine the credibility of my take on myself" (p. 222). As someone who did not have access to surgery or the academy, Cindy felt helpless. This contention illustrates how the formation of community in academia can become fraught with unfortunate and violent assumptions that all trans people are the same. Or, in Cindy's words, "one size fits all" (p. 222). Focusing on narratives like Wilchins' comes at a price. In an attempt to build community, academia can also alienate those who do not have access to the same privileges of being able to afford gender affirmation surgery and do not have the academic clout to be noticed as autobiographers of their own lives and bodies. Thus, while Prosser's work pushes a material lens, it can also favor one narrative over another.

In an attempt to occupy the space in between and beyond, Jeanne Vaccaro (2013), writing more than a decade after Prosser, uses the metaphor of felt to break with hardened understandings of trans identities that teeter between theory, biology and medical discourse. She begins by referencing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) who understand felt as the anti-fabric. As a rich matrix of threads meshed together into different layers, felt is always in a state of flux, not conforming to any one movement or notion (p. 475). Using felt as a metaphor for transgender embodiment, Vaccaro explains that it displays a "relation between matter and feeling within experience, specifically the sensation (bodily, cognitive, otherwise) for gender in transition." (p. 93). Felt accounts for "the dimensionality of such an experience, and importantly, does not privilege a single mode of transition (hormonal, surgical or legal) or reinforce narratives of gender 'realness'" (p. 93). Being a material that is connected to the homemade, it encourages us to think through transgender embodiment as located through the unique experience of the individual who is manipulating and pulling on their respective gendered, entangled threads. While this experience may be unique, it is also fostered through the entanglements that bodies share with other bodies. Vaccaro explains, "the body becomes with and through its movement and proximity to other bodies. In this way, *the body* is *a body* is *my body* is *your body*, a choreographed set of spatial relations and discursive practices" (p. 94). Vaccaro's work makes trans subjectivity expansive and encourages the opening up of transgender embodiment. Still, unlike queer, transgender is still rooted in the material.

Operationalizing Queer and Transgender

So, how does one know if a particular youth is queer or transgender? While the previous sections give some background on a set of ideas that surround queer and transgender, this section focuses on how to use the performative and discursive to open up space for those who do not abide by normative codes of gender or sexuality. Sedgewick's (2002) work on non-dualistic thought and Ahmed's (2006) work on queer phenomenology are two helpful starting points in thinking through how to see queer and transgender as they are embodied and enacted. They both offer a notion of the term beside that puts into motion the context that assists in bringing non-normative bodies to the fore.

Sedgwick's work seeks to create the tools and techniques for non-dualistic thought. She is quick to posit that this does not mean that she is shuttling all dualistic thought to the realm of the useless. Instead, she hopes to gain a vision and practice of non-dualistic thought that will allow us to see the relational and the different simultaneously. Using Austin's work, she moves through specific performative utterances to showcase how they function within a set of rules. By doing this, she illustrates that creating lineages of speech acts helps us to see a map of relations - speech acts that abide by the rules, do not abide by the rules or that need the support of other speech acts to come into fruition. In this way, she turns away from Derrida's and Butler's critiques of Austin in order to see how the "textures and effects" of performatives lie beside one another. To think of all things as beside one another helps to both see power relations at work while visualizing the space in between and the ecology that surrounds all things. Holding performatives in tension will allow for an understanding of who is enacting gender and sexuality in a way that constitutes difference or that pushes against what appears to be straight or cisgender.

Ahmed furthers this notion of beside in her work on queer phenomenology. She first discusses a Countee Cullen poem which depicts a white and black boy holding hands as they make their way through the searing looks of a disgusted crowd. She uses this poem to showcase how the gestures of the boys, beside one another, produce a new way of being that contests and opens up space for alternative ways of life. She states, “the boys take a path that others do not follow. A path is cleared by their besideness. Just that. Two bodies side by side. They pass by; they pass through…That is enough to clear the ground” (p. 169). It is when one looks at the boys in context that their queerness comes to the fore and, more importantly, the power their queerness has to protest convention. The boys alone do not have the same potentials as they do together. In general, Ahmed’s work moves toward looking at the context to find what is emerging out of the ordinary. Thus, her quest does not involve finding a “queer line” but instead finding “an orientation toward queer, a way of inhabiting the world by giving ‘support’ to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place” (p. 179). In doing this we allow the “oblique to open up another angle on the world” (p. 179).

Sedgwick’s call to look at what is beside in order to see difference and power operates alongside Ahmed’s understanding of how to see what is breaking new ground or who needs support. These conceptual frameworks help to see that there are no definitional parameters that are set in stone for queer and transgender youth. Instead, it is the researcher’s responsibility observe all things beside one another in order to see who contests the normative parameters of sexuality and gender (even sexuality and gender that is already considered non-normative) and to make space for their story.

Youth Subjectivities

> Youth are trapped in “becoming,” and their bodies, actions, and emotions are read as evidence of their immaturity. Condensed phrases, such as ‘raging hormones’ or ‘peer pressure,’efficiently telegraph their position. The developmental framework, consumed at-a-glance in age, requires youth’s ‘less than’ status. Researchers, activists, and educators strive to help young people, but on the established terms, which reduce and homogenize them while forgetting the play of power and resources in these representations. (Talburt and Lesko, 2012, p.14)

As the quote from Talburt and Lesko explains above, youth are consistently framed in ways that position them as beings that are not in control of themselves and as a result require adult intervention. Similar to the identity development models mentioned previously, youth have predetermined expectations that surround and manipulate their possible subjectivities. There is also the political economy of neoliberalism that encourages youth to be self-sufficient and at the same time, follow the rules, perform well on standardized exams and fulfill the roles adults have set out for them. If youth betray standards, they are only allowed so much leeway before what is normal wayward behavior (e.g. testing the boundaries) becomes delinquent behavior. Of course, looking at the juvenile justice system and educational punishment systems, it is clear that this is a highly raced and classed pursuit (Meiners, 2007). So, how does one frame the concept of youth without bolstering the narratives that disregard youth as simply a phase?

One method that Talburt and Lesko (2012) propose insists that, first and foremost, power and context are made central to defining youth experience. She explains, “youth are making themselves and also being made within sedimented and changing locations, economies, and discourses” (p.21). This is especially true for the vast majority of youth who are connected through social media and have the ability to try out different ways of being within the discursive landscape of larger queer and transgender online communities. As youth work on who they are, they play within what they are exposed to and dynamically create their subjectivity over time.

Halberstam (2005) also adds to the conversation by pushing an “epistemology of youth” that goes “against the youth/adult binary” (p.27). Queer and transgender history is rich with subcultural, even youthful, narratives that defy the set futures of a heterosexual world. She explains that queer futures often “lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience - namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (p.30). Thus, there is already a rich history within queer and transgender communities of people contesting the progression of steps they are supposed to take in life. Keeping this central to understanding youth life histories and always questioning the hazy divide between what makes a youth a youth and what makes an adult an adult is critical. This work will assist in working against the pathologization and infantilization of youth.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I selected from a wide variety of literature that engages with youth who do not fit within normative conceptions of sexuality and/or gender. Not all scholars use the terms queer and transgender. Many utilize the acronym LGBTQQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning) while others use more specific terms such as genderqueer, butch and intersex. I begin with the critiques of identity development and gender dysphoria models from scholars and youth activists who are troubled by their rigid constructions. I then expand to a national scale where queer and trans youth are fighting for recognition amongst gay and lesbian adults who overwhelmingly control the narrative around what it means to be a part of LGBTQQ political projects. Finally, I address the scholarship that focuses on the contested terrain that queer and transgender youth navigate in schools. This review seeks to provide a rich and complex vision of what it *can* mean to be a queer and/or transgender youth.

Critiquing Psychological Modeling and Coming Out

The compulsory notion of creating one solidified identity and coming out, while common, can be a dangerous precedent for many queer and trans youth who do not fit the model of sexuality and gender identification laid out in developmental models. Julie Tilsen (2013) critiques identity-based models by asking the questions, “What does it mean for someone who doesn’t develop in the way described by the model? Does this render some youth as developmentally disabled if they fail to develop in the prescribed ways?” (p. 41). In her work with the Q-Squad, a multicultural queer and trans youth group, Tilsen found that many of the members encountered unwelcoming situations when faced with the remnants of models like the one that Cass put forth. One member relayed that her psychologist seemed to always want to stereotype her. She stated, “I think the most damaging part of labels is other people putting it on you and thinking they can understand you like that" (p. 35). Many of the Q-Squad that chose to go to therapy had similar reservations implying that they felt pathologized. One youth told a story about a therapist who explained that the youth's choice of a trans partner was really a reflection of the youth being uncomfortable with their own body. The therapist went on to explain that once the youth reached the milestone of a solid identity then such choice in partner would not happen. These interactions are symptomatic of a rigid system of identity models that, while beneficial to some, makes others feel as though they do not fit in or belong.

At the same time, because developmental models and popular narratives focus so much on coming out, the risks involved are decontextualized and overlooked. Even though many people (including myself) have coming out *stories*, there are queer and trans youth who do not benefit from such a practice. Tilsen explains that practitioners privilege those who show courage and forget that the word implies there are risks involved. Because of this she encourages them to also celebrate a youth's refusal to come out as "a practice of safety, caution and good judgment" (p. 45). Furthermore, beyond the risk, there are many youth who simply do not and will not identify or come out for a plethora of reasons. Equally political as Navratilova's call to come out, some youth see not coming out as, "an act of resistance to stable notions of identity, and another way to underline the contextual nature of identity" (p.46). Tilsen argues that in order to be with and beside queer and trans youth, it is imperative that we understand the terrain of gender and sexuality as murky at best. At times it may resemble solidified notions of identity but more often will not. This notion is echoed by Audre Lorde (1982) who, when reflecting on her youth in her biomythography, *Zami*, contends that,

> Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were

> different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuated self. At the Bag, at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem, at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing. (p. 89).

These sentiments are also elucidated in scholarship that engages queer and trans youth to tell their stories while they are still young. Through interviews and calls for submission, the ideas that flow directly from queer and trans youth complicate any linear or homogenous viewpoint. In one edited volume entitled *Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology*, Amy Sonnie (2000), who started the project when she was just 19, opens up a space for queer youth where issues like racism, classism, ableism, sexism and transphobia can simultaneously be addressed. In doing so, Sonnie hopes to bridge stories together from diverse backgrounds that recreate, question and complicate the larger dominant narratives of what it means to be young, queer and/or trans. In introducing the anthology, she notes,

> Matthew Shepard has become a queer community icon, his murder a cornerstone in legislation against hate crimes in the United States. But why was his the only story about hate violence to dominate the news that year? Why was there no significant media coverage about the murders of trans queers of color such as Marsha P. Johnson or Tyra Hunter…We matter. Our *survival* is news too. (Sonnie, 2000, p. xiii).

Fifteen years later, Black Lives Matter is making a strikingly similar argument. Sonnie’s words put the importance of coming out into perspective – what does it mean to come out when you continually fear for your life? What does it mean to come out when there is unequal recognition of your body as one that is human, that deserves protection and that should be allowed to live?

Stories in the volume break with conventional ways of understanding identity. For example, in an anonymous contribution (2000), a 17-year-old transgender female-to-male poet wrote a piece on being butch. In his piece, he describes the line that he treads and how he may upset assimilated lesbian and gay people who pair well with straight society. He also talks about pleasure, a topic that never quite makes it into the literature around queer and trans youth. He discusses the complexities of how to give and receive pleasure when the need to have a wall "to fend off spears, to drown out the sounds of the angry words thrown at me" (p. 32) gets in the way. In this discussion it is clear that the paths of sexuality, sex and gender are tedious and create tensions between the realities of being trans youth of color and engaging in intimacy.

Trans youth are also defying the standards set up by the DSM and finding that the medical industry has an uncomfortable stronghold on their identity. In Susan Kuklin's (2014) *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*, the interviews she conducts with trans youth showcase the youths' own understanding of self. Jessy, a female-to-male Taiwanese American describes the transition process as initially something that he wanted to fully accomplish and finish. He explains, "When I first started my transition, I wanted to be complete, from one side to the other" (p. 29). However, Jessy goes on to explain that after moving through his transition process he is now "embracing [his] in-betweenness" (p. 29). He further states, "I'm embracing this whole mix that I have inside myself. And I'm happy. So forget the category. Just talk to me. Get to know me" (p. 29). Here Jessy's understanding of self cannot be reduced to a DSM category. He simply cannot be contained. Similarly, Cameron, who identifies as "gender queer, gender fluid and gender other,"

(p. 113) but also uses words like boy and trans to describe himself, rejects the idea that trans people do not like their bodies. He explains, “I wanted hormones and top surgery. I didn’t want bottom surgery because the options aren’t that great and it’s really not something I need. Like I said, I don’t have body issues. I’m not dysphoric” (p. 113). Cameron’s words are particularly brave. For many trans or gender non-conforming people, not adopting the language of the DSM V can put one at risk of not getting access to hormones or gender affirmation surgery (Spade, 2006). It is a risk that Cameron is willing to take in order to produce a counter narrative.

In another interview with Nan, an intersex, gender queer individual, it becomes clear that the medical industry can reconfigure your body in ways that you have to undo and then rebuild upon. After not getting a consistent period, Nan went to several doctors at the age of 17. Each one of them had a different diagnosis and each one of them performed procedures that opened Nan’s body up to scrutiny. One could not make sense of the white lining around their ovaries, another said that they had Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS), one claimed that Nan was intersex (a diagnosis that Nan felt confident in and relieved by), and the last one reconfirmed the diagnosis of PCOS and put Nan on hormones that would lessen their testosterone. Even though Nan felt most comfortable with the intersex diagnosis, it was the PCOS diagnosis that won out and despite their reluctance to become more of a girl, Nan was put on estrogen anyway. After being hospitalized for depression and diagnosed as gender dysphoric, Nan was introduced to testosterone. However, in order to continue receiving the hormone they had to go through the process of explaining everything about themself. “Even today, right here, I struggle talking about how I feel. I’m trying to be comfortable about myself” (p. 143). Being intersex, Nan had to work hard to find a proper path to the drugs that they needed. What does, “A marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, of at least 6 months’ duration” (DSM V, 2013,

p. 241)? mean when doctors do not agree on your biological sex Nan's story is one that complicates the DSM V diagnosis pattern. Their hard work to get hormones was fruitful but was also lucky – it was only upon their hospitalization and depression that they were even able to start creating their own medical pathway.

Homonormativity

Lisa Duggan (2003) details how neoliberal economic policies since the 1980s have had drastic effects on altering and dismantling overt public life and reconfiguring queer spaces. Duggan asserts that when neoliberal agendas were widely accepted by both conservative and liberal politicians, economic policy was separated from policy relating to social issues. This left very little room for the critique of corporatization and the dismantling of public services since fighting for a difference in social life could not mean restructuring the economy. As wealth continued to shift upward and create a massive income gap, de-democratization ensued and slashed the opportunities for grassroots movements to thrive. Policing tactics became even more pronounced as protesters met increased force while demonstrating. Most of the financial burdens were placed on the most vulnerable individuals who, according to the US government, would have to take the initiative to solve issues of inequality themselves. Those who were still invested in lesbian and gay politics and who still wanted to participate in political projects retuned their strategies to fit within corporate frameworks. Lesbian and gay middle of the road activists began utilizing neoliberal logics and catered their activism to privatized domestic gains and corporate funding. She terms this homonormativity, or neoliberal gay and lesbian politics. It is anchored in projects of corporate sponsorship, private privileges, marriage and military involvement and produces a respectable platform complementary to heteronormative functioning, patriotic duties and consumer practices. While these may have been circulated as positive gains, they also created new violence and differentiation within gay and lesbian communities across the country.

Three years before homonormativity was coined by Duggan, the aforementioned queer youth, Amy Sonnie (2000), was creating a very similar critique. She declares, "This system makes possible a society that packages queer identities with rainbow ribbons and sells them to the highest bidder. A society in which Pride has been commoditized" (p. xvii). Furthermore, Anna Agathangelou, Daniel Bassichis and Tamara L. Spira (2008) argue that investments in homonormative actions bolster the prison industrial complex, reinvigorate empire and create a political terrain where white gays and lesbians benefit from the marginalization of queer and trans people of color. Their provocative statements about death and carnage compel us to rethink the joys neoliberal political gains bring along with the structured killings of marginalized people. At a time when queer people of color are disproportionately imprisoned or killed, the authors call for queer justice that encompasses a move towards joining prison abolition movements and questioning economies of desire and affect. Fourteen years prior to their work, a contributor to *Growing Up Gay/Growing Up Lesbian: A Literary Anthology* by the name of Dennis (1994) discussed the prevalent racialized tendencies of the gay scene in the 1990s. He states, "I think there are a lot of gay images that emphasize the whiteness, the blue-eyedness, the blondness" (p. 15). This overarching image of the person who can be an icon for gayness prevails today and enhances the distinction of those who can get rights and access to safety and those who cannot.

What is particularly concerning about this movement in gay and lesbian politics is its impact on queer and trans youth. As Rob Cover (2013) reminds us, the expectations that homonormativity creates makes it almost impossible for queer and trans youth to adequately mimic and grow into the pre-packaged "codes of queer identity" (p. 340). It also excludes those who would be “unable to achieve a full sense of participation and belonging because they do not or cannot fulfill the racial, ethnic, or body-type criteria” (p. 340). Not to mention, most rights that are secured (marriage, access to the military, employment protections, etc.) have little to no immediate impact on their lives. Since queer and trans youth cannot use these institutions as leverage, there is an “increased gap between the ‘queer haves’ and the younger ‘queer have-nots’” (p. 340).

This disparaging political agenda can be best exemplified by looking at the political gains of white, wealthy lesbian and gay adults in New York City and the increasingly criminalized queer and trans youth of color who occupy the same space. Martin Manalansan’s (2005) work describes how homonormativity has “redrawn boundaries, neighborhoods and lives” (p.141) in the post-9/11 city. By eliding lines of class and race, New York City cosmopolitan queers, largely white and men, rearticulated their identity in terms of consumptive practices – “to be gay is to wear Prada” (p.143). While being surveyed and policed by their own gay peers, queers of color faced increased violence by the state as their bodies became suspect under the guise of having terrorist potential. This was particularly noticeable at the Christopher Street piers, once home to queer and trans youth of color, the piers were taken over by high rises and white, gay, male neighborhood watchers who prevented youth from using the space at night by kicking them out of the neighborhood or calling the cops.

In response to the violence committed against them, queer and trans youth of color began organizing against the gentrification and policing efforts of homonormative gays and lesbians. They created a group called FIERCE! (Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment). Megan Davidson’s (2008) ethnography of the group discusses how they held a public awards ceremony satirically handing out awards to those who were most at fault for spearheading the push to get queer and trans youth of color out of “gay-friendly” NYC villages.

She documents their chants marching down to the Christopher Street Piers, “We’re here, we’re queer, give us back our fucking pier” (p. 244). They see the piers as the only space where they may find community and avoid police. FIERCE!’s politics are deeply intersectional – they focus on the interlocking oppressions of race, class, age and gender. Because of this complex focus, the cries of queer and trans youth were not heard. In fact, in response to queer and trans youth not “listening,” the residents decided to increase “police patrolling and vigilante tactics” (p. 249). Some residents overtly racialized their opposition to queer and trans youth of color by exclaiming that their neighborhood was becoming “gang like” and that the queer and trans youth were not like them (p. 249). Thus, while adults were pulling on the strings of the state, FIERCE! was focused on the well-being of the most vulnerable and thus did not have access to the same state protections. By keeping the movement as one that is lead for and by youth and unwilling to be coopted by corporate sponsorship, FIERCE! continues to fight against homonormative codes of ethics.

New York City is not the only location where queer and trans youth are calling homonormativity into question. The queer and trans youth collectives in Asheville, NC are also defying politics as usual by framing their politics within the discourse of anarchism. Neal Ritchie’s (2008) work with queer and trans activist groups reveals that the collectives believe that, “there is absolutely nothing conceivably ‘queer’ about electoral politics, corporate power or marriage. Especially among service sector-class queer youth, we find ourselves consistently stuck between the alienation of our everyday lives and the complete irrelevance of reformist and national LGBT politics” (p. 265). Anarchism, which revolves around the belief that an anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist political platform are the only ways to promote change, fits well with their notions of queerness and gender bending, their focus on Do-It-Yourself culture and their love for punk rock. The non-hierarchical environment of punk rock is one where stage and audience blend, no payment is required for attendance, bodies are in constant contact and the conventions of popularized music are broken. Here queer and trans youth are finding ways to associate with one another that do not require representative politics and that rework the configurations of capital.

Finally, queer youth have also been engaging with online platforms that reach a larger audience and that showcase their criticism of politics as usual. James Shelton (2008) explores the online queer youth space of Turned Up Volume (TUV) describing it as a creative arena that creates a space where queer youth can understand their unique qualities and what they may be up against in the world. In one youth's work they created a satirical cartoon that encouraged gay boys to conform – noting that they have three categories to choose from "standard gay boy, flamer boy, and Abercrombie boy" (p. 77). They ended their piece by explaining dos ("keep up with the latest trends") and don'ts ("talk to ugly people") (p.77). In this scathing critique of highly visible mainstream gay culture, this queer youth participant found a route to empowerment through re-telling and showcasing the violent narratives that surround queer youth who do not or cannot conform to the representations they see on screen. Shelton also notes the confidence that queer youth have built over time through self-expression and that the online space gives them a means to create alternative communities.

Education

School curriculum consistently promotes heteronormative and homonormative standards. From a young age, children are taught about adult sexuality and gender identity in ways that are future-oriented. They are told that when they are old enough they will be able to explore these adult ideas. To be sexual beings in the present is virtually out of the question. Whether they are told heteronormative fairy tales (Lester, 2007) or homonormative children's stories that focus on marriage, family and gender normative characters (Taylor, 2012), children are not given access to the multiple lives they can lead in the moment. As teenagers are given access to Young Adult (YA) fiction, they encounter even more heteronormative stereotypes and often do not see themselves in the text. As Antero Garcia (2013) argues, “unless you are white, traditionally beautiful and heterosexual, you’re not going to be getting a lot of mileage as a female in YA books at the moment” (p. 77). The lesbian and gay YA novels that do exist also have the tendency to promote homonormative ideals. Many of them portray gay and lesbian characters that do not contest homophobic assumptions, in fact sometimes they reassert them. While some have the ability to push boundaries such as positing gay youth as sexual beings, most reassert the norm (Wickens, 2011).

Schools have been coopted by neoliberal impulses of standardization and policies like No Child Left Behind. The same economic policies that drive homonormativity are the ones that have systematically made schools uninhabitable to queer and trans youth of color. High stakes testing has restructured curriculum and severely cut the amount of time teachers are allowed to engage students as critical, unique and independent thinkers. As Jonathan Grady (2012) describes, “queer youth of color are not allowed to think. If they are not allowed to think, then essentially they are proscribed from exerting protagonist power in and on the world around them or even to exist as queer” (p. 989). Neoliberalism leaves them with the question: “How do I survive on my own” (p. 989)?

While curricula and national policies are one way to understand the struggles of queer and trans youth, statistics are often used as another way to analyze the experience of queer and trans youth in schools. A highly cited source, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2013) surveys students across the country to determine what queer and trans youth are facing. Some of their studies indicate that LGBT youth experience, “higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation" and have "lower grade point averages (GPAs) than students who were less often harassed" (p. 47). Gender non-conforming students are less likely to plan to go to college than their gender conforming peers and report that they experience lower self-esteem as a result of discrimination. According to the Williams Institute (2015), a research facility dedicated to understanding gender identity, sexual orientation and public policy, "40% of the homeless youth served by agencies identify as LGBT: 43% of clients served by drop-in centers identified as LGBT, 30% of street outreach clients identified as LGBT, 30% of clients utilizing housing programs identified as LGBT" (p. 41). Accordingly, the students in the GLSEN survey that reported living in less stable housing also reported, "poorer educational outcomes, including lower GPAs and lower educational aspirations" (p.47). The Center for Disease Control (2011) data indicates that LGB youth are four times more likely and questioning youth three times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. Here in Madison, the Dane County Youth Assessment (DCYA) (2012) shows that 1.2% of cisgender youth often thought about suicide compared to 25.4% of trans youth.

These statistics are staggering and have been used to inform policies that have encouraged schools to implement anti-bullying policies and promote the creation of Gay Straight Alliances (Mayo, 2014). However, these statistics do not tell the entire story. In fact, they can grossly misrepresent populations of people. Joseph P. Robinson-Cimpian's (2014) reading of the DCYA's 2012 data complicates the links between suicidal ideation and trans youth. Looking through the data, Robinson-Cimpian eliminated what he calls "mischievous responders," or responders that reported three or more low frequency responses out of ten selected survey questions. For example, those who identified themselves as transgender and also indicated that they had two or more children, were in a gang and were blind would be eliminated from the pool. Once he eliminated these outliers from the dataset and recalculated the results he found that suicidal ideation was the same at 0.8% for both cisgender and transgender students. This revelation is meant in no way to undercut the issues with suicide that are prevalent in schools. However, what Robinson-Cimpian's work does is create pause – should self-reported survey statistics be taken at face value to inform our understanding of queer and trans youth? Does a staggering statistic that indicates transgender students are suicidal, even if accurate, paint a picture of trans youth that is sufficiently complex? Does the simple implementation of a GSA guarantee improved statistics for all LGBT youth? As Susan Driver (2008) reminds us, statistics that always illustrate queer and trans youth as "at-risk" and as victims does little to showcase what they are doing against all odds to combat heteronormativity and homonormativity in schools. They also do not give us comprehensive plans that look deeply at how to create effective GSAs and what students are doing to become agents of change.

Productive Spaces of Engagement for Queer and Trans Youth

There are times when school-sanctioned activities can allow for a space that facilitates imperfect yet necessary conversations around being queer, trans and youth. After three years of working with an LGBTQA youth and adult book group, Mollie Blackburn (2011) notes that the conversations that took place were never solely libratory or oppressive. Instead, they teetered from one side to the other carrying with them components of each. For example, one participant who was labeled as an ally in the group voiced that she had to explain to other people who asked her about her participation that she was not a lesbian and that she was there as a supporter. This discourse posited her as somehow above LGBTQ people, working as their helper. In another situation an adult mentor commented on how she was excited the gay character in a book was not so flamboyant. She felt that this was a more palatable representation than having a gender non-normative gay character. A youth member showcased his concern with her remark. As a gay youth who did not participate in hyper-masculinity, he felt that too many gay novels featured jock-like characters that did not embody his own sense of self. There were also harmful discussions that consistently renewed the idea that all LGBTQ people are the same, normal or just like you and me. The erasure of difference during these moments homogenized the LGBTQ community and tended to overlook the complexities of being queer and trans. While these moments were setbacks, others proved to push boundaries for both the adults and youth in positive ways. Discussions around sex, pleasure and desire that surfaced forced the adults to begin having open conversations with youth. While these were uncomfortable, they also proved to be fruitful and led to moments where the boundaries around queer sex were broken.

GSAs can also be productive spaces of engagement. Especially for those GSAs that are strategic and work to change political campaigns that are not effective in their specific school context. For example, Susan W. Woolley's (2014) work with queer and trans youth at MacArthur High School details how they reworked the contours of GLSEN's Day of Silence. After participating in the activity of being silent all day to bring "attention to anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying and harassment in schools," one youth noted that she was followed around and called a "faggot" (GLSEN, 2015). When she told her teachers they did not believe her. The GSA then decided that such practices like the Day of Silence were simply not effective. They restructured the day noting that if students participating in the activity are called names, they should feel free to speak back. They also decided to do a "Day of Loud" or "Day of Pride" (p. 336). In order to have more people in the school understand their cause they created panels and learning environments that led up to the Day of Silence in order to educate their peers and teachers on the importance of the day. While these actions showcase the resilience of queer and trans youth and the usefulness of a GSA, they also expose the fact that teachers and administrators are relying on the most vulnerable population to do their own bidding.

The Limits of School-Sanctioned Activities

Not all GSAs and school-sanctioned activities have the best reputation or policies when it comes to benefitting all queer and trans youth. Nat, the aforementioned participant in Kuklin's (2014) study relayed their experience with the GSA at their school,

> In my sophomore year, I tried going to a GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) meeting. It turned out to be mostly a hook up scene. I thought the Gay-Straight Alliance would be gay people and straight people trying to understand each other. No. It was mostly gay people and people who said they're bisexual talking about sex. I saw it as complete bullshit. I was disappointed. I held my anger inside and pretended I was okay about school. (Kuklin, 2014, p. 136).

Along with Nat's disdain for a club that did not provide them with a space to think about and through queer and trans issues, Catherine Connell (2015) describes the presence of racism in a GSA at a school in Austin, Texas. She begins one of her chapters by relaying a conversation that a completely white GSA conducted around setting up social events with neighboring schools. When student participants found out that GSAs from schools that were predominately Black and Latinx were going to come to their mixer, many were taken aback. The overwhelming thought was that the intersections of queer or trans identities were not even possible in communities of color who had been labeled as homophobic. Connell states, "They were surprised that progay organizations like GSAs existed in poor communities of color, revealing their privileged assumption that the opportunity to be openly LGBT in high school was restricted to schools like theirs" (p. 155). Furthermore, their discourse further entrenched the belief that, "identifying as

Black and Latino precludes identifying as gay. (p. 152). GSAs continue to struggle with creating space that is welcoming for all queer and trans youth who come to the table with complex identities.

Considering that not all queer and trans youth find solace in school-sanctioned activities, Blackburn (2004) encourages us to see that many who do not follow school rules are still participating in agential actions. Blackburn's article details three youth who exercised agency and fought against homophobia in their schools. While one was able to do this in a way that fit within standard methods of communicating with teachers, staff and students in schools, the other two had different reactions. After facing discrimination at school, one student decided to quit his junior year. He took some time off and joined a queer and trans youth group called the Attic. After giving himself the time that he needed, he returned to graduate the following year. Both decisions, to leave (unsanctioned) and come back (sanctioned), were critical to his survival and well-being. The last youth in Blackburn's study, a Black male-to-female trans student, left school after decades of mistreatment. Her decision to leave, even though it was not legal, was essential for her survival. Instead of school she chose to spend time studying for the GED exam in the library where she would not have to go through the hell of homophobic remarks. Along with the stories detailed by Blackburn, Maisha Winn's (2011) portrayal of Nia, a black stud who participated in a youth-focused theater company called Girl Time, echoes a similar story. Her courage against homophobia does not fit the norm of sticking up for oneself. After a female romantic interest's brother targeted Nia and accused her of making his sister gay, the school interrogated both students after a confrontation and criminalized Nia. Winn explains,

> While Nia's recounting of this confrontation with her romantic interest's brother could have been a case of homophobic bullying, the school's response could also

> have been cloaked in homophobia. Once the security team (all male) intervened, they accepted Nia's attacker's story and proceeded to search Nia. (Winn, 2011, p. 74).

Nia's actions, as they were mitigated by her race and sexuality, did not register as agential. Instead, they registered as criminal. At the same time, Nia's attacker was shaped as the victim, further upholding heteronormative standards that are prevalent in schools. What these four youth teach us is that agency may look different, sound different and can be read as defiant according to school codes, policies and procedures when queer and trans youth are attempting to assert themselves. When schools are not safe places in the first place or do not welcome and support queer and trans youth, then simply implementing a GSA and telling students to attend will not necessarily help.

Still, scholars, teachers and youth are all making commitments to changing the landscape of schools and scholarship. In Alyssa D. Niccolini's (2014) piece she describes how students are combatting the normative curriculum of schools by infiltrating classrooms with Zane books – erotica that is popular among teen girls of color. The books do not contain the classic romantic nexus of white, heterosexual, romantic interests. Zane books provide daring depictions that pale in comparison to Toni Morrison's sex scenes, but still offer students queer potentials to draw from. For example, students like Drew who identifies outside of gender norms, detailed how the books are not for boys but they are for someone like him. For Drew, they opened up a site where he connected with ways of being that are outside of hegemonic masculinity. Niccolini also discusses her own infatuation with Zane. The presence of *Purple Panties* (Zane, 2008), a black lesbian novel, seduces Niccolini and she cannot help but be tempted by its cover and attracted by its shine. What these books present for teacher and student is a rethinking of what counts as curriculum and what counts as learning goals.

Jackie Regales (2008) describes her work with transgender youth zine writers who are “writing themselves into the theoretical discourse dominated by academic writers” (p. 87). The youth who participate are strictly anti-corporate and push against standardized codes of curriculum. They want to be able to define themselves in ways that do not tear their bodies into subsections or fragment their identities. They also refuse to be research subjects who will be used and abused by theoreticians who do not allow them to speak for themselves. Regales writes, “like thousands of young people, the writers of these zines are invested in discovering who they are, who they have been, and who they want to become, and in figuring out how to reconcile those points in time and in their own histories” (p. 87).

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

Instead of using methodological approaches that seek to quantify or contain queer and transgender youth, this research will push beyond the confines of teleological coming out narratives, psychosocial Gender Dysphoria diagnoses and homonormative political impulses that elide lines of race, class and age. As such, this research aims to follow in line with scholars who position queer and trans youth as organic intellectuals while contextualizing their subjectivities within the larger political economy (Blackburn, 2011; Winn, 2011; Connell, 2015). Using the methodology of life histories research (LHR), I will engage with queer and transgender youth in the project of creating their own life histories. This study will showcase the contradictory and complex worlds of queer and trans youth and the subjectivities, political platforms, and communities they work hard to create. As such, it is meant to generate a space of contact between educators and allies who are committed to working alongside queer and trans youth.

Research Questions

This work seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What issues and ideas do the life histories of queer and trans youth invite educators to explore?
2. What does this work compel us to (re)consider when thinking through pedagogical practices?

Epistemological and Theoretical Underpinnings

How does one conduct poststructuralist research that aims to question the categories within which we operate while still using those categories, however lenient they may be, to begin thinking about the lives of queer and transgender youth? This question has troubled many feminist, trans and queer scholars who feel torn between the push to make social change by acknowledging and affirming the existence of those typically erased while knowing that the politics of representation often come with exclusionary political parameters. This is especially true in the face of neoliberal political impulses like homonormativity which counts on the simple commodification of identity in order to inform marginalizing and complicit social movements. But what if we thought of these categories as mere starting points? What kind of thinking would that require? Heeding Ahmed's (2006) call to disengage with the politics of "finding a queer line" (p. 171) and instead working toward an ever evolving queer, transgender and feminist praxis, this work gives up on the project of giving voice and gives in to the process of "getting lost" (Lather, 2007, p. 171).

In order to inform this research, I turn to Rey Chow (1993) and Patti Lather (2007) who encourage us to rethink how we form, understand and know a subject. Chow's work specifically warns against trying to simply reconstruct our research subjects in ways that we think are authentic. While many believe this work to be "better" in the sense that it forwards a "truer" image of the subject, it simultaneously creates the same modernist trap - it still gives ultimate authority to the researcher's vision of who a subject is or should be. She urges us to start at the understanding that the colonized subject is "not the defiled image and not not the defiled image" (54). This is not to deny violence that has been done by the researcher's gaze, but instead denies both parties rights to solidified representations. It also means that the subject of research may still engage with hegemonic narratives or even counter narratives that continue to draw from hegemonic narratives. All of this may be present in the research and is what makes up subjectivities. When we give up on projects of authority and voice, research retunes itself and the researcher must engage with what Lather refers to as "getting lost" or conducting research that implicates the researcher and crafts itself along the way without a discreet subject at the center. She notes that for researchers, "perhaps a transvaluation of praxis means to find ways to participate in the struggle of these forces as we move toward a future that is unforeseeable from the perspective of what is given or even conceivable within our present conceptual frameworks" (107). This means giving up the authority to dictate what a social movement is, who the actors are, what needs to be done and who should and should not be involved.

In Lather's work she accomplishes this by first mixing modes of representation so that no single perspective is ever fully dominant - researcher, research participants, scientific literature or political context. She also urges researchers to offer participants time and space to lodge their understanding of what is being presented, how they feel about it and what needs to be altered before publishing. Finally, her work suggests that researchers leave grounds to be explored and work to be accomplished. This future-oriented shift in thinking through research disregards the modernist project of creating a subject and informs the idea that this research is not about pinning down issues with queer and transgender youth. LHR is a uniquely positioned methodology that allows for creating a platform where queer and transgender youth stories can act as a springboard for thinking about multiple messages and calls to action simultaneously.

Crafting Life Histories

> Ask a roomful of life history researchers what life history research is about and you are likely to get a roomful of diverse responses, all loosely connected to a central epistemological construct illuminating the intersection of human experience and social context." (Cole and Knowles, 2001, p.9)

As Cole and Knowles explain above, LHR is a research methodology that is flexible in its formation and implementation but that revolves around trying to understand how the subject and context inform one another. It broadens the scope of narrative research, which limits its analysis to individual experiences, in the service of a larger historical project that seeks to understand the present through a research participant's life story. At the same time, it also uses this information to think about the future. As William Tierney (2000) reminds us, "The relationships between postmodernism and life history affords authors and readers critical insights into not so much the dead past as the developing future" (p. 538). Tierney's non-teleological way of thinking is one reason why LHR is a compelling methodological approach for showcasing the lives, desires and yearnings of queer and transgender youth. Since both queer and transgender theory push against developmental models, LHR affords research participants the chance to play with time and memory in untidy ways as the goal is not to underline an ordered cause and effect but instead to understand the interplay of power and potential.

While LHR can be conducted in varying ways, I created a methodology that incorporates the work of LHR researchers alongside the tenants of feminist theory and queer history historians. My methodology centralizes dialogic interviews. This technique affords the research participant agency in how the interview is conducted and allows for a more fluid exchange of ideas that is not confined by question/answer routines. Through this dialogic exchange, I also integrated a discussion of youth artifacts. This multimodal focus intertwines aspects of youth life like social media pages, art and music. Artifact discussions were woven throughout the interview in order to create a rich idea of the contextual world that youth live in. In my questioning techniques, I combined classic tenants of feminist theory with LHR scholarship as a way to foreground a reworking of memory that calls attention to the discursive production of subjectivities and violences. Finally, as many LHR scholars suggest, I chose to forgo a strict protocol for showcasing the research in favor of creative modes of representation.

The process of getting to know and write about a research participant in LHR requires an open-ended interviewing technique. As Elliot Mischler (2004) explains, the “interview is a dialogic process, a complex sequence of exchanges through which interviewer and interviewee negotiate at some degree of agreement what they will talk about and how” (p. 84). Through this semi-structured interview, there is often a loose framework that is proposed by the researcher and then reworked by the research participant. In many projects, this means giving an outline of the larger thematic picture that the researcher would like to cover and then asking the research participant if there are pieces missing or if they would like to add other areas to explore in order to adequately showcase their life history (Cole and Knowles, 2001). It also means being open to personal questions posed by the research participant to the researcher. Since the interview is open-ended, this means that the researcher’s questions along with the research participant’s questions are just as important as the research participant’s and researcher’s answers and as such, the entire interview is part of the data (Mischler, 2004).

I opened up each interview with the research participants by explaining that their stories were going to be used to change the field of education. I also gave them different topics that they could explore like sexuality, sex, race and gender and then asked if they thought they wanted to add anything to the list. Most did not take me up on the offer but in their discussion of their life were quick to meander into what they thought was important and interesting. For example, one of my interview questions revolved around choice in clothing. As fashion is political in that it is gendered, raced, classed and sexualized in different ways, it was something that brought up key pieces of data that helped me to understand the youth as political actors. When I asked Sam about their choice in clothing they relayed that they loved their Pokémon shirt, even though no one ever saw it because they often wore a sweater over it. This was a meaningful comment in and of itself because it signaled a pleasure in clothing selection that was all about Sam and not about the interaction of Sam and their peers. I could have then followed up with another question but after talking about the shirt, Sam went on for at least ten minutes discussing the complexity of Pokémon (different characters, plot lines, etc.) and I became enthralled at the world that they were describing. About halfway through they said,

> **Sam:** I feel like I'm wasting your time.
>
> **Bess:** You're not. I'm fascinated by this.
>
> **Sam:** Are you actually interested?
>
> **Bess:** I am. I'm just…
>
> **Sam:** It's really cool.

It was at this moment that I could have steered the interview away from Pokémon so that we could get back to fashion choices. However, I could tell that Sam really wanted to talk about Pokémon and I knew that if it bared significance to Sam then it was still essential data. Looking back at this data and noting that my responses are also part of the data, it was also an important time for me to reflect on my interviewing technique. I do not remember what I looked like while Sam was talking but it must not have been good since they relayed that they felt like they were "wasting my time." Perhaps my body language did not signal my genuine interest. What is also present in this discussion is the moment where what feels like a conversation quickly turns back to what it really is – an interview. This power differential was ever present and in the conversation above, the distinction between researcher and research participant became strikingly clear. This is not escapable and is why LHR necessitates researcher reflexivity.

Since Sam said that Pokémon was "really cool" I could feel that they wanted to say more and asked that they continue, another power move on my part. This shifted to a discussion of the

Pokémon game on their Nintendo DS, another object that they took with them everywhere, including school. In fact, they relayed that because the school does not have wifi they could only run their character around in a circle so that their Pokémon eggs would hatch. They explain:

> **Sam:** It's just in the game, it's in-game steps, not real life steps.
>
> **Bess:** I know that…
>
> **Sam:** Trust me, if it was real life steps, I would not be…
>
> **Bess:** Running around with eggs in your pockets…
>
> **Sam:** No.
>
> **Bess:** Right.
>
> **Sam:** So, like, you can only carry six Pokémon at a time and you have to have an actual Pokémon, you can't just carry six eggs with you. So, I'll carry, like, my Jolteon and then five eggs.
>
> **Bess:** Right.
>
> **Sam:** And I'll run in a circle for, like, an entire class period and just hatch all the eggs.
>
> **Bess:** That's… That's fascinating.
>
> **Sam:** Sometimes I'll hand my DS to somebody else, I'll be, like, "Can you run in circle for me while I write this down?" That's… That's just what I do. I like it.

Once again, the question that started out about fashion turned into something equally important. In this discussion, Sam reveals how their DS mitigates school and becomes an important feature in their daily lives. It also acts as a metaphor for how boring school can be. That you would choose to run around in a circle to hatch your eggs instead of engage in classwork is telling.

Ultimately, it is the dialogic focus of the interview that allowed us to get to this point and to reveal a complex picture of the ways in which Sam fashions themselves at school – both in dress and in feelings toward curriculum.

Along with interviews, artifacts, like the Nintendo DS above, can serve as a starting point to begin thinking about the research participant's life history. Toys from childhood, Facebook profiles and even homework assignments all produced ways to recollect interesting moments in the research participant's life. I also broadened the larger contextual environment of the research participants by including discussions around pivotal historical moments, references to popular culture and political contexts in order to situate the research participant's life stories (Cole and Knowles, 2001).

In all of my interviews we consistently went back to what artifacts filled the research participants' lives at each moment. We talked about the music they were listening to, the artwork they created and all of the literate work they engaged with like books, fan fiction and youth-created media. We also created artifacts in each of the interviews as they drew different time periods of their lives and then narrated their drawings. The artifacts magnified how participants saw themselves. During our interviews, the emotional registers of participants ebbed and flowed as they gushed over the meaning and impact objects had on their lives and subjectivities.

By broadening the contextual environment of the interviews I was also able to see how politics and media influenced the research participants' lives. There was one moment that seriously changed the makeup of the interview data – the election of Donald Trump. Two participants, Jacob and Draco, did all of their interviews in September and October of 2016 over the course of a few weeks. They were out of high school and so had more flexibility in how they wanted to schedule their time. There was no mention of the sitting president, Barack Obama. However, in the interviews I did with Harper, Sam and Jay, Trump was the great modifier. Conducted over a longer course of time, the interviews spanned from September 2016 to May 2017. Harper described how their recent dating life was momentarily interrupted when a potential romantic interest joked that he was glad Trump was elected. Harper elucidated that in that moment, they felt incredibly unsafe and immediately thought about how they were going to escape the situation. Sam relayed that one of their friends, the only other gay person at school who they mentioned consistently, told them that they were going to vote for Trump. This became a point of contention and ultimately Sam lost faith in this particular individual's ability to understand that voting for Trump meant voting against Sam. It simultaneously situated privilege in the LGBT community where white, cisgender, gay men could vote for Trump without feeling as though their bodies or rights would be impacted. Jay described the day after the election as painful and that him and his schoolmates commiserated and could not focus on school work. All of these stories were linked by the same political context and allowed for a deeper understanding of how the discourse of Trump circulates through schools and lives.

While LHR calls for a deep investment in the research participant, it does not contend that the research participant is somehow outside of power or incapable of producing violence. This notion is furthered by feminist historian Joan Scott (1991) who relays that taking someone's narrative as evidence of an untampered history is fraught with modernist assumptions around truth and the enlightened subject. She states that when one narrator's story is privileged as truth, "questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside" (p. 777). In this way, LHR pushes us to understand the research participant and researcher as caught up in the "constant constructs embedded in societal and cultural forces that seek to constrain some and enable others" (Tierney, 2000, p. 538). Those that have invested time into compiling the memories and histories of queer and transgender communities have voiced similar concerns and have suggested that LHR bring up both the stories of their research participants and those whose stories are left aside. Queer history historians have argued that we must lay bare "the seams by which the story is constructed" (Kennedy and Davis, 1993, p. 25). This is not to undercut research participants' stories but to always leave room for those who cannot speak on the record.

This concept is further considered in Charlotte Linde's (2009) work on both life histories and institutional histories. She brings to the fore the question of silences and how to work them into LHR. After all, how do you find something that is not present? She concludes that there are those silences that are obvious – occlusions that are easily found by comparing stories side by side or looking through the historical records. At the same time, there are also erasures or active cover-ups that are made at an institutional level. For example, a student's story of violence in school may not make it into the official record or it may be altered. Thus, in order to perform LHR, it is crucial to continue looking for contradictions, asking questions, unearthing the power of discursive violence and bearing witness to the silent ways in which subjects are formed and reformed.

These tenets of LHR came up most strikingly when I had three competing narratives around the organization called Advancement Via Individual Determination or AVID. AVID is a support network for students in the academic middle, largely students of color, who are singled out as potential college material. Educators are trained by AVID and use the AVID curriculum to support this select group of students in doing well in school and applying for college. Sam, who participated in the group only to leave it after it felt overwhelming to them, relayed that AVID was essentially soul crushing. While AVID's website would contend otherwise, Sam vocalized a severe and compelling critique. Interestingly, at the same time I was interviewing with Sam, I was also hearing from the students I teach in the Secondary English program. They illustrated a far different vision of AVID as it helped them with things like classroom management and keeping students organized. One student teacher lamented when they found out that AVID would not be at the school where they were going to teach the next year. All of these factors were swirling in my head as I approached this data and I had to take care in spotlighting Sam while also going back to and revealing all of the other extraneous data that was impacting my understanding of Sam's life. Each discursive creation of AVID and what AVID is capable of was woven throughout the first paper, which spotlights Sam's AVID experience.

LHR encourages incorporating creative ways to showcase data. As Cole and Knowles (2006) explain, "our approach to life history research, then, is arts-informed. Such inquiry processes are organic and fluid, and the representation of the work reflects qualities of multi-dimensional lives through multiple media forms" (p.10). Thus, life histories can be composed of the interweaving of poetry, digital archives and artwork produced by the research participant or outside art that works to magnify the research participant's contributions. There are also strands of LHR researchers who encourage other researchers to treat contributions made by the research participants the same way they treat high art. This is echoed in Daniel James' (2000) treatment of the life history of Doña Maria. In one of his final chapters, he performs a critical reading of a poem created by his research participant. In his discussion of the poem, he explains that these pieces of evidence created by research participants are just as valuable and meaningful as the canonical visions of the past. This method of representation and analysis is clearly articulated in the third paper on Jay. By weaving his artwork, lyrics from his favorite music, his life history data and poetry, I both represented Jay's life and subsequently analyzed it as one would any canonical literary text. In doing so, I ultimately argued that students' life histories can stand on their own as texts with literary merit in the English Language Arts classrooms.

Finally, LHR is a reflexive and autobiographical process where what one is learning and experiencing makes its way into the research so as to showcase the parallel and divergent scripts of everyone involved. As my researcher reflexivity section reveals, coming to this work was a personal journey. Along with having a personal connection at the forefront, LHR as a research process will inevitably pull at my own life memories along with the privileges I hold both as a researcher and cisgender white woman.

Research Participants

I focused on five individuals that I met through my time as a mentor in a queer and transgender youth storytelling group. All of them identify as queer and transgender in some way. This includes identities such as genderqueer, demiboy, pansexual, greysexual, polyamorous, and other innovative terms. I have worked with these individuals since March of 2015 and believe them to be youth activists who are committed to changing the world around them. They are between the ages of 15 and 19. Throughout my time with them, I have been struck by their ideas, pushed to question my own assumptions and have changed as a result. I have often left our time together thinking that others need to hear their stories. Most importantly, they are the youth that I have seen pushed aside. Whether in our storytelling group, at school or online, each youth participant struggled at some point with acceptance. This understanding of their social contexts, which I was only able to ascertain by knowing them well, positions them as those that we need to hear from most.

Data Collection Procedures and Methods

All of the data collection procedures fall in line with the goals of LHR research; they are intended to evoke multidimensional life histories that take into account the multivalent contextual parameters of queer and transgender youth lives. All interviews were one to two hours each for a total of up to nine hours of time for each youth. I paid each participant $15.00 an hour in order to compensate for their time. While the interviews were constructed around different time periods (childhood, adolescence, etc.), I did not stop research participants from meandering into other times of their lives or to tangentially relate different moments. The timeframe simply served as a starting point.

Data Collection For Life Histories With Research participants	
1st Interview: Plan of action for future interviews and negotiation of research and General Questionnaire Appendix A	In this interview I presented the research participant with a loose framework and goal for the project and then we negotiated how the project should form together. Then we went through a basic questionnaire that focused on the research participant's demographic background and a broad understanding of the research participant's life.
2nd Interview: Childhood Questionnaire Appendix B	In this interview the research participant was prompted to think through and about their childhood by drawing a picture, listening to music of their choice (from that time or another) and subsequently narrating their drawings as a way to get them thinking about their life histories. In order to play with time and space, I asked them to interface with artifacts that they brought to represent that time period. We then looked at their social media presence at the time, along with any other music, books or popular culture from past and present that informed their understanding of their childhood. I took a picture of the artifacts and drawings as long as they did not have any identifying information on them. For social media I had them narrate the page and then redacted any identifying information from the interview transcripts.
3rd Interview: Adolescence Questionnaire Appendix C	In this interview the research participant was prompted to think through and about their adolescence by drawing a picture, listening to music of their choice (from that time or another) and subsequently narrating their drawings as a way to get them

	thinking about their life histories. In order to play with time and space, I asked them to interface with artifacts that they brought to represent that time period. We then looked at their social media presence at the time, along with any other music, books or popular culture from past and present that informed their understanding of their adolescence. I took a picture of the artifacts and drawings as long as they did not have any identifying information on them. For social media I had them narrate the page and then redacted any identifying information from the interview transcripts.
4th Interview: Current Life Questionnaire Appendix D	In this interview the research participant was prompted to think through and about their current life by drawing a picture, listening to music of their choice (from that time or another) and subsequently narrating their drawings as a way to get them thinking about their life histories. In order to play with time and space, I asked them to interface with artifacts that they brought to represent that time period. We then looked at their social media presence at the time, along with any other music, books or popular culture from past and present that informed their understanding of their current life. I took a picture of the artifacts and drawings as long as they did not have any identifying information on them. For social media I had them narrate the page and then redacted any identifying information from the interview transcripts.
5th Interview: Piecing together the data Appendix I	In this interview the research participant had the opportunity to read through their transcripts, re-explain or re-examine any part they think is important. They had the opportunity to let me know what parts of their life history connect with one another. For example, if something from their childhood resonated with them in the present moment or if they discussed something from their adolescence that reminded them of another time, they were able to express that. They were also able to lay out the data, which included the pictures that I took, the way that they saw fit and created a display that showcased their life history. I took a picture of this display.

Data Analysis

> In poststructuralist terms, the 'crisis of representation' is not the end of representation, but the end of pure presence. Derrida's point regarding the 'inescapability of representation' shifts responsibility from representing things in themselves to representing the web of 'structure, sign and play' of social relations. It is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing - spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute knowledge/power. (Lather, 2007, p. 119)

Data analysis for this project occurred in three phases. The first phase of data analysis centered around my first research question: What issues and ideas do the life histories of queer and trans youth invite educators to explore? This process entailed piecing together and juxtaposing evidence of each life story presented by the research participants in the study. This required me to go back and look at the final interview with the research participant where they highlighted the most important moments of their life histories. I did this first because it allowed the research participant the first say in what should be most important in the representation of their lives. Then, I went back and added in other events that seemed particularly poignant or compelling. Most of these were moments that the youth brought up again and again. Around each of those stories, I created a web of data that interacted with or spoke to the telling of the event. This meant cutting and pasting together the transcripts from interviews, contextual data, photos of artifacts, my own thoughts, lyrics from the songs that they chose and screen shots from their digital lives. This web facilitated a picture of the data where both salient notions of their lives and contradictory notions of their lives came into play and was juxtaposed against one another. By overlaying the data so that pieces came into conversation with one another, I was better able to analyze the complexities embedded in the research participant's life history.

I then used a Foucauldian framework and queer reading strategies to do a preliminary reading of the life histories. I analyzed the discursive social relations that undergird queer and transgender youth life histories by utilizing the process delineated below:

1. Map out the multiple subjectivities that are incited into discourse throughout the research participant’s telling of their life history paying careful attention to how they are brought to life through the language of the research participant.
2. Code for the local and communal forces that are at play in the research participant’s life history (school, social media, friends, doctors, teachers, etc.) and what forms of knowledge/power they bring with them.
3. Explore how discourse is used to help enact current power/knowledge epistemologies.
4. Examine how discourse is taken up in order to intervene in confrontation, smooth out contradictory notions or rupture the current episteme.

To expand this reading, I also employed Gayatri Gopinath’s (2005) queer reading practices in order to push the analysis further and shake out possible queer and transgender futures, disparate connections between research participants and compelling ideas that lingered from the life histories gathered. Gopinath describes her queer reading practices as those that allow for the pushing and pulling of what are considered normative formations that bear with them the traces of queer subjects and forgotten practices. Gopinath does this by wrenching "particular scenes and moments out of context” and extending them “further than they would want to go" (p. 22). This practice leads to potential rearrangements of desire that do not get usurped by normative and nationalist goals and may provide a different way of seeing and understanding the potentials embedded in the life histories presented. I mirrored this process by focusing in on ideas or concepts that appeared simple (friendships, school life, home life) and pulled out of them the non-normative and pleasurable set ups that the youth had reimagined for themselves. This gave me an idea of the ruptural or subversive potentials that were lying in plain sight.

Having this preliminary reading, I then turned to three unique calls for papers or proposals to guide my thinking. Using this process, I hoped to both further answer my first research question while grappling with answers for my second research question: What does this work compel us to (re)consider when thinking through pedagogical practices? As an interdisciplinary scholar that has a background in Gender and Women's Studies, along with experience as an English Language Arts teacher and the field of literacy studies more generally, I chose three different journals to steer the conversation in distinctive ways: *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Literacy Research: Theory, Method and Practice* and the *English Journal*.

The *Women's Studies Quarterly* proposal read as follows:

> In this issue, we invite contributors to reflect on the histories, presents, and futures of protest through a feminist lens. The current moment is often hailed as 'the age of protest,' one in which the recent women's marches, originating in the US but soon spreading globally, were seen to be a culmination. Such declarations, however, depend on a very particular notion of what counts as protest, and indeed feminist protest…We contend that popular 'age of protest' narratives risk obscuring other key moments and sites of long standing protest, particularly when led by racialized or otherwise minoritized populations…We invite our contributors to think broadly and critically about the relationship between feminism and protest as one that emerges from multiple and overlapping locations and communities, on and beyond space of 'the streets.'

This particular call was compelling to me because it forced me to think about how each youth embodied different forms of protest. As I read back through the storied data I found that all of them had to consistently figure out how to strategically fight back or play along in order to, at the very least, survive and, in other moments, to thrive. I considered what a protest won by the youth may look like – what would schools have to look like? Work places? Family? Friends? In the end I could only focus on one youth and so I chose Sam. Their story seemed to showcase the most struggle and different forms of possibility for a future less harsh.

The second journal, *Literacy Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, had a call for papers in January of 2018 where they asked those who presented at the Literacy Research Association's 67th annual conference to submit their paper for review and potential publication. The conference paper that I wrote and revised responded to this call:

> We welcome proposals for studies that bring into focus the nature and attainment of meaningful literacies. We encourage sessions examining, for instance, the intersections of literate practices and personal well-being, relational development, problem solving, or the identification of new problems of personal and social significance. How do particular theoretical perspectives and methodologies influence our sense of complexity around notions of meaningful literacies and development and their visibility? How might research be leveraged to disrupt conversations around policy, curriculum, and instruction that reduce literacy to a narrow set of measureable skills?

When I storied the data, there was one piece that I was reluctant to analyze. In each youth life history there was a lengthy discussion around the process of nonsuicidal self-injury or cutting. Youth cut for different reasons, told different stories around how their cutting habits came to be and what their scars meant to them. I was drawn to this data and scared of it at the same time as every time I talked about it, I felt as though I was endangering the well-being of the participants. This call for proposals changed that perspective as it altered my gaze. When I thought about how the body as a text can signal things like relational development or identification of new problems, the literacy practice of cutting began to take on new meanings. Using these different guidelines, I went back through the data and read it with an eye for what cutting was saying about how the youth were forming bonds, processing emotions and articulating their desires.

Finally, the *English Journal* put out the following call for papers,

> Researcher Socorro Herrera… advises teachers to intentionally integrate students' biographies as they plan lessons. Framing reading and writing assignments with learning strategies that encourage students to share aspects of their family life and their backgrounds can personalize curriculum and increase interest. The value we place on students' individual identities influences their commitment to the culture of school and their learning in our classrooms…For this issue of English Journal, the editors invite stories about instructional efforts to be intentional in creating assignments that allow students to integrate their in-school and out-of-school lives. How have you centered autobiography or biography in lessons and units? Which mentor texts have worked well to guide students in considering how their lives are connected to the goals of your language arts classroom? How have you employed personal journaling as a substantive element of your curriculum? When have you struggled to help students share aspects of their lives that may not be valued by the school culture? What has happened when you have invited students to explore their own experiences as a lived curriculum through the assignments you offer them?

While the previous calls also led me to think about pedagogical strategies, this call brought pedagogy to the forefront. It encouraged me to analyze the data and unravel what I had done with my research participants so that it could be translated to the classroom. It also allowed me to play with representation and think about how to create a multimodal literary text in the space of English Language Arts.

Study Limitations

This project does not seek to speak for all queer and transgender youth. What this project can do is facilitate connections between researchers, teachers, community members and other interested parties who seek to open up space and work with queer and transgender youth. This research cannot produce and should not be used to produce a one-size-fits-all curriculum program. After all, the life histories presented relay a very specific time, space and context. The pool of participants is small and relatively localized. However, their stories can spark curiosity and lead to curriculum that provides open and productive exploratory spaces.

I share a close bond with the youth that I have worked with and our relationship has been one of comradery. We are often, but not always, aligned politically and influence each other through the sharing of stories and information. Still, there are differences between us including but not limited to race, age and class. I come with my own critical lens and have often engaged with them in conversations around political issues where we end up on opposite ends of the spectrum. I have also been their mentor and director, which has positioned me, at times, in an authorial role. I have picked who gets what parts in the skits that they produced, blocked their scenes and helped them with characterization and acting techniques. While I chose not to be their mentor throughout the time of the study, the relationship we built inevitably affected the outcome of this research. My hope is that it works in our favor as we have a foundation of trust. However, it could also mean that they withhold certain aspects of their life because I am still the adult in the room and happen to also know their parents or guardians. This is something that I aware of throughout the interviewing process.

LHR as a methodology does favor the experience of a few individuals over the experience of many individuals. While these individuals are considered intellectuals in their own right, this does not mean that what they produce is the objective truth. It also does not mean that the youth are free from knowledge/power paradigms. Whether one is white, able-bodied, queer as opposed to trans, and/or middle class allows for access to different forms of privilege and power. It is likely that notions of hierarchy inform how the youth interpret the meaning of their lives. Still, their perspectives provide an in-depth look at fifteen to nineteen years of living on the margins within and outside of their chosen and/or given communities. Thus, this work does not aim to be objective or to reject power relations. Instead, it aims to be subjective and place power relations at the center in order to see rich and contextualized queer and trans youth life histories.

Researcher Reflexivity

In 2004, my freshman year of college, I joined a group on campus focused on anti-racism efforts. Our main prerogative was to get rid of the school's mascot, "Chief Illiniwek." I went to Board of Trustee meetings, hung up signs outside of my dorm room, leafleted and spoke at protests. I was disgusted and angered by those who did not understand how racist it was to "honor" Native Americans by celebrating a toe-touching white man adorned in regalia and face paint. I was also part of the group's anti-war section that hosted teach-ins during which Iraq War veterans and activists would come and speak out against the violence occurring abroad.

In 2007, I decided that I was not going to date cisgender men any longer. I met my partner, Amy, who I am still with today.

In 2008, I attended a group session for lesbians on campus. Accompanied by Amy and a mutual friend, we sat and listened to the core group discuss an upcoming panel during which they would answer questions from students in a 100-level social science course. They pulled practice questions from a hat and tried out different answers. The first question: “How do lesbians have sex?” One group member practiced their response and said, “Lesbian sex is like extended foreplay.” When they were finished practicing their answers, they started talking about the same-sex marriage movement. My friend and I began asking about their political agenda and why it was so normative. Why were they dependent on the approval of the masses? Why did they continue to ask permission from the law? Not to mention, why is lesbian sex “extended foreplay” exactly? Why is it defined within the framework of hetero intercourse? As I scanned the room I noted that one of the women in the group proudly donned a “Chief Illiniwek” sweater. The next day, my friend and I were called in to speak with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) center director who said we made people feel unsafe.

The same year I attended The Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Ally College Conference. I, along with others, rushed to the microphones after a speech by Eric Alva. Alva, a gay, Iraq war military veteran who lost his leg, discussed “don’t ask, don’t tell” and the war on Iraq. After listening to his speech on the war I could not help but think about the death toll. Are we not killing people abroad in the name of LGBT rights at home? Is loving a particular person something we need the military to condone? My friends and I were booed off the microphones. Turning from the microphone to walk out of the auditorium, I saw the same group of women avoiding my gaze. It became clear to me that anti-racist and anti-imperialist efforts were not part of the larger LGBT agenda and that I would have to move on.

In 2009, I began a masters in Women and Gender Studies. My focus went from zoning in on normative LGBT politics to critiquing broader neoliberal projects and the police state.

In 2011, I did the unthinkable. I got married. It was a last-minute effort made to ensure that I could join Amy in Germany on a job rotation.

In 2012, I started teaching English Language Arts in Miami, Florida. I used my Gender Studies training to teach English Literature to high school juniors and seniors. We talked sex, sexuality, gender and race. When they found out I was queer, I figured I had some sort of responsibility to queer students specifically. Even with the focus on sexuality and gender, I did not feel confident that my class was what people called a “safe space.” After all, I did have a history of being told that I was making others feel unsafe. So, I went online and to a professional development course to try and figure out what the deal was - how can I guarantee the safety of students in my classroom? I received a flyer to put up with a pink triangle. I put it up. One student asked me to explain it. I sat and stared at it for a long time. I had no clue how the poster and the guarantee of safety went hand-in-hand.

I never figured out how to create an environment that was “safe.” Plus, I did not have time. I was busy prepping students for the state exam that allowed them to graduate. I was busy worrying about the principal coming in and checking student work. I was busy trying to figure out ways to teach to the standards. I was busy.

In 2014, I began a PhD program with the hopes of working amongst scholars committed to revealing the racist and classist implications of standards-based instruction.

In 2015, while pondering ways to do this research, I found myself intrigued by a local queer youth community storytelling group. I missed teaching and thought it may be an opportunity for me to finally get an answer as to how one creates a space that is welcoming for queer youth. Before going to the storytelling group, I attended a Gay Straight Alliance meeting in a local high school classroom and witnessed mild conversations around what to do when you hear the phrase, “that’s so gay.” After this experience, I went to the queer storytelling group thinking that the youth would be relatively normative. My presumption of normativity was quickly disproven.

Some stories the youth shared were predictable and painted a picture of a homophobic, classist, transphobic, ableist and racist world. However, there were also stories about the infighting that existed in queer and transgender youth communities. These tales illustrated a divided youth community dealing with their own isms and phobias. There was also talk around how to make the storytelling group a safe space. This was often met by resistance when youth would explain that it seemed as though everything had to come with a trigger warning and thus some felt silenced if they did not follow protocol. What struck me most was the constant policing of identity where one youth would lay claim to an identity like transgender only to be met with skepticism from other transgender members of the group. At the end of each night we would join hands and appreciate one another.

The stories I heard sounded familiar - they sounded like my own. The infighting and skepticism also sounded familiar as they were arguments I had within my own queer and transgender communities. However, I had the reputation of leaving a situation where I felt that my politics were not completely aligned. In contrast, each time I came to storytelling group, everyone would return. The youth I met with each week would struggle together to confront each other and the larger world simultaneously. My stories were also from a time when I was in college as opposed to high school or junior high. The youth stories I heard showcased the influence of a burgeoning and ever-growing online community of transgender and queer youth from across the globe. While I had access to this as an undergraduate, the available platforms to inform and change one’s subjectivity online have grown immensely. My stories are also coated with my privileges as a cisgender, white woman who is now a married academic.

Most importantly, what queer youth storytelling group affirmed is that there is no simple way to create a safe or inclusive learning environment. Even when everyone is committed, the complexity of queer and transgender youths' lives do not allow for simple solutions. What their life stories can offer are possible exciting and intricate notions of what learning and creative environments can mean when a plurality of subjectivities come together. It also forces the constant (re)creation and (re)imaginings of intersectional and rich pedagogical frameworks that seek to acknowledge and fight violence while understanding that there is no outside of power.

In 2016, I officially decided that I had to return to the work on normative LGBT politics that I began in my undergraduate career and tried to leave behind. My experiences as a teacher and mentor of a queer and transgender youth storytelling group made it clear that there is work to be done and there are stories to be told.

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Imagining Otherwise: Listening to the Protests of Queer and Transgender Youth in Secondary Schools

Introduction

> School is not happiness any more. It used to be, it used to be, like, yay, alright! Time to learn! But now I'm like, why are you making me learn these things in this way only? I don't like it. It's too restricting now.

> I'm a blob flowing through space. It's me in my meat sack. That's what I call my body, it's my meat sack, basically.
>
> - Sam, 17-year-old high school student, pronouns: they, them, theirs

Above is a quote from Sam, a mixed race (black and white), gender fluid, pansexual, vegan witch who agreed to share their life history. They provide a fierce and all too familiar critique of schools. In contrast to this critique, Sam's understanding of their body goes against the rigidity of school and instead finds a way to transcend the pressures of daily life. Floating and being boundless is one way that Sam finds an alternative way of being in an era of increasing neoliberal standardization. Sam's story is like that of many secondary students whose intersectional subjectivities transcend the categorical arrangements that are valued in high school. While Sam had some promising moments in school, their overall journey was often one of disconnection. In response to a school that could not fit them, Sam engaged in various forms of protest. They critiqued, they did the bare minimum, they left "opportunities" that were soul crushing and they dared to dream of a different reality. In what follows, I will showcase the strategic interventions that Sam negotiated throughout their high school career and connect them to the wider political protests against neoliberal standardization. I will then provide a call to action that is informed by Sam’s life narrative. This call urges educators to think otherwise, an idea I relate back to black feminism and the literary genre of weird. Thinking otherwise will help to craft different conceptions of space and time so that more intimate connections are possible in schools.

Methodology

Before I began constructing life histories with my research participants, I spent a year in the field building relationships through a community program that highlighted storytelling in the LGBTQ+ community. As I listened to queer and transgender youth tell their stories, my understanding of the world continually transformed. I began taking note of the social dynamics within our group: who was left out, who was told they had incorrect views, who could not consistently attend because of time/work/access to a car and who could not participate in our year-end storytelling performance because of anxiety or other obligations? I also watched for those who were continually frustrated with their school experiences. While some in the group managed to play the game of school well, others were either ambivalent or asserted that school was not worthwhile. When our year together was over, I stayed in touch with all of the youth and then proposed to work with five youth whose stories were marginalized for the aforementioned reasons.

I chose to utilize Cole and Knowles’ (2001) life history methodology because it seeks to illustrate the “storied nature of lives” and the intricacies that are embedded in an individual’s telling of their history. At the same time, it also seeks to go “beyond the individual or the personal and places narrative accounts and interpretations within a broader context,” and as such “draws on individuals’ experiences to make broader contextual meaning” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 20). The interviews conducted with all participants were semi-structured and dialogic. Before the interviews with each participant, I explained that their life histories were going to be used to help shift our understanding of education and help educators think through what works and what doesn’t in schools, what issues queer and transgender youth face and where they may thrive or feel their full selves.

For this piece, I examined all five life histories to pick one that would be illustrative of the group in that it showcased how queer and transgender youth must navigate school in a precarious and steadfast manner in order to maintain their sense of self-worth while getting through all of the necessary content and tests. Once I selected the life history, I re-read it with an eye for moments of protest where the youth provided a relevant critique of school, where they had to figure out how to conform in order to survive and where they simply refused to move with what was expected of them. I also looked for moments that were illustrative of new and imaginative futures. What follows is a reading of these moments of protest and the call to action that they demand of educators, administrators and students.

Critiquing the Standard Student Body

Sam fosters their own sociopolitical consciousness through critique. They notice and deconstruct violent normalizing forces daily. The labor of calling out these violences is one way that Sam protests. This is especially apparent when Sam calls attention to the act of walking up stairs and how it metaphorically encapsulates all that is wrong with standardization, structure and student connection across lines of race and ability.

In one interview, Sam and I looked back at what they had said about school. Some of their experiences, especially with teachers and a core group of friends, were fruitful. However, they tended to disdain the wider student body whom they felt they could not trust. In a moment of exasperation, they stated:

> School is meaningless. Meaningless. There's so many athletic white people, it's just that's how it is and I hate it, like, ugh. Why is everyone athletic and white? They can do things for longer than I can do things. Like, even the people who are, like, 'Ugh… I have to go up all these stairs… it sucks.' I'm, like, 'same…' And then, there's the kids who take them three at a time, it's, like, 'Can you not?' Like, I'm clutching under the railing for dear life, jeez…

Sam's first words, "School is meaningless" is an oxymoron that overtly repositions our commonsense understanding of schools. What is supposed to be a place of learning is actually a place of anti-intellectualism. In this instance, Sam's focus is on the students and how they move through and interact with the space of school. These white athletic people move in mass, upwards and quickly in a way that feels preordained to Sam, it is "how it is." This notions to the sedimentation of segregation, standardization and accountability as white athletic students cluster together, move in similar ways and presumably arrive on time. The order of things reveals itself in the most mundane set of bodily articulations – moving up a staircase. Sam's illustration of this repetitive act brings to the fore the ridiculousness of not only what white athletic students do but what they do with vigor and it begs the question, what is the point? If these are the daily rhythms of school, where does that leave Sam and the students who concur that these movements "suck?" Sam's question, "Can you not?" opens up a set of possibilities. Instead of moving upward, Sam gestures toward the railing where "dear life" is located. Sam contends that simply staying and holding on offers more promise to their survival than attempting to do as the white athletic kids. Still, they are compelled and forced, by being legally required to be at school and follow the schedule that they are given, to move in the same way and to abide by the architectural and structural demands of school. Thus, even though Sam moves up the staircase in their own way, at a pace that they try to keep, they still must shape themselves against the pressures of school.

Playing Along Without Giving Up Their Full Self

Throughout their school years, Sam had to negotiate when and where they would participate, when and where they would give their full self. This was another tactic that Sam used to survive and push through standardized curriculum without letting it hurt their sense of being. This is illustrated through how they navigated a process called Socratic seminars.

A process that "encourages dialogue" around a "rich" piece of text, Socratic seminars ask students to entertain open-ended and peer-driven questions. Students are asked to refer back to the text when making their claims and work together to find a shared meaning. Framed as providing "critical skills for postsecondary success," the Socratic seminar is used widely in schools across the nation (McCready, 2014, p. 14). Sam's description of the Socratic process stands in stark contrast to the canned language used to describe Socratic seminars above. Sam illuminates how meaningless the process is by deconstructing what is valued in student dialog. They explain,

> We all sit in a circle, you have to share three times and then you'll get full credit and then you have to watch somebody else and count how many times they share. It was, like, ugh…because then you're also spending time thinking, is she going to get all her sharing in? Like, I want to make sure that she gets all her sharing in because she's really quiet. She's being overshadowed. And everybody's just going around the circle. It's good in theory, but when you put rules on it, like, 'you must share this amount of times,' and 'you cannot speak unless three people before you have spoken.' It's like now I'm counting everything. *I don't want to sit here and count, I want to listen to other people.* I would typically sit there during the Socratic

> seminar and just nod a whole bunch because that counted in one of the like grading categories. It's, like 'appear to be listening,' like, if you nod, that counts. So, I'd be, like [shakes head up and down] 'Right…Right…' I'm just sitting like a bobble-head. It was meaningless.

In the first few lines, Sam's understanding of the Socratic process is made blatantly clear – they are doing the work for credit. The dialogue aspect of the Socratic process is undermined by counting and "going around the circle" which completely inhibits Sam from listening. While they fight to get their sharing in while monitoring another student, Sam soon realizes that a huge part of the Socratic process is a performance. They figure out a way to get credit by simply sitting and nodding. In that process, Sam must leave themself behind and become what the teacher and rubric expect – a listener who does not actually listen or "appears to be listening" and a sharer who shares exactly three times and who must wait patiently while others go before they are able to speak once again. Still, they play along and participate in the "critical skills" that are valued at the postsecondary level – bobble heading. This gesture gets Sam what they need while allowing them to disengage from the practice of so-called student-led discussions that are for the teacher to oversee. When they decide to give in, they do so in a way that does not require too much of their energy. By refraining from twisting themself into the process, they preserve their energy for other things.

Refusing the Neoliberal Pull of AVID

When Sam's self-worth was demeaned in a college-preparatory program called AVID, they protested by removing themselves. Their leaving of the program, while meant to ensure their survival, was also a protest against the larger neoliberal movement to differentiate and mold a specific subset of youth of color so that they can be used as diversity points at the high school and college level.

The Socratic seminar discussed above was part of AVID, which stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination. AVID is neoliberal in its naming in that it foregrounds hard work and personal responsibility. Its origins are linked to the integration of Clairemont schools in San Diego, California. The creator of AVID, Mary Catherine Swanson, a white teacher who was featured on one of the UC Davis School of Education's Alumni Spotlights, is framed as a person who challenged the school system. The article explains that AVID started in 1980 when the school Swanson worked at "prepared for an influx of 500 minority students who were ordered bused to Clairemont by the courts" (UC Davis School of Education, 2014). Swanson relays that the students were coming in with a deficit but that she felt she had a way of preparing them for success and asked if she could "undertake an experiment to see if 32 of the incoming freshmen could cope with Clairemont's college preparatory curriculum if she supplemented their education" (UC Davis School of Education, 2014). Positioned as researcher, Swanson took on her first group of students and at the end of the year, 30 out of 32 of the students went on to college. The narrative of white female teachers making a difference in the lives of youth of color is common and centers the teachers as progressive while communities of color are situated as needing rehabilitation. This is perfectly mirrored in the rendering of AVID's beginnings. AVID expanded from one white female teacher to an entire movement, and the trace of Swanson is now pervasive in schools across the nation. Teachers everywhere can be trained in Swanson's method. AVID's website explains that it,

> targets students in the academic middle–B, C, and even D students–with the desire to go to college and the willingness to work hard. Typically, they will be the first

> in their families to attend college, and come from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. These are students who are capable of completing rigorous curriculum but are falling short of their potential. AVID places these students on the college track, requiring them to enroll in the most rigorous courses that are appropriate for them, such as Honors and Advanced Placement. To support them in the rigorous coursework, AVID students learn organizational and study skills, develop critical thinking, learn to ask probing questions, receive academic help from peers and college tutors, and participate in enrichment and motivational activities to make their college dreams reality (AVID, 2017).

In many ways, AVID acts as a funnel that incites subjectivities into being by targeting a select few to differentiate from the rest. AVID believes that their program will help students who are "falling short" to see their true potential. In this way, AVID comes in as a hero and offers students "support" so that they can go to college and become self-sufficient. Each year, students are selected by teachers, asked to interview for a spot and then, if admitted, are given an extra class period in the day with an AVID instructor who teaches them how to note-take, dialogue and organize a binder. Students have their binders and notes checked each week so that teachers can see that they are following the AVID method. In one study on AVID attrition rates, which can be up to fifty percent depending on the district, a teacher is quoted as saying that AVID students "have to really want to be willing to surrender [themselves] to the system" and that those who do not are destined to be exited (McCready, 2014, p. 109).

While Sam could play along in Socratic seminars, they found the entire process of AVID to be nonsensical and demotivating. They explain,

> In seventh grade, they had this thing where, like, every teacher chose students with, like, who they thought had potential and said, “You might want to join this program.’ And we all went to, like, a little meeting thing and you sign up, it’s, like, a whole interview process and everything and I got in. So, I got in. And then I was in and like, it was just AVID. I don't know how to explain it really. It was just a thing that was happening. I was officially in it 8th and 9th grade. I quit it in 10th grade. They were teaching you how to do these things and those things and whatnot. Like they would check that you took your notes, you wrote the questions, you wrote the summary, you highlighted things, you’re actually reviewing your notes. Fucking ninth grade.

Sam’s first illustration of AVID as a “thing” is telling as it pushes back against AVID’s understanding of itself as a savior and promoter of students of color and instead frames it as something elusive and nothing special. It just is. However, this thing creeps up on Sam and becomes pervasive in that it encapsulates part of their life and fills it with “these things and those things and whatnot.” Their portrayal of the AVID curriculum as uninspiring runs counter to AVID’s self portrayal as it undermines the idea that AVID produces “rigorous curriculum.” What Sam learned was rote instead of critical. The moments that AVID curates (being nominated, interviewing, making it in) to make its students feel special are lost on Sam as they relay, “So, I got in.” This critical stance goes directly against AVID’s hope that its students will play along as one of the chosen ones. In the end, AVID becomes a source of surveillance as Sam must go through the process of being checked off each week. The frustration that they felt during this process coats their memory of ninth grade.

When I asked why they quit they explained,

> I quit it because it was stressing me out. Because the thing with AVID is you can do better, like, always you can do better. You can do better! Even if you do a pretty good job. Like, you're getting A's. They're like 'You can do better.' I was like 'How?' They're like, 'Well, volunteer.' It's like, 'When? What are you, what do you want from me?' I say that a lot but, seriously like what do you want from me? I don't get it. So, I quit AVID because I was like crying before going to school on Sundays. I was like, 'I can't do it. I'm doing my best and they keep telling me, 'You can do better.' Like, what am I supposed to be doing!? But it was a requirement that we had to do all those specific things. Plus, improve all the time. Always improve.

What Sam points to repeatedly is that AVID teachers could not explain why they wanted Sam to continually improve. There were "requirements" that Sam had to meet to stay in the program but no sufficient reasoning that allowed them to understand the end game. Who were they getting better for and what does getting better the AVID way look like? Sam's strategy of playing the game, as they did in Socratic seminar, was not possible in the larger space of AVID. Instead of continuing this soul-crushing experience, Sam quit. At the same time, AVID was pushing them out. AVID's system does not thrive on being questioned. In fact, those who question the system are framed as disruptors and threaten AVID's existence more generally. It has been documented that teachers believe that students who cannot abide by the rules or who question the system need to leave so as not to upset other students who submit (McCready, 2014, 150). So, while Sam recovered from the emotional drain, AVID continued to thrive through other students. When I asked if anything was helpful from AVID, Sam's position was clear,

> No, because I was in ninth grade and eighth grade and it’s, like, taking notes on stuff I pretty much know. And if I don't know it, then I’d know it once it’s explained, which is, like, two seconds after it’s been introduced. In AP Biology I might take notes. I take notes and then I look at them, sometimes I’ll be, like, you know, I should probably highlight that and I’ll, like, circle it in a different color or something, but I don't write questions on the side and summaries and use the notes as flashcards and whatever the heck else.

Here, Sam poignantly articulates what AVID assumes – that Sam comes in with a deficit and that they need extra support and help in order to thrive. In this case, Sam did not, they already understood what they were learning and had the capacity to learn material without AVID’s insistence that they take notes in a specific way. In short, knowledge acquisition does not equate to how well one can take notes. What also undergirds Sam’s critique is that beyond seeing students of color as lacking, AVID does not trust students of color to know what to do or to shape curriculum in ways that they see fit. Thus, while Sam figured out how note-taking works for them, they would not have passed a weekly binder check because they did not do it in the AVID way.

On a broader scale, Sam’s critique and refusal of AVID fits in with a larger protest against the neoliberalization of education and its commitment to diversity without disruption. Roderick Ferguson, who discusses diversity initiatives at the university level, describes this process as, “cannibalizing difference.” He explains that when the university finds that diversity is profitable in specific ways, it engages its subjects in the “will to institutionality” (Ferguson, 2008, 162-3). This process requires that subjects speak to their profitability in markets of difference without upsetting the neoliberal norms. It is in the university's favor to anticipate future axes of difference so that they have the upper hand in shaping what subjectivities they will grant admission and what subjectivities they will overlook. This neoliberal movement to rein in difference and amplify it simultaneously is illustrative of the techniques the university uses to commodify dissent before it poses potential ruptural capacities. AVID helps universities by starting this process before students even enter secondary school. Sam, as a mixed race, gender fluid, pansexual, hits the diversity demands of universities, and if AVID was able to properly groom them, then the university would have benefitted from their arrival. AVID is the university's first line of defense in its quest to diversify without having to structurally transform. While Sam refused to be tokenized and as such was able to save themself from emotional breakdowns, they also had to give up the AVID name and the direct line to institutions of higher learning that AVID can promise its students. Thus, the choice to disengage comes at a cost that students should never have to pay.

Demanding Transformative Curriculum

Sam has ideas that, if taken seriously by school administration and educators, could change the way gendered curricula operates. This is especially true when Sam protests sex ed and calls attention to the ways in which it makes them feel like their body is not in the curriculum. Their reimaging of what sex education could look like is transformative in the sense that it would upend all commonsense notions are what genitalia signifies. At the same time it would require that sex education be the place where questions about gender identity are answered. Sam recollects that their sex education unit started out with their teacher explaining,

> 'Alright, this is the unit, it's about to start, so, for a couple of weeks we're going to be talking about this.' And then you get a packet and it's like the full body diagram. And then, it's like the specific diagram for each one. And then it's like the inner diagram, the outer diagram and you have to match up the parts and there's like quizzes that you take and there's like notes. So, when we were learning about the

> parts and such, I was just, like, 'Yeah, someone has these'… I was just like let's just get it over with.

Sam's sex ed unit came with promises it could not keep. "This is the unit, it's about to start," sounds exciting at first. It is the unit, the one where you actually get to learn about something that should be intimately connected to one's body. However, what the unit entails is not only boring but disconnected from Sam's body. When sex education is covered with standardized meaning, Sam does not locate themselves within the diagrams, quizzes and notes. When I asked them if they ever talked about queer sex or gender identity in sex education they explained,

> No. During sex ed I thought, 'Huh… I don't really know how girls would have sex. How would two girls do that? I don't really know.' I also thought, 'Two guys… I don't really know how that works either.' And then I'd sort of think about it and I'd be, like, 'I guess it makes sense that they don't teach that because they don't teach us how it normally works.'

I followed up by asking if they would want to know more about queer sex and gender identity in schools. They said,

> Yeah. And some people can know that that's what's going on, like, other people are like that. Because there are people who are, like, 'Wait… that exists?' Like, all the time. There are people, 'Gender fluid? What's that?' I'd like people to have just a mini unit, you know? It could be like two days where you learn that these are the genders. Here you go. And so people are like, 'Oh… that's interesting.' Then you learn something. Congratulations. Congratulations.

What Sam deems as simple would likely be quite complex and transformational. The two-day mini unit that Sam suggests would have to struggle with how the diagrams, so set in their rigid definitions, and gender do and do not combine. They would essentially have to erase the male and female from the genitalia and start at a totally different place. Then, sex ed educators would have to do the work of introducing the material themselves and take on the labor of answering questions instead of leaving Sam to answer those questions constantly as students ask them about being gender fluid and pansexual. Teachers would also have to commit to engaging students in something that would be intellectually stimulating. In short, people would have to learn "something," and that something may implicate students' bodies.

Black Feminist Echoes and Being Otherwise

> Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuated self. (Lorde, 2001, p. 226).

> The forces that are really hostile to black life, to black people, are always operating. So that we are in a period of reaction now that is so strong, that if we are not careful the work we are doing now is going to have to be 'rediscovered' at some point. You know, people are going to have to keep doing it, or rediscover it again, or reassert it because the forces of opposition are so forceful and so powerful and they're always pushing against us, they always want to enforce forgetfulness. They always want to do something that forgets the African presence or reabsorbs it, reappropriates it in another way. The need to confront psychological violence, epistemic violence, intellectual violence is really powerful (Spillers, 2007, p. 301).

Sam proposed a praxis or way of living against the tides of standardization that echoes the movements in black feminist thought. Sam's aforementioned protests resemble Audre Lorde's and Hortense Spillers' whose quotes bear such gravity in the context of standardization in schools. As

Lorde's words remind us, the process of standardization is life threatening. And as Spillers contends, there are forces, forces in the form of college prep, school architecture, and accountability, that are propelling the kinds of violence that Sam encounters daily in school. However, Sam also points to something different in their purposed praxis of living that is echoed by Denise Ferreira da Silva (2014) in her work on black feminist poethics. Both Sam and da Silva contend that in order to thrive, there must be a reconfiguration of time, space and connection. While da Silva locates these moments in Science Fiction, Sam locates these moments in being weird and living life otherwise. Sam's motioning toward weird opens up possibilities, especially when it is articulated through the literary movement of weird. These weird literary roots give another perspective on how to live life otherwise.

Being weird and seeking a different way of being was strikingly apparent in our last of four interviews. During this time, we reviewed the prior interviews so that they could add or change parts of their life history. We started by going over how they described themself in the first interview – a mixed race (black and white), gender fluid, pansexual, vegan, witch. I asked if they wanted to add anything and they said,

> I'm a weirdo. Like, no matter where I am, I'm probably the minority. I figured that out a while ago. Like, no matter where I am, in some way, shape or form, I'm a minority. Like, it's just how I am. I could be at a LGBT thing, I'm the only person of color. I could be at a witch thing and I could still be the only person of color, but I could be the only, like, vegan. Or I could be the only LGBT or something, like, I have so many different weird things that it's hard to be not the weird one. If I found someone just like me, I don't even know if I'd like them. My ex Caitlin, we had the sexuality weirdness and we had the mixed race, we both have that in common, but

> I got my weird religion, all my hobbies that are strange, like I sit at home and watch YouTube forever. They, like, clean and watch movies like a normal human being. I'm not really, I'm just, weird.

At this moment, Sam understands their body as both more and less – they will always be otherwise and in excess of any given group's categorical assumptions (e.g. LGBT people are white, witches are white, eat meat, are straight and cis) and at the same time they are the only one or the "minority" in the group. As both more and less, their subjectivity exerts a certain form of pressure on each category. When Sam arrives with their "way, shape or form," their presence suggests that categorization has its limitations. At the same time, Sam does not see much potential for change as their history gestures to consistent reminders that they are the only one and that this may be an endless cycle. These notions echo Spillers' argument in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," where she suggests that black feminists are always and already placed "out of the different symbolics of female gender" and that this "different social subject" has a wealth of "grammars" that could upend our commonsense notions of categories and lives (Spillers, 2003, p. 228). While Sam too believes in figuring out a way to position themself differently, their hope does not lie in finding more of the same. They want to be weird. The idea of weirdness that they conjure is linked to them rejecting the domestic calls of cleaning and watching contrived movies with a beginning, middle and end. They would rather opt to be at home and watch YouTube, an endless stream of video, forever and thus reimagine home as a space of leisure, timelessness and boundlessness.

These desires are akin to Denise Ferreira da Silva whose piece, "A Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," suggests that our conceptions of space and time bolster the ways in which the black body is categorized, commodified and used in the pursuit of white progress. In contrast, "Blackness's capacity to signify otherwise – beyond universality and its particular arrangement of Space and Time but also away from transcendentality (self-determination) – invites a consideration of knowing without modern categories" (da Silva, 2014, p. 84). Instead of engaging in space and time as we know it, da Silva suggests that we entertain the concept of a plenum or, "a description of existence marked by virtuality: matter imaged as contingency and possibility." (da Silva, 2014, p. 92-3). It is the space and time beyond our reach that may offer a means of connection beyond how we understand each other in the present.

Sam is striving toward this point as well and pushes against what is known into a space and time where something else is possible, something else exists. Sam does this through their self-fashioning of being weird. The etymology of weird signifies multiple things, but its literary roots suggest that weird is a "liminal literary category" that pushes against what we know and motions toward an otherwise (Dodd, 2017, p. 51). It is simultaneously a word that has been taken up to suggest alternatives ways of seeing and understanding the world that is not reliant on a human-centric lens. The "narratives of the Weird allude to a world much larger than previously assumed: a much darker reality, from the vastness of the unknown expanse of space to the unseen systems that form the human/nonhuman worlds" (Quigley, 2017, p. 54). Sam pushes toward this something other in their uptake of weirdness and refuses to be pulled into the space of the normative or standard.

A Call to Action – Curating Spaces for Being Otherwise

In order to put theory into practice, it is worthwhile to note that there were moments in Sam's school career where the possibility of being otherwise, even if that possibility was small, was present in school. When da Silva discusses an otherwise she references Octavia Butler's characters in the realm of science fiction. In Butler's text, not only are space and time disrupted, but the way that people, space and memory connect is also rearticulated. For example, feelings are shared and when one person feels something, so too does another. While I do not believe the following example fulfills what da Silva or Sam hope for, I do think that it approaches a different kind of reality that can be realized in schools. I asked Sam if they had a favorite class and they responded that they did, a creative writing course. When I asked them about what they would write about and do in class, they responded by saying,

> Typically just a specific topic, but sometimes it would go off. We started every class period with ten minutes of journal writing and we'd talk about that for a while and then we do whatever he had planned. And so sometimes we'd end up talking about dreams for like an entire class period. And one time, we spent an entire class period just telling jokes because that was the problem, tell your best joke. And so everybody was like, 'I got this!' We had a non-fiction prompt of the day, the fiction prompt of the day and then you could also write about whatever. And sometimes people would share their whatever and we would talk about that. Sometimes people would share their fiction prompt and we'd be, like, 'Wait, that doesn't make sense. Like, how did you do this?' Like, ask questions about the story they wrote. The non-fiction ones would be like write a list of all your favorite food. People would share it and then ask, 'Why?' and then we would all talk about the why. 'Why is this your favorite?' 'I like mac and cheese because I like cheese and macaroni.' 'Why?' 'Because it tastes good.' There's not as much of just because. I said, 'I, actually am a weird one. I like brussels sprouts.' and everyone was like, 'Oh, okay…' Then you listen to them and you care.

In the space of this one classroom, time did not seem to matter. While there were classes periods when the teacher would instruct, other times it would just “go off” or they would spend the entire time talking about their thoughts without any particular structure. Student thoughts were the central force in these lessons as they entertain the “why?” instead of “just because.” This kind of discussion protocol goes against the frameworks of programs like AVID that seek to dissolve dissent in the name of critical thinking. Furthermore, the question of why is always situated as that which can be asked forever; it is timeless.

One of the main things that could occur in this classroom, was Sam’s ability to situate themself as “weird.” In their discussion, they could reveal that they liked Brussel sprouts, an idea that may seem off or strange to their classmates. Yet it is this idea, the one that makes them different, that also creates connections and compels students to listen and care for one another. This class offers one perspective on the work that can be done, at least for now, in schools. Perhaps the work will have to move elsewhere, but teachers and educators, especially those in the humanities, can begin considering setting up alternative worlds and universes, spaces where students connect differently and where standards are not the core of a classroom.

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Queering and Trans*ing Education with Rage and Desire: Opening up Conversations Around Cutting

Abstract

By attending to the ways in which cutting manifests in the life histories of queer and transgender youth of color, I argue that cutting is a queer and trans literacy practice. I focus on the life histories of three youth, Jay, Harper and Sam, who have different experiences, reasons for, and reactions to their cutting. With each story, we learn something new about the act and how it pushes us to the brink of pedagogy and policy. Jay's narrative forces us to reckon with youth who refuse to or cannot maintain their bodily integrity. Harper's story brings to the fore the violence of everyday life for queer and transgender youth of color. Finally, all three youth ask us if we are ready to engage with the expressions of rage and desire that cutting enables. I end by considering the humanizing trend in education and ask if the impulse toward humanizing is not possible for queer and transgender youth of color who cut.

Introduction

This paper seeks to open a conversation around cutting. What psychologists call non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), cutting lies in the margins of the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (2013). The manual classifies mental disorders in order to create a common language around the disorder and its associated risks. Once designated as a symptom of bipolar personality disorder, cutting in the DSM-5 is something that psychologists now address in the "Emerging Measures and Models," section. Those who work in educational psychology have given basic guidelines that include how to refer a student, how to notice and engage cutters in conversation and how to promote the discussion of healthy alternatives when cutting comes up in conversation (Hasking et. al., 2016). We have been here before. The DSM diagnosed homosexuality as a sexual orientation disturbance and did not remove it as an official diagnosis until the 1970s (Drescher, 2015). The DSM-5 still largely controls how transgender people can get access to medical care. It recently changed the diagnosis for transgender individuals to Gender Dysphoria and warned that youth with this diagnosis also, “show elevated levels of emotional and behavioral problems” (p. 453).

As educators, we cannot wait for psychologists to begin to draw conclusions about cutting. We cannot continue to simply rely on referral to counselors as the means to cure cutting. We cannot allow for someone else to decide the efficacy and necessity of the practice. This paper examines the life histories of queer and transgender youth of color who cut. Their stories give us a way to think about how cutting is a material and artifactual literacy practice that acts in queer and trans ways to disrupt our notions of wholeness and bodily integrity. The act of cutting also brings to the fore the violences that are put on and resisted by queer and transgender youth of color. Finally, cutting acts as a method of expressing rage and desire. I conclude that these narratives around cutting push us to consider pedagogies that are not contingent on bodily integrity and that engage in the raw and visceral emotional landscape of cutting. In this way, they compel us to rethink what we mean by humanity and humanizing in literacy and education research along with our attachments to the “healthy” alternative. At the very least, we need to start talking to one another about cutting as a literacy practice; and that by describing it as such, educators are not condoning it, but asserting that it is a functional text that needs attention.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Cutting in Schools

Psychologists have described cutting, which falls under the umbrella of NSSI as, “the immediate and deliberate destruction of one’s own body tissue, without suicidal intent, and not for purposes that are socially accepted” (Hasking, 2016, p. 645). This means that the person who cuts could be suicidal but that the cutting itself is not used to commit suicide. It is also evident from this definition that while there may be socially accepted forms of body modification, like tattoos and piercings, cutting is the line where pathology forms. Cutting was once thought of as a predominately female and white practice but this has since been debunked as studies continually show prevalence of cutting across lines of race, gender and sexuality (dickey et. al., 2015; Sornberger, 2013; Gholamrezaei, et. al., 2017). In general, cutting is seen as an unhealthy coping strategy in response to stress. It has also been linked to poor body image (Duggan et. al, 2013).

Jessica Toste and Nancy Heath (2010) explain that since cutting in schools is considered a contagion, psychologists used to suggest that any overt discussion of cutting or scarring is redacted from conversations with students. In fact, initially because of its contagious qualities, educators were instructed not to talk about it under any circumstance. However, the field has shifted as it has realized that it is impossible to stop youth from having discussions around cutting. So, Toste and Heath suggest that instead of talking about the act explicitly, it should be implicated in larger discussions around unhealthy or risky behavior that is used to deal with stress (e.g. drinking and drugs). Then, the discussion should move toward how to deal with stress in healthy and effective ways. Specifically, as an alternative to cutting, Toste and Heath encourage following the protocols introduced by Linda Lantieri (2008) who believes schools should embrace things like mindfulness, meditation and yoga, which help to support the emotional intelligence or inner resilience of students so that they can handle high-stress situations. They suggest this even though, "no research has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches directly in the area of NSSI" (p.15). As with most psychological literature, the work of sequestering the act of cutting is on the student. The student needs to find ways to cope while the outside world is rarely called into question.

Cutting as a Literacy Practice

Cutting has never been explicitly linked to the act of literacy. However, I argue that cutting is a literacy practice that is material, communicative and multimodal. Cutting acts as a text in ways that echo the work of literacy theorists who have argued that literacy is embedded in the flesh and wounds and the concomitant stories of pain, rage and desire that emanate from those sources. It is a literacy practice that deserves time and space in classrooms.

Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell's (2011) work, for example, argues that "literacy itself is artifactual" (p. 133). They explain that literacy is multimodal and is embedded in material objects such as postcards, tattoos, suitcases and scrawls. These all count as literacy artifacts that, "can be used to elicit stories within school and community settings" (p.134). The narratives that come out of these objects are essential to redressing the power imbalances in schools as they situate the speakers as intellectual and foreground their at-home literacy practices as meaningful. The queer and transgender youth of color in this piece all have narratives that emanate from their cuts and scars. These narratives often push back at the stories that others (teachers, family, peers) contrive through a reading of the youth's bodies.

The cuts and scars that queer and transgender youth carry with them throughout the day also act as literacy artifacts in ways that reflect David E. Kirkland's (2009) work. His discussion in "The Skin We Ink: Tattoos, Literacy, and a New English Education," explores the stories embedded in the tattoos or literacy artifacts that exist on the flesh of a young black man named Derrick. The story of Derrick's tattoos, at times painfully produced, and "told in the workings of ink and flesh, illustrates a young man's use of texts and tattoos to revise a shattered self-portrait. At the same time, this story posits a powerful critique of the words and worlds that surround him" (p. 375-376). In the case of Derrick, his tattoos actively counter the "ominous myth about the absence of literacy in the lives of young black men," while at the same time opening up the multimodal possibilities of literacy that are often not seen as legitimate in school spaces (p. 375). As Kirkland reminds us, literacy practices that do not follow the norm or that do not benefit the ruling class are often pathologized, especially when they highlight social ills or benefit marginalized groups. Kirkland ends by suggesting that this “promiscuous textuality in the practice of literacy offers Derrick a reprieve from tragedy, multiple ways to read and write, and a possible release from a hijacked identity” (p. 391). It is a text that is necessary to Derrick’s understanding and self and thus schools should start thinking about how to lend these literacy practices space.

Furthering this discussion, Elizabeth Dutro (2011) argues that stories of pain and contention, like the ones described by Derrick through his tattoos, should be considered necessary and legitimate testimony in literacy classrooms. However, she makes clear that the testimony itself is not enough and argues that there must be a witness to the speaker’s story; a witness that in turn shares their own testimony. This cyclical practice of witnessing and testifying help to constitute a, “a self-conscious attention to both connection and difference between one's own and others' testimonies,” an act she calls, “critical witnessing” (p. 199).

As mentioned above, tattoos are considered one of the validated forms of bodily modification in the field of psychology. Kirkland, Pahl and Rowsell also validate that tattoos count as artifactual literacy. However, no one has explicitly stated that cutting counts as literacy, even though it mirrors aspects of tattooing. Both require the tearing and healing of skin and come with unique narratives. The cuts, like tattoos, that surface on youth skin are a legitimate text and provoke others, for better or for worse, to interpret the meaning behind the cuts. While I am not completely aligning tattoing, cuts and scars, it is worthwhile to understand that viewing the manipulation of the flesh as a literacy practice and literacy artifact propels a different, and sometimes contentious story told by marginalized youth. It is a story that, as Dutro argues, demands space for both testimony and witnessing as it catalyzes an alternative way to see and understand the world as it is experienced by queer and transgender youth of color.

Cutting as a Queer and Trans Literacy Practice

The act of cutting and subsequent scarring is a literacy practice that actively disrupts our ways of understanding in queer and trans ways. Queer as a performative is entrenched in the interplay between the subject and context. Those who are queer interact with the space around them and embody lived lives that may appear, as Sara Ahmed (2006) suggests, “oblique or offline […] which as we know involves a commitment to living in an oblique world or in a world that has an oblique angle to that which is given” (p.161). She also offers that living queer means living “odd, bent [or] twisted,” which often results in disturbing “the order of things” (p.161). Ahmed’s depiction of queerness includes racialized bodies who, even in practicing heterosexuality, are often still queered as their performance cannot meet the standards of whiteness. This is not because the performance is not the same but instead because the optics of race refuse any formal iteration that counts as normal.

Reflected in these life histories as desirable or necessary for survival, the material literacy of cutting, as it surfaces both in practice and as a scar, queers the subject as their body refuses to meet the embodied expectations of others. This ends up frustrating family members as it disrupts their notions of how youth should act. As a result, many of the youth are deemed as what Ahmed (2010a) describes as “affect aliens,” or those who do not align with the proper objects of happiness (p. 37). When a cutter turns their attachment to the improper object of the blade to find a sense of relief, they threaten the integrity of the family. In this way, queer and transgender youth of color who cut become “blockage points” that often make family members aware of their own faults and mistakes (p. 39). The text on their skin make family members feel put upon. As a result, family members often ask the youth to cease their actions so that the family can get back to normal or so that they do not have to confront the histories of violence that preceded the act of cutting.

Cutters also upend the promise of education, which, as Ahmed (2010b) explains, “is about cultivation, whereby, through tending the soil, you encourage the [student] to grow in some ways rather than others. To educate is to orient,” toward school-sanctioned happiness (p.54). As bell hooks (1994) argues, that happiness is often properly displayed through bourgeois values that reject the raw emotions associated with cutting and that are often racialized and classed. When youth (re)(dis)orient themselves toward their own bodies and couple that orientation with the blade, they refuse the sustenance the soil of education promises. They write a different story in their own skin. In doing so, they force us to question the quality of that soil and this often aggravates peers, teachers, and school administrators. Teachers hope for a psychological diagnosis, peers tell the cutters that they should die so as not to further contaminate the school population, and administrators decide that the general education track is not suitable for anxious and depressed students.

In response to these initiatives, the youth in these life histories respond in ways that resemble José Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) vision of a queer utopia. They seek ways of being that resist the anti-relational tides of neatly packaged identity-based and often white-washed politics. There is no policy that can attend to cutters because they refuse the administrative pull to incite themselves and instead favor community building that can be painful and joyful all at once. As youth describe who they are in the context of cutting, they are unable and unwilling to fully present themselves as full subjects. In so doing they open up other ways to embody a body that is not contingent on the integrity of the skin and a fully formed subjectivity.

Cutting also opens up ways of being and knowing that are present in the conceptualization of trans embodiment. As Jeanne Vaccaro (2014) explains, trans embodiment is entangled with the concept of the handmade or the,

> collective — made with and across bodies, objects, and forces of power — a process, unfinished yet enough (process, *not* progress); autonomous choreography; free; do-it-yourself; nongeometrical transformation; freeform. The handmade is a haptic, affective theorization of the transgender body, a mode of animating material experience and accumulative felt matter. As bodily feeling and sensation transform flesh parallel to diagnostic and administrative forces, a handmade orientation foregrounds the work of crafting identity. The material properties of soft and pliable forms of emotional life, skin elasticity, scar tissue, cellular organization, and bodily capacity and dimension operate as a corrective to the limited categories of surface/depth and before/after. Density and texture yield felt knowledge. Labor congeals as residual emotion. Transgender life is made and remade as matter, identity, politics. The handmade generates new evidence of what a body and its difference might be (p.96-97).

Throughout these life histories, there are countless times that youth reimagine cutting in ways that stand in tension with interpretations offered by psychologists, teachers, and parents. By redefining cutting, youth open up different possibilities of being that resonate as a text on the surface of their skin and impact the people around them. Each time a cutter engages in the literacy practice they open up, both literally and figuratively, a mark that is made collectively as it stands as a response to their world. Finally, they never arrive in the ways that those around them wish them to arrive, as healed and whole, both by nature of scars as those markings that persist and by the impossibility of reconciling the contradictions inherent in cutting as an act that derives from rage and desire simultaneously.

These literacy practices of rage and desire push us to reckon with our sense of what we should condone or, at the very least, allow space for in educational settings. In the last section, I devote time to the ways that cutting manifests as a communicative literacy text that transforms the lives of these queer and transgender youth of color. When they cut, they can make sense of their world and change their world, if only for a moment. It provides unsanctioned connections, reveals violence and serves as a reminder to youth struggle and victory. In many ways, their stories mirror Susan Stryker's (2006) who, upon theorizing her subjectivity as akin to Frankenstein, states,

> 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…May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world (p. 254).

Like Stryker, the youth that you will hear from in this paper risk being abject in order to engage in a literacy practice that allows them new ways of living, loving and knowing. They rupture the sense that things have gotten better and their memories of a near past provide an archive of felt experience that contributes to a larger genealogy of queer of transgender youth experience. In this way, documenting and calling attention to these memories resists the ways in which the memories of a predominately white majority have been preserved while trans and queer of color narratives have been "ripped from the fabric of time and space" (Ware, 2017, p.176). These stories, as black and trans archivist Ware explains, remind us that queer and transgender youth of color are here, that they will “continue to exist, continue to fight, to struggle for change, and to win” (p. 177). Their desire and rage, as expressed in the literacy artifacts of their cuts and scars, is just one of many texts that deserve attention and space.

Methodology

I interviewed five queer and transgender youth who were members of a local storytelling program that I set up in a small Midwestern suburb. Queer and transgender youth came from the surrounding areas and I chose five who, in my opinion, needed to be heard on a larger scale as it consistently seemed that they were being pushed out of school or marginalized in different ways. I utilize a life history methodology because it seeks to illustrate the “storied nature of lives” and the intricacies that are embedded in an individual’s telling of their history. At the same time, it also seeks to go “beyond the individual or the personal and places narrative accounts and interpretations within a broader context,” and as such “draws on individuals’ experiences to make broader contextual meaning” (Cole and Knowles, 2001, 20). The interviews conducted with all participants were dialogic. Before the interviews, I explained that their accounts of their life histories were going to be used to shift our understanding of education. They would help educators think through what works and what doesn’t in schools, which issues queer and transgender youth face, and where they may thrive or feel their full selves. Each youth and I met for 6 to 9 hours and drew, wrote poetry and created a larger life history map together.

The narrative of cutting came up in four out of five of the life histories we created. While I knew cutting was a prominent factor in the lives of the youth that I worked with, I did not seek out these stories. Still, stories of cutting were ever present, nestled in with larger narratives of trying to survive and connect in a world that is overly paternal while at the same time coldly against queer and transgender youth. The three youth that I discuss in this paper come from three different worlds. Jay is a pansexual, transgender, female to male (FTM), Latinx/white sophomore at an alternative school in a city with the preferred pronouns he/him/his. Harper is a genderfluid, pansexual, Latinx/white student that recently graduated from a rural high school with the preferred pronouns they/them/theirs. Sam is a genderfluid, pansexual, black/white student who is in their senior year of high school in a suburban school district with preferred pronouns they/them/theirs.

Data Analysis

I used a combination of Eve Sedgewick's (2002) and Sara Ahmed's (2006) notions of beside. I used Sedgewick's work to piece together a "map like set of relations" to understand how cutting exists in the larger ecology of the youth life histories (p. 5). By keeping everything in tension I sought to move beyond a "drama of exposure" (p. 8). Instead of trying to reveal the culprit of cutting, I hope to showcase the twisting relationships and experiences that occur when the flesh is manipulated, when the inside and outside of the body combine and when scars are part of the discourse of the flesh. I am also looking for the ways in which cutting disrupts the order of things. For this, I look to Ahmed who discusses how the interactions between queer subjects and objects as they operate in the world, can lead to different ways of thinking. I searched for different orientations toward cutting and meanings that the youth presented through their stories of cutting with the hope of starting the conversation around what educators must do to make space for the cut body in classrooms, schools and the world.

Findings

The Route to Happiness May Not Be Wholeness

In many of our interviews, participants described their cutting through the reactions of their parents and peers who took their cutting personally. The imperative for the youth to cease the act was predicated on the well-being of the people around them as opposed to their own personal health. This same narrative also surfaced in a popularly circulated post on several of the participants' social media pages called "The Butterfly Project" (http://butterfly-project.tumblr.com). The project, which seeks to help those who self-harm, is a step-by-step process that people can use to stop self-harm and start healthier alternatives:

1. When you feel like you want to cut…draw a butterfly wherever the self-harm occurs.
2. Name the butterfly after a loved one, or someone that really wants you to get better.
3. NO scrubbing the butterfly off
4. If you cut before the butterfly is gone, it dies. If you don't cut, it lives.
5. Another person may draw them on you, these butterflies are special so take good care of them.

This process goes along with the behavioral and cognitive psychology techniques that seek to find a different and healthier release for patients. The healthy alternative here is to draw the butterfly and connect that butterfly and its existence to a person who wants you to stop cutting and get better. This is to say that the project puts emphasis on the people around the cutter as opposed to the cutter themselves. What so gets lost in this equation are the reasons behind the cutter's actions, the uninhabitable worlds where the cutter must live and the focus on the cutter's feelings more generally. Furthermore, the ability to live with cuts and scars or to be broken in some way is not possible. While water and soap may wash a butterfly away, it cannot get rid of scars or fresh cuts.

In Jay's case, his parents and friends tried to keep Jay from cutting. They were Jay's butterflies. In one of our interviews Jay drew a picture of his middle school experience. In the center he drew his arm with cuts across it and the word 'está' [stay] on his wrist. Jay detailed that:

> I have a tattoo, 'está,' on my wrist. I got that around the time when I was starting the self-harming. I would self-harm because I was so depressed. I was so depressed because I got beat up, and I thought my parents got divorced because of me. And I got 'stay' on my wrist because I know people want me here... I always self-harmed because I always tried to find an artery, and I just wanted to die. I didn't want to be me, and I didn't want to exist. And I remember telling my parents. My parents were always like, 'But we care about you. We care about you so much.' And I would always feel like, 'I don't want you to care about me. I want you to forget about me.'

There are multiple layers to this story, but the one I will focus on is the notion of staying. To stay, to delay, to prevent, to remain are laborious tasks for Jay and stand in stark contrast to his desire to be something other than what he currently embodies. 'Stay' as it is placed on his wrist and arteries insists that Jay avoid the threshold that could take him from life to death. It also tells him not to cut, the act that could, for better or worse, allow him to explore the cusp of alternative realities. Each time he goes to hurt himself, his friends and parents are there to remind him that death is not the way out. However, to stay alive is precarious as it requires battling depression and physical beatings along with keeping a body alive that is precious to his parents but not necessarily to Jay. When Jay says he wants his parents to forget about him, he wishes that their happiness was not contingent on his survival. If his parents were not in the way of his interactions with his own body, cutting could become the gateway to a different reality where Jay's understanding of self has the ability to transform. I say this not to condone the act, but to bring up the idea that the ways in which skin, parents and friends contain us can cause distress. Especially when the demand to keep a sense of bodily integrity does not resonate.

Interestingly, the same want to play with different realities and embodied emotional worlds surfaced in an earlier interview. Jay's actions as a child were met with distaste from his teachers who felt that his dynamic lifestyle did not meet the expectations of schooling. Jay found pleasure in exploring his race, sexuality and gender in ways that were not straightforward and that mimic what cutting offers Jay in his later life. Jay drew a picture of his childhood that displayed several different pictures: a marker, school house, the names Timothy and Juliet with hearts around them, and a hat. In Jay's discussion of this picture he explains:

> My sister was a little darker and I think my dad liked her better because of it. And I always envied her for that. So when I was at school, I would get markers, like, the brown ones, and I'd just cover my hand. And all of my teachers in grade school were kind of mean to me because I was a very hyper child. And they all wanted me tested for ADHD. My mom told them it was just child's play and that I did not need to be tested. But I just couldn't sit there quietly. And I just wanted to be outside and play. I remember this one student, whose name was Timothy. He was very cute when I was little. Like, to me, I was head over heels for him. And then I met him, we became friends, and he introduced me to one of his friends, and I met Juliet. And Juliet changed my life forever, that's when I started questioning my sexuality. Juliet was, like, the first girl I ever dated, and I was like, 'What is this even called?' Because kids would be, like, 'That's not normal.' And that's when I knew. Yeah, that was around the time I got the hat. Yeah. And I had this hat, this is when I first

> started feeling different. I had this hat that I would wear, it was my dad's, and I would put all my hair back and I would put it on. I would pretend I was my twin brother that I had, I was like, 'Yeah, I'm my twin brother, his name is Sammy.' And my mom was always, 'Oh, he likes to act and stuff, so it's whatever. It's just child's play.' When it really wasn't.

This story begins with a discussion of how Jay attempts to darken his skin so that he looks more like his sister. If he looks more like his sister, then his Dad, who is Mexican American, may like him more. However, this act does not bode well in the classroom where Jay's teachers, who teach in a predominately white elementary school, find this act distracting. They define Jay's actions as hyper and hope to get a diagnosis of ADHD confirmed. While it is unclear in Jay's story what exactly a diagnosis would mean (paraprofessional support or someone to look after Jay may have been a result of a diagnosis), Jay's mom retorts that Jay does not need such a test and uses the term "child's play" to protect Jay from his teachers. Jay then asserts that neither of these articulations of himself are true. Instead of child's play or ADHD, Jay describes himself as feeling intensely and allowing those feelings to craft his relationships with students, himself and the objects that allow him to take on new roles. He becomes "head over heels" for one person and then allows his feelings for another to "change his life forever." When he poses the question, "What is this even called?" he pushes for a moment where his subject position can be recognized and where he can showcase the multiply defined ways in which he wants to mitigate his skin and desire for both girls and boys. This conversation is quickly squashed when the kids around him simply respond with "that's not normal." Jay uses that response as a way to then define himself against the grain of what is considered normal. Being not and being different is a pleasurable state for Jay as it defines him just enough to have the flexibility to continue to redefine himself. He then moves to talk about the hat that allows him to change into his twin brother Sammy and experience, once again, something that is not child's play. With each embodied iteration Jay lays claim to not being, something that he also considers a facet and outcome of cutting.

In his last year of middle school, Jay was brutally beaten and given a concussion by a peer. As a result, he transferred into an alternative school. When he spoke about his move, Jay always tried to make it appear as though this was his happy ending. In fact, in the picture that he drew of him in his new school, he illustrated a smiley face with the heading, "overall happier." However, each time we met for another interview he would start with the happy ending and then go into a different story where he fell into a deep depression or started cutting again. I inquired about this in one of our interviews:

> I don't know what happened. I went into this deep depression where I started cutting myself again, and no one knew about it. I didn't want to tell anyone. I didn't want anyone else to worry about me, because I was doing so good. I don't really know who I am or who I want to be. I just know I don't want to be like this anymore.

Embedded in Jay's writing and body is a message to all of us. First, it illuminates the fact that when we ask youth to be whole because of our own nervousness around their bodily experimentations, we risk ending the conversation. Jay, aware of the pain he causes others when he does not showcase his progress, decides to cut again without anyone seeing. Second, it also foregrounds that the subject that Jay wants to be still has not arrived. Jay still feels as though he does not want to be "like this anymore" and thus Jay does not want "to exist." Cutting acts as a way to mitigate this existence.

The question then becomes, if existence for Jay is always fractured, where can Jay exist? If his existence is predicated on not being, then where can Jay find space? If his arrival at school, at home and in the world is contingent on not being fully formed and on being cut and scarred, where does Jay belong? Are we ready as educators to provide a space where the subject who resists formation or who simply cannot arrive at wholeness be present? I contend that in order to start this conversation, cutting, as it holds the narrative of the pain and pleasure of being on the interstice, must be integral to this conversation.

The Cut Body Disrupts Others Sense of Self

Jay's parents and friends were, undoubtedly, trying to be supportive of Jay. In Harper's case, others around them wanted them to either get better or die. Both directives were given because the people around Harper felt uncomfortable with being called out or having their straightforward lives interrupted. In this way, Harper's scarred body is a constant reminder that the outside world is not ready to change. This fear of change and transgression provoked others to isolate Harper to maintain the status quo. While this is happening, Harper also finds ways to bond with another person who self-harms. Harper explains:

> Seventh grade things fell apart and came back together. It was the start of a beautiful friendship with Ari. In seventh grade Ari became depressed. She confesses to me that she self-harms which, at that point, I was no newbie to. I was well on my way. So, I was like, I admitted it to her, stuff like that, and then she was, like, 'Well, I think I'm gay.' And I was, like, 'Well, shit. If I come out now, it might sound like I'm copying her.' And then she was, like, 'I already know you're gay, obviously.' So, I came out that year, too. And, like, it was nice to, like, have someone else to come out with, like, someone else to, like, tell my problems to and be like, 'Hey, I did this last night.' And then she'd be upset for me, and be like, 'It's OK. We make mistakes.'

> I actually felt so great that I finally told my grandmother, because that's who I was staying with at the time. Most of the time that I got put back in any home it was with my grandma. Like, my mom, it was trickier for her to get me back. For good reason. So, I told my grandmother about my eating disorder, about my self-harm, and about me being gay. And she pinned it on Ari. It was, like, 'Because Ari did this, then you do it, too? Because you're just a copycat.' My self-harm, she was, like, 'I've never seen you get any scars on your wrists, so you don't really do that.' And then, like, I rolled up my sleeves and showed her, and she was like, 'You're just doing it for attention and you're doing it because Ari does it' She was like, 'Ari has real problems. What problems do you have?' And I'm like, 'Did you really just ask that? Did you miss 14 years of my life?
>
> Sophomore year was actually the height of all the suicide and self-harm, eating disorders and all that jazz. Simply because I was back with my mom at that point. Like, I just remember the very first week of living with her. We were watching 'Family Guy,' and it was a really, really triggering episode, because someone said, 'Oh, I'm going to kill myself. Which way do you cut wrists again?' And then you heard Meg say, 'Horizontal for attention, vertical for results.' And my mom, I specifically remember her turning to me and being like, 'Yeah, Harper. Horizontal for attention, vertical for results.'

In recollecting their friendship with Ari, Harper recounts how having someone to "finally talk to" was such a relief to them. That they could finally say that they self-harm and that they're gay in a non-threatening and reciprocal manner, was a powerful moment where things came together. As they recognize their pain and subjectivities in one another, Harper and Ari build a space where they can talk. When these stories arise, Ari is upset *for* Harper and then follows up with the sentiments that "we make mistakes." The possibility of being fractured is available to Harper during these conversations. This stands in stark contrast to the narrative of "stay" for the well-being of others that Jay heard.

Feeling good about this new relationship, Harper confides in their grandma. In these discussions, Harper is met by their grandmother's frustrations. In her opinion, Harper is just trying to get attention and being a copycat. Both terms undercut Harper as a person and reduce them to someone who does not have a mind of their own. Instead, they are needy for support that they do not deserve. Harper's grandma refuses to believe that Harper's life history justifies having an eating disorder or self-harming. This disbelief is convenient for the grandma as it negates any responsibility for Harper's actions.

Finally, Harper confronts another instance of being labeled as an attention-seeker by their mother. When Harper's mom reiterates the "Family Guy" quote, she reminds Harper that their actions were simply for attention and that if they had a real problem, they would have been dead. The act of cutting in these scenarios becomes something that is depicted by family as petty. It's simply a way to make others feel bad for you. The attention that Harper requires would mean that their mother would have to acknowledge her wrongdoing and that is something that none of Harper's family members are willing to do. Thus, cutting becomes a means of exposing other people's issues or other people's violences. This is also apparent when Harper goes to school.

> Throughout junior year, I was skipping classes and stuff because I just couldn't deal with the eyes on me always because I moved away and came back with a shit ton of scars that I couldn't cover because the school was so damn hot. So, people asked questions, people started talking and they were, like, 'Oh, she went to a mental

asylum.' So, like, that year it got really bad, to the point where people were writing shit on my locker and leaving horrible notes telling me to kill myself. They didn't understand it, so instead of trying to understand it, they more so, like, threw it at me as, like, 'You're weird, so fix it or die.' So I just started cutting more. Basically. I've never actually been bullied…super hard, to the point where it was isolating. And then word got out that I dated a girl from my old school. And while I came out in eighth grade, it didn't affect them if I wasn't dating a girl around them, but now when there was proof that I actually dated a girl, it drove them up the wall. Like, no one would talk to me, girls wouldn't invite me over to sleepovers because they all thought that I was just going to try and get in their beds and stuff, so that was real rough.

Towards about May, my grandmother got crazy and would tell me to go kill myself and said I was worthless. It got to the point where my foster mom had to take me to the hospital because I was going to kill myself. Like, I had a plan, I showed her, too. I was like, 'I need help.' So, I said that I needed help, and she got me help, which was really cool of her at the time. And then I dropped out of the classes. All of them, by the end of junior year. The summer between junior and senior year I signed up for the GED program, which is like option two –you're actually getting your high school diploma, but through specific, like, troubled learning class, I guess, for people like me, who have severe anxiety or depression and just can't focus in class. It was specifically designed for kids like me. So, that was a thing, and I was looking forward to that.

Harper's scars become a site of disgust for peers at their school. They believe that Harper's experiences as they are expressed through Harper's skin are going to contaminate the school. So, Harper has two options, to "fix it or die." The problem is, Harper cannot fix it since the issue is not about Harper, but about others' insecurities. Because Harper cannot transform their flesh into useful artifact that both suggests that they are not damaged and that they are straight, they become a pariah and that pushes others to feel as though they should die. As their peers confirm more and more that Harper is not welcome there, Harper responds by cutting, staying alive and showing up, further showcasing the violence on their body as it occurs.

Harper's grandma reiterates the same sentiments at home and this leads to Harper moving into another foster care situation. On the edge of suicide, they receive help and at the same time find hope in the prospect of a GED class. This class gives them the promise that they can be depressed and anxious. Something that they could not be in a regular classroom as their visible pain was simply too disruptive. Like many queer and transgender youth of color, and youth of color more generally, who have strategically used the GED as a way to avoid an unwelcoming and standardized school environment, Harper also figures that this is their best shot (Blackburn 2004, Tuck, 2009). The question then becomes, why? Why is the GED class the one space where Harper can actually receive an education?

Rage and Desire

In one of our first interviews together, I asked Sam who they considered to be part of their family. Sam responded with their immediate biological family and then their two best friends, Cynthia and David. When I asked them about Cynthia they responded by saying,

> Cynthia is my best friend. We used to joke that we're like the same person…We're both black and for a period of time we were, like, 'Oh, we're both girls.' Cynthia is family.

In our later interviews Sam told a story about Cynthia's boyfriend and an interaction that they had over something he had said to Cynthia.

> In tenth grade I started carving. It was like making a tattoo. I don't think I told you the story behind the word 'weak' carved into my arm. It's a big one. My friend Cynthia has a boyfriend, Derick. He's a fucking abusive asshole.
>
> He did something that upset Cynthia and I texted him, 'Don't you ever fucking hurt her again,' and he was, like, 'Okay, I'm sorry. Damn.' And then, I talked to Cynthia about it, it turns out I overreacted. So, I was, like, 'Alright, I'm sorry, man. It's my bad.' He was, like, 'Okay, it's fine.' But then, a couple of days later, he was like actually 'No, you know what?! It's not fine!' And then he started basically just borderline bullying. I blocked him from my phone, my kik. He's a technology dude, so he figured a way to call me, even though I blocked his number and then he would sometimes hack into Cynthia's phone and call me from her phone and it was terrible and, at one point, he was, like, 'Why do you even, why are you even alive? Like, you're just so fucking fat and ugly, no one will ever love you.' And I was, like, 'Okay, dude, like, calm down.' He was, like, 'You're just weak. You know what? Do you know what you are? You're just weak.' He called me weak and it destroyed me. Weakness is something that is not tolerated, ever, like, in my family especially. You can't be weak. You got to be strong. Don't cry, ever. I was not okay for two days, I was like, 'I'm weak. I'm just weak. I can't do this because I'm weak. I can't

> do this because I’m weak. I can't. I’m just weak. I’m a weakling.’ And, so at one point, I was like I need to do something. I really want to just carve it into my arm. And, so, I did and I’m not going to lie, it helped, like, it felt good. I was, like, this is great, this is what I wanted, it’s what I need. And then, it was a reminder to myself, after a while, I got over it, I was, like, you know, he’s just an asshole, actually.

Sam’s first assertion is that what they do to their skin is called carving. By distancing themselves from the pathology, Sam finds different words to explain how they interact with and use their own skin for the purposes of expressing their rage and desire. Cynthia’s boyfriend stands for all that is normative and wrong in the world. He is an “abusive asshole,” he is a “man” and “dude” who interrupts one of Sam’s most important relationships. Sam’s reciprocal support system is in jeopardy when Cynthia’s boyfriend enters the picture. Furthermore, when Sam attempts to support Cynthia, they are first told that they are overreacting and then when they apologize, they are berated by Derick who calls Sam fat, ugly, unlovable and weak. The last designation of weak is what eats away at Sam. It reminds them of what they are not supposed to be in the eyes of their family and explains that being called weak “destroys” them. However, instead of letting it impact everything they do, they find a way to move through the emotions and address them head on. They allow themselves to give into the desire of carving “weak” into their arm, of marking their own body the way that they see fit. For the first time in days Sam feels good as they do something for themselves as opposed to for Cynthia. “It is what [they want], it is what [they need].” This mark serves as a reminder that they are strong and that Derick is just an “asshole.” It is a contradictory reminder of the violence in the world that marks bodies as less than and the ways in which bodies can wear that notion in unexpected ways.

Cutting was not the only instance where Sam mentioned using their body to call attention to violence. Beside the story of the "carving of the weak" Sam also mentioned feeling physically overwhelmed by the architecture of their school and the white, athletic people that moved in mass around their bodies on a daily basis. In one of our interviews Sam lamented that,

> School is meaningless. Meaningless. There's so many athletic white people, it's just that's how it is and I hate it, like, ugh. Why is everyone athletic and white? They can do things for longer than I can do things. Like, even the people who are, like, 'Ugh… I have to go up all these stairs… it sucks.' I'm, like, 'same…' And then, there's the kids who take them three at a time, it's, like, 'Can you not?' Like, I'm clutching under the railing for dear life, jeez…

This is another moment where Sam embraces their weakness in order to make a larger point. As they stand, sometimes with others, and commiserate, they force others to go around them. This strength that is found in the weakness and refusal of not attaining a particular embodied whiteness and athleticism further reminds us of the violence embedded in schools that foster select body types and leave others behind.

Harper explains their cutting differently. They describe a contradictory narrative that involves both rage and desire and illustrates cutting as something that keeps them alive and validates their feelings. It also allows them to change the path that has been laid out for them in life. They explain,

> My scars, to me at the time, they were more so, like, 'I went through some shit and here's the proof of it.' Like, 'I survived to tell the tale.' I feel like if I never started self-harming, I wouldn't have been able to rationalize anything. Like, cutting was a very irrational thing but it brought me back to reality. To the point where I realized

> what I was doing. And what I was doing was wrong and wrong again. Because awful as that sounds, I feel like it was necessary. I don't want to think of what else I would have done. Like, I could even end it all, so that was always the first thought. It was like, 'Well, time to die today.' Not trying to make it sound like a joke, but like that's just who I am. So, like that or drugs have been in my life my entire life. I don't know. Like, cutting was the only thing that didn't affect anyone else in my mind. Like, it affected only me. And that was my punishment for like thinking such thoughts or being the way I am. But then afterwards it was always the realization like, 'I really just did that. That was real. That was my emotions on the inside becoming visible.' It helped to rationalize what was going on inside, like, to realize it is a real thing. I'm not making it up.

Harper first describes that their scars count as courage and strength and pushes back on the idea that self-harm indicates weakness. They then go on to explain that what they are about to say is contradictory. They contend that cutting is an irrational thing but that it can transport them back to reality and to rationalize. Thus, like Sam's discussion of cutting as carving, Harper reframes it as something that is a *necessary* and wise thing to do for their own survival as the other options are drugs and death. Necessary is an interesting word as it suggests that there are no other alternatives in Harper's world. Self-harm brings them on the cusp of realizing that what they were doing to their body or what they could do to their body is wrong and no other act does that kind of labor. They must make that first incision to have those realizations, there has to be a breaking point where they decide to end with just a cut. Cutting keeps suicide, something that seemed like a real option to them or "just who they are," at bay.

Cutting also helps Harper feel strong and in control or that they “really just did that.” When their “emotions on the inside become visible” they become a narrative of strength and as was explored earlier, it flies in the face of others who think that they should be dead. Harper ends by saying that they are not “making this up,” which is the one thing that their mother and grandma consistently made them feel as though they were doing. Cutting contends that this is real. This body, this way of living, this life is a real one and the irrational act of cutting is what allows for this realization to happen.

Finally, Jay’s story around cutting as it relates to desire and rage occurred in a bathroom at school. Jay rarely went to the bathroom during passing periods for fear of being ridiculed, but during class it becomes the one place where he and his first love can cut and connect. This narrative comes alongside other major happenings in Jay’s life like coming out, getting a binder, saying goodbye to his father and losing a friend.

> I would cut in the bathroom and that also relates with this guy named Blue, who was also transgender. Blue is such a nice person. I don’t even know why I ever broke up with him. They’re so great. And they were, like, amazing. That was my first, like, same sex love. Like, we were both trans and it was, like, an amazing experience. We used to cut together in the bathroom. We cut and it was kind of like I felt like, I don’t know, I felt like we had more of a connection at the moment. But it also really hurt me. To see someone I love do that. But then we did it to each other, which was also, like, a trust thing for me. And I was like, ’Go ahead.’ I don’t know. I felt I had trust there. And then I came out which is also around the time when I said goodbye to my dad, and I was like, ‘I’m not coming over anymore, because you’re an asshole.’ And I got my first binder [used to flatten your chest]

> and then I found out my best friend Aly was going to move. And I was so heartbroken and once Aly left, I was, like, going crazy. 'Oh, this is horrible, how could this happen to me?!' All I did was just sit in my room and I cut a lot, and I cut a heart into my wrist.

While Jay's family members interpreted the cuts as suicidal and tried to support Jay by providing access to medical intervention, Jay was simultaneously using cutting to connect, figure out his sexuality/gender and get through some of the hardships of middle school. Cutting transforms the bathroom, a space where transgender youth often feel isolated, into a space of queer and transgender connection. When Jay draws his own blood and the blood of Blue, their bodies tell the same material story of pain and pleasure. At the same time, Jay imprints a heart onto his arm in response to losing his friend and, through that mark, once again represents the painful loss and simultaneous connection. These handmade cuts that concern his parents are also representative of Jay's dynamic feelings of rage and desire.

Conclusion

In a recent issue of *TSQ*, "The Issue of Blackness," theorists questioned the overarching goal of the humanizing trend in queer, trans and black studies. While the push for self-realization and space has been part of queer, black and trans organizing, many questioned the value of this humanizing project and wondered if it is ultimately libratory to strive toward an ontological state that has always and already been unavailable to black people (Ellison et. al., 2017; Warren 2017). I would argue that for queer and transgender youth of color who cut, it may also be the case that the requirements for being a human are not available to or desired by them. This is especially true when their life histories indicate that the world and their desires do not align with the bodily integrity that schools often require. At this juncture, it may be worthwhile to have a conversation around what is expected at the level of the flesh (discursive, real or otherwise) in and outside of schools.

The humanizing trend in literacy research has largely been produced in response to the ways in which literacy has been used as a tool to dehumanize. Drawing on M.E. Dyson's (2004) work, Kirkland (2009) explains that, "since Black men are seldom discussed in terms of their humanity, assumptions of their lack of literacy relate to assumptions of their lack of humanity," thus "by denying literacy, one also denies a person's humanity" (p. 378). In speaking of Derrick's tattoos and the stories that they tell, Kirkland seeks "to reiterate the humanity of a young man I knew" (p. 381). This humanizing impulse is also present in Dutro's (2011) work as she contends that providing a space for critical witnessing will simultaneously build moments for human connection where commonalities and inequities can stand in stark relief.

More broadly, in certain fields of education, the humanizing trend has been taken up to inform research methodologies that seek to decolonize. Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn's (2014) work argues that research methodologies need to shift away from the colonizing view of the neutral observer. In lieu of this positivist trend, they argue that humanizing research involves, "building relationships of care and dignity and a dialog consciousness raising for both researchers and participants. Furthermore, we view such a research stance and its processes as involving reciprocity and respect" (p. xvi). Eve Tuck (2009) has been instrumental in these conversations as well, adding that the process of decolonization insists that we attend to desire instead of damage in our research with marginalized communities. Tuck explains that, "Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness" (p. 417). In one example of centralizing desire, Tuck discusses how she took students to the exhibit "Stereotypes vs. Humantypes: Images of Blacks in the 19th and 20th Centuries" on display at the

Schomberg Center for Research on Black Culture at the New York Public Library in Harlem. There she witnessed stereotypical images which she describes as one-dimensional, cartoon like and examples of “flat damage” (p. 418). Alternatively, she remarks on the exhibit’s humantypes, which featured photographs and installments by African Americans. Tuck remarked that this art stood in stark contrast to the stereotype pieces. Instead of looking, “subhuman,” these images, “portrayed African American people as having pasts and presents and futures, as dignified in work clothes, as simultaneously serious and exuberant” (p. 418). In short, Tuck argues that the humantypes portion of the exhibit displayed the “complexity and wholeness,” of African American people (p. 419).

The scholarship that has come out of the humanizing trend, both in literacy and in education, is valuable. The methodological protocols of dialogism and consciousness-raising from Winn and Paris mirror the life histories work that I conducted with Harper, Sam and Jay. However, the attachment to the concepts of human/humanizing/humanity, causes some concern. This is because humanity and humanization is haunted by its past and present uses. Thus, Tuck can argue that the humanness that she is describing is about desire, complexity and wholeness. Kirkland can further state that Derrick’s literate acts are what restore his humanity. Winn and Paris can couple humanization and decolonization and say that the two are linked through research methods that centralize dialogue, consciousness, dignity and care. However, at the same time, Merriam Webster (2018) can foreground the act of humanizing as a transitive verb that means, “to represent as human: attribute human qualities to.” More strikingly, Merriam Webster can define the same word for English Language Learners as “to make someone or something seem gentler, kinder, or more appealing to people.” It is this remnant of humanization that maintains the colonial acts of producing subject/objects, for better or for worse, as it positions researchers as the ones that are making, representing and attributing humanity to their subjects. This is but one of the issues taken up in the aforementioned issue of *TSQ*.

Two articles that question our investments in humanization forefront the critical articulations of black feminism and afropessimism. Calvin Warren (2017), drawing on Hortense Spillers (2007), reiterates that black bodies have long been disqualified from "traditional gendered categories," and thus,

> black existence becomes something other, a blend of sorts of categories that is unrecognizable as gender. We might call this symbiotic blend a form of transness, in which the blending troubles not just gender categories but also the categories of the human itself… The problematic that black trans studies raises is that ontology itself is the fundamental issue—gender serves as the covering for a deeper onto-metaphysical challenge, the lack of the onto-phonological procedure (p. 269).

What Warren makes clear in this passage is that the call into being, the call that makes one human, is ultimately unavailable to black people as their bodies are not given the same access to what makes someone human in the first place. Gender is but one of the many facets of humanity that are necessary in order for the call to be fulfilled. This idea is further explored by Eva Hayward (2017) who uses the work of Wilderson (2010) who argues that white supremacy has created the ontological conditions that result in bodies being split between being human and black. She wonders, "Following Wilderson's critique of 'the human' as white beingness, might we ask: is beingness the problem, rather than the solution, for addressing antitrans violence" (p. 192). Hayward ends by suggesting that rejecting the protocols of humanness may actually be more life-saving than trying to play into the hands of an ontological state that has largely been refused to black people.

These issues are taken up by Jay, Harper and Sam as they are compelled to fulfill a certain standard of health and wholeness. Each of their bodies disrupts that which is expected of youth in and outside of schools. Jay's response to this violence is to find ways to not "be like this anymore" or an ontological state that is remains unknown. Harper understands their cut body, one that makes others recoil, as the only body that will keep them from dying. This logic, one that insists that wholeness is not happiness, does not align well with how schools value standardized and final products. In Sam's case, desire is coupled *with rage* producing a contradictory tale on the flesh. This tale houses what could be considered the stereotype and the humantype simultaneously. As educators we need to think about what we expect from students and whether or not those expectations fall into the hands of the same humanizing rhetoric that expects students to look, act and desire in particular ways. Furthermore, we need to start asking what we mean by care and dignity. In the case of cutting, psychology has long held the assumption that care for cutters means reducing their desire and rage, essentially estranging them from working through their emotions in ways that they see fit. At the same time, we need to think about how striving toward dignity may keep us from talking about cutting – a literacy act that may never be seen as dignified.

Now is the time to start having these tough conversations around what we understand as a valued form of literacy and what kinds of "healthy alternatives" are available in our education system. As the life histories suggest, manipulating flesh is a space where rage and desire meet. Is that possible in schools? I would venture to say that our current alternatives of what is deemed healthy do not actually make up for the visceral intensities that cutting allows. So, what kinds of emotions are we willing to let in so that the act of cutting is no longer necessary? What kinds of restructuring is necessary so that the bodies of youth who cut can traverse in schools?

Limitations

This study is limited as it only engages three youth life histories. As such, it serves merely as the beginning of a larger discussion that will require the input of educators, youth and researchers.

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Exploring and Analyzing Our Bodies, Minds and Hearts Through Multimodal Life Histories

Introduction

I served as a mentor for a community storytelling group that focuses on issues relevant to queer and transgender youth. Each week, youth came and told their stories to one another and together we would produce an artful representation that spoke simultaneously to discord, ambivalence and desire. Sometimes these moments were cathartic and spurred a sense of urgency and activism. At other times the storytelling was painful and left us with feelings of despair. Sometimes both would occur. At the end of each session, we would join hands and appreciate one another, exchanging the hope that we would see each other next week. There was never a time when I left feeling resolved. Still, the sense of community and struggle kept me coming back. After working with the group for over a year, I felt that educators needed to hear their stories in order to transform schools. With this goal in mind, I decided to embark on a research project that would showcase their lives.

I chose a life histories methodology because it mirrors the processes we became accustomed to in our time together. The creation of a life history centralizes a dialogic interaction with each participant, providing them a chance to describe who they are through multimodal texts (songs, art, poetry). They also were encouraged to play with time and space in a nonlinear and unconstrained fashion (Cole and Knowles, 2001). I framed our life history as a chance for the youth to tell their life stories so that educators could respond to their needs. I explained that this would entail an intersectional exploration of their race, age, gender, sexuality and abilities. With the hope of creating a space where they did not have to censor themselves, I mentioned that discussions, good or bad, of their bodies, sex, family and schools were possible. Along with their own narrative, I asked them to bring in artifacts, share artwork, choose songs and talk about their favorite media.

I transcribed the interviews and placed their narrations alongside photographs of the artifacts they brought, art they had created, and lyrics and photo stills from the music videos they watched. In doing this, it became clear that opening up spaces to talk about queer and transgender issues as they relate to embodiment, pleasure and sanctioned violence was an avenue that rendered texts rich in literary merit, for and by youth in struggle. My years as an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher returned to me, the Common Core standards ringing in my head. As I read through and developed the life histories, I could hear my participants writing beautifully crafted essays that had “valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1) and conveyed “complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately through effective selection” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2). They were writing narratives and developing, “real…experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3). Furthermore, as they put together different media, their life histories served as a means to analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.7). More than just standards, these life histories made space for students who have experienced moments where their hearts, bodies and minds were not widely accepted. They formed theories around identity and its flexibility, what depression and love can look like and how to be in a world that is both present with possibilities yet steadfastly working against one’s desires. In this way, we do not have to wait patiently for the next young adult book to cover these issues; instead we can look to our students.

This paper addresses how I invited youth to explore and create a multimodal life history. I also address how these life histories can be used as literary texts in the ELA classroom. I begin with a larger discussion around the importance of having space for the creation of life histories where students can explore their gender and sexuality. Then, I delve into the method that I used to work with youth in creating their life histories and pause along the way to make recommendations regarding how this may operate in an ELA classroom. Finally, I show a portion of two finished life history excerpts from a youth participant named Jay. I expand on how I put the pieces of their life history together. Finally, I explain the takeaways from the finished product in order to showcase how ELA teachers can use student texts for the purposes of literary analysis.

Queer and Transgender Youth Life Histories Literature Review

Queer and transgender youth have consistently used their own narratives to illuminate how they stand in contrast and accordance with the wider world. With each iteration, they have created a movement that contests normative political platforms largely led by older white gays and lesbians, and forged new ways of being, loving and knowing. In one example, Amy Sonnie (2000) set out to create an anthology that housed the life experiences of a multicultural community of queer youth. She explained that she wanted to create a space where youth could engage with their own stories outside of coming out narratives. In this way, Sonnie sought to position youth as experts in their own right and allow space for them to question and re-question the contours of their identity. In response to the call to talk about the tedious nature of body politics, one anonymous contributor wrote a letter about butch identity. He contended that stories like his are the ones that many wish “would disappear so that normal gay and lesbian folks can assimilate into straight society” (p. 31). In an effort to carve out some space for himself, this contributor discussed his path to becoming butch and later asserting himself as a transgender man. When he discussed how to let love in while also mitigating his approach to masculinity, he described it as building a wall. He further explained that the person he loved needs to help him,

> …make it strong. But I also need to reassure my heart that it's OK to let you in. The same holes that would be big enough for you to crawl through are big enough to allow in hurt that my heart's not sure she's ready for. I don't know how to let you in without letting in pain. I'm consulting my architect. Maybe we can figure this one out, because I'm dying for some company in here (p. 33).

By laying out the space for queer and transgender youth voices, Sonnie was able to publish contributions like the one above and showcase the rich literary work that is being done while exploring one's gender and sexuality. The line, "I'm consulting my architect," is rife with symbolic resonance. It calls into question who owns and creates a body. It also gestures toward queer theory and scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz (1999) who describes a "third mode of dealing with dominant ideology" that focuses on the labor of identity (p. 9). He states, "I understand the labor (and it is often, if not always work) of making identity [and that the intersections of essentialist and constructivist narratives are] precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid racially predicated and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation" (p. 9). Identities like the anonymous contributor's are what Muñoz would call "identities in difference" (p. 10) as they are always on the cusp of emerging, pushing through to materialize between dominant ideologies and self definition. The anonymous contributor brings this voice to the foreground as he tempers his desire for companionship with his negotiation of gender.

Susan Kuklin's (2014) *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* is another text that centralizes the stories of transgender youth. In one particular interview with Nan, who uses pronouns they/them/theirs, describes themselves as intersex and genderqueer, it becomes clear that the medical industry can reconfigure your body in ways that you have to undo and then rebuild upon. Nan describes all the different circuits of power and despair that they had to traverse before being able to get adequate and appropriate medical treatment. They explain that after not getting a consistent period, they went to several doctors at the age of 17. Each one of them had a different diagnosis and each one of them performed procedures that opened Nan's body up to scrutiny. One could not make sense of the white lining around their ovaries, another said that they had polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), one claimed that Nan was intersex (a diagnosis that Nan felt confident in and relieved by), and the last one reconfirmed the diagnosis of PCOS and put Nan on hormones that would lessen their testosterone. Even though Nan felt most comfortable and relieved with the intersex diagnosis, it was the PCOS diagnosis that won out and despite their reluctance, Nan was put on estrogen anyway. After being hospitalized for depression and diagnosed as gender dysphoric, Nan was introduced to testosterone. However, in order to continue receiving the hormone, they had to go through the process of explaining everything about themself. "Even today, right here, I struggle talking about how I feel. I'm trying to be comfortable about myself" (p. 143). Nan's story opens up space for thinking about gender and sex in ways that are not widely available because sex is seen as a binary system. Nan's narrative arc shows us that this is not the case. Their story and the way they tell it mirrors and challenges a cacophony of medical discourse that mediates Nan's body. One can feel how Nan got so close to being able to define themself only to have that moment stripped away. This leaves them in a moment of struggle which suggests to readers that the fight is just beginning and calls us to think about our stance. Both Nan's stories and the anonymous contributor give us an opportunity to think about how important it is to allow students to construct their pasts, presents and futures by exploring their memories and what they want to be possible.

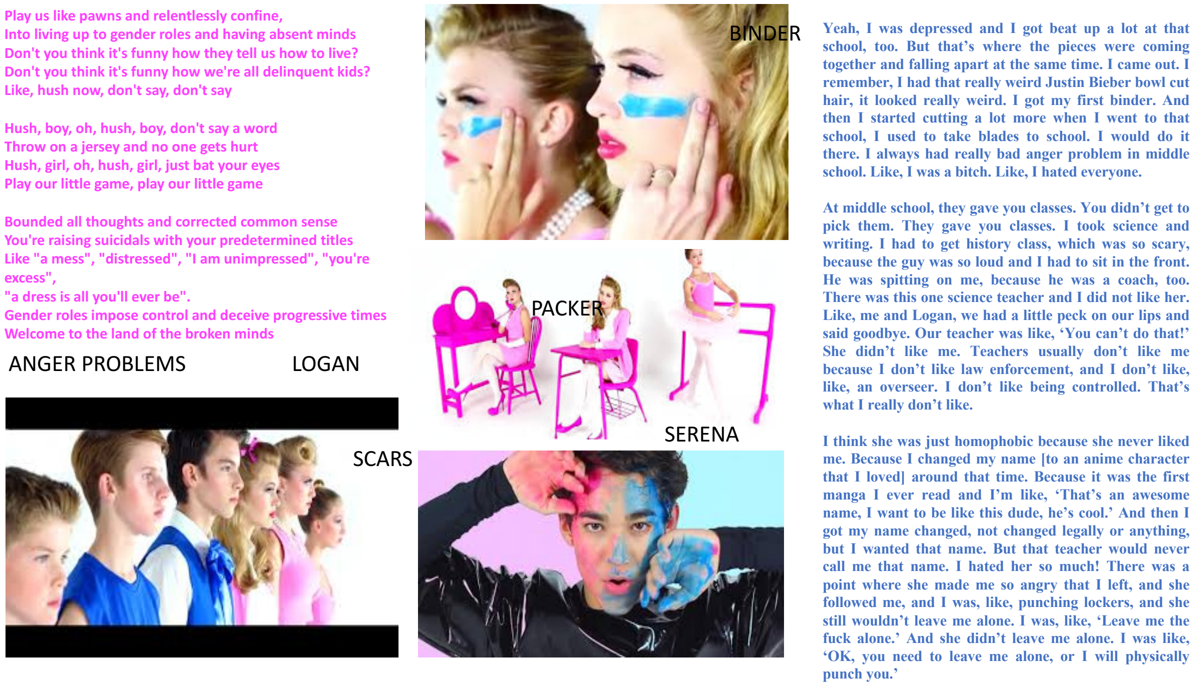
The Process of Creating Life Histories in an ELA Classroom

There are many ways to go about creating life histories that give students chances to explore their bodies, minds and hearts. The first thing to note is that it takes time to narrate years of life. This means that the project will need to be integrated over the course of at least a semester so that students can engage with their memories. There were many times during our interviews when participants, a month after our first time together, would want to add another story or expand on their interpretation. One way to do this would be to select a few days per month or one day per week when students could engage in activities that spark their memories. This allows them to slowly accumulate their thoughts. The other key aspect to building life histories is to not only consider the present and past but also the future. In both the first and last interview I asked participants where they saw themselves in the years to come, what they hoped and dreamed, and what they thought was possible. Finally, time is a social construct. Letting youth play with time as they remap their lives makes for profound moments when they can make sense of who they were with the knowledge that they have in the present day. This means that if they go off into a story that may not be within the time frame that they are exploring, that is okay. When they go back to review their notes they can think about how those two disparate pieces connect, even if they were not connected by the passage of time.

I used various methods to create a space where youth could engage with their life histories. The first interview was largely about who they were in the moment. I asked them to think about themselves through an intersectional framework. After the initial interviews, youth were then asked to pick a favorite song and then draw or sketch a vision of a timeframe in their life. They could pick adolescence, a year in school, their childhood, an event that was important to them, etc. This helped to keep them focused without incredibly narrow parameters. The song they chose could be from that timeframe or a current favorite. Then, using the picture that they drew, participants would orally narrate that timeframe of their life. I audiotaped and transcribed these interviews reviewing them with participants. When this process is transferred to the ELA classroom, I suggest that students pair up to narrate their lives and ask each other follow-up questions. Then teachers can invite their students to turn-in their audio clip for feedback or more questions. If some students are not comfortable with each other, it might benefit them to further narrate their pictures outside of the classroom before submitting their audio narration. Once students have what they consider to be a thorough vision of a timeframe in their lives, teachers can ask them to transcribe the audio and use that transcription as one of the many artifacts that inform their life histories.

Once student compile their narrations, then you can ask them to start layering artifacts into their life histories in order to create a rich landscape of their lives. I asked participants to think about media that informed their lives and share a representation of that media (favorite quotes, memes, etc.). I asked them to talk about who they considered to be their family at different times, who they considered friends and how these groups of people have changed over time. During each timeframe of their life histories, I asked them to take a moment to describe how they understood their race, age, religion, sexuality, sex and gender. For one interview, participants brought in artifacts including artwork, stuffed animals and poetry to enhance their life histories. These layers could then be put into conversation in order to produce a narrative that students could share with the class. Depending on how much time is available, students can use their narratives, drawing and media to create a longer life history, or they can also pick a timeframe and compile a smaller multimodal picture of themselves. All of these student-created texts can then be used to teach the tenants of literary analysis and Common Core standards. Concerns about outside media and its appropriateness for class can be addressed by having students send the teacher their choice of objects (media, artifacts, songs, etc.) prior to class. Then, the teacher can guide the student on how to pick a representation of the media that is appropriate for the classroom without completely censoring them. For example, one youth participant loved Manga Yaoi, a gay comic series loosely translated as Boys Love. It often features explicit scenes of anal sex, BDSM or other mildly pornographic depictions. My recommendation would be to talk to the student about what is important to them about these Mangas (e.g. gender transgression, pain and pleasure) and then choose the cover page or specific quotes that showcase why Manga Yaoi are so important to them without being outwardly explicit.

Producing and Analyzing the Product



Play us like pawns and relentlessly confine,
Into living up to gender roles and having absent minds
Don't you think it's funny how they tell us how to live?
Don't you think it's funny how we're all delinquent kids?
Like, hush now, don't say, don't say

Hush, boy, oh, hush, boy, don't say a word
Throw on a jersey and no one gets hurt
Hush, girl, oh, hush, girl, just bat your eyes
Play our little game, play our little game

Bounded all thoughts and corrected common sense
You're raising suicidals with your predetermined titles
Like "a mess", "distressed", "I am unimpressed", "you're excess",
"a dress is all you'll ever be".
Gender roles impose control and deceive progressive times
Welcome to the land of the broken minds

Yeah, I was depressed and I got beat up a lot at that school, too. But that's where the pieces were coming together and falling apart at the same time. I came out. I remember, I had that really weird Justin Bieber bowl cut hair, it looked really weird. I got my first binder. And then I started cutting a lot more when I went to that school, I used to take blades to school. I would do it there. I always had really bad anger problem in middle school. Like, I was a bitch. Like, I hated everyone.

At middle school, they gave you classes. You didn't get to pick them. They gave you classes. I took science and writing. I had to get history class, which was so scary, because the guy was so loud and I had to sit in the front. He was spitting on me, because he was a coach, too. There was this one science teacher and I did not like her. Like, me and Logan, we had a little peck on our lips and said goodbye. Our teacher was like, 'You can't do that!' She didn't like me. Teachers usually don't like me because I don't like law enforcement, and I don't like, like, an overseer. I don't like being controlled. That's what I really don't like.

I think she was just homophobic because she never liked me. Because I changed my name [to an anime character that I loved] around that time. Because it was the first manga I ever read and I'm like, 'That's an awesome name, I want to be like this dude, he's cool.' And then I got my name changed, not changed legally or anything, but I wanted that name. But that teacher would never call me that name. I hated her so much! There was a point where she made me so angry that I left, and she followed me, and I was, like, punching lockers, and she still wouldn't leave me alone. I was, like, 'Leave me the fuck alone.' And she didn't leave me alone. I was like, 'OK, you need to leave me alone, or I will physically punch you.'

Above is an example of a pieced together life history that students could subsequently analyze. The picture above features song lyrics from Benny's "Little Game," on the left, stills from Benny's music video in the middle and bottom left, Jay's narration on the far right and words that Jay drew on his picture while thinking about the timeframe of his middle school years. Students can get creative with representation but this is one way that the components of a life history can be integrated. Below is an example how the pieces of the product took shape and what the literary analysis of this product might look like. This analysis is my own but in the ELA classroom, this role could easily be transferred to the students.

Jay, who currently identifies as transgender female to male (FTM), latinx and white pansexual, chooses Benny's "Little Game," a video that he loves and a song that he chooses to listen to while he draws. The song goes,

> Play us like pawns and relentlessly confine,
> Into living up to gender roles and having absent minds
> Don't you think it's funny how they tell us how to live?
> Don't you think it's funny how we're all delinquent kids?
> Like, hush now, don't say, don't say
> Hush, boy, oh, hush, boy, don't say a word
> Throw on a jersey and no one gets hurt
> Hush, girl, oh, hush, girl, just bat your eyes
> Play our little game, play our little game
>
> Bounded all thoughts and corrected common sense
> You're raising suicidals with your predetermined titles
> Like "a mess," "distressed," "I am unimpressed," "you're excess,"
> "a dress is all you'll ever be."
> Gender roles impose control and deceive progressive times
> Welcome to the land of the broken minds

In the music video, created by the 15-year-old Benny, boys in blue and girls in pink engage in stereotypically masculine (weight lifting) and feminine (walking with books on their heads) activities. When one boy reaches for a Barbie doll and one girl opens the book on her head, the respective groups go after them. The boy and girl are then transported into a dark room where they find each other and begin placing blue and pink paint and powder on each other and themselves. It ends with Benny holding a finger up to his mouth and a slight smile on his face.

While this video plays, Jay draws different objects on paper that define his time in middle school. He draws two hearts, one with the name Logan, his first "same sex love" who is also transgender FTM, and the other with the name Serena, one of his best friends. He draws blades that he used to cut himself, his first binder (a clothing item used to bind back breasts), his first packer (a flaccid, silicone penis-shaped object that you put into your pants), the name he chose for himself based on a manga character, a fist, a face with the title "anger problems," the scars on his arm from cutting and a pansexual symbol. When he finishes drawing he discusses each object and also narrates his overall time in middle school. What is striking about his recollection and drawings is that it echoes Benny's "Little Game,"

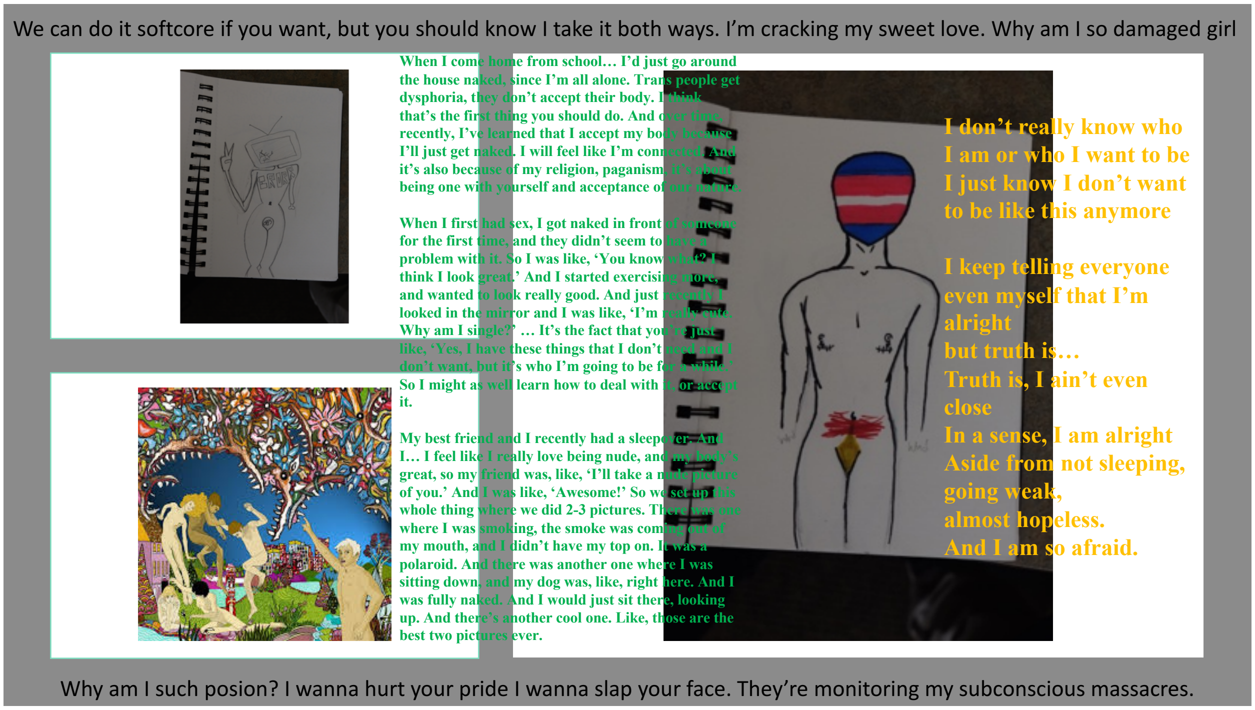
> Yeah, I was depressed and I got beat up a lot at that school, too. But that's where the pieces were coming together and falling apart at the same time. I came out. I remember, I had that really weird Justin Bieber bowl cut hair, it looked really weird.
> I got my first binder. And then I started cutting a lot more when I went to that school, I used to take blades to school. I would do it there. I always had really bad anger problems in middle school. Like, I was a bitch. Like, I hated everyone.
> At middle school, they gave you classes. You didn't get to pick them. They gave you classes. I took science and writing. I had to get history class, which was so

> scary, because the guy was so loud and I had to sit in the front. He was spitting on me, because he was a coach, too. There was this one science teacher and I did not like her. Like, me and Logan, we had a little peck on our lips and said goodbye. Our teacher was like, 'You can't do that!' She didn't like me. Teachers usually don't like me because I don't like law enforcement, and I don't like, like, an overseer. I don't like being controlled. That's what I really don't like.
>
> I think she was just homophobic because she never liked me. Because I changed my name [to an anime character that I loved] around that time. Because it was the first manga I ever read and I'm like, 'That's an awesome name, I want to be like this dude, he's cool.' And then I got my name changed, not changed legally or anything, but I wanted that name. But that teacher would never call me that name. I hated her so much! There was a point where she made me so angry that I left, and she followed me, and I was, like, punching lockers, and she still wouldn't leave me alone. I was, like, 'Leave me the fuck alone.' And she didn't leave me alone. I was like, 'OK, you need to leave me alone, or I will physically punch you.'

Like Benny, Jay's experiences are moments when he falls apart and comes back together. As he transgresses norms, he is met with violence and has to mitigate the hurt by figuring out how to move through the anger that school causes him. All the while, the schedule that defines his life in school that is given and that you "get" is "scary," as it is representative of a curriculum that is trying to mold Jay. The figure of the coach spitting on Jay in order to teach him history becomes symbolic of the ways in which information is tossed onto Jay in a way that he cannot defend. As spit is something that is hard to avoid, it seeps into Jay in a way that seems ultimately nonconsensual. He is being, in the words of Benny, played like a "pawn," being told "how to live."

Furthermore, his science teacher who he describes as akin to "law enforcement" attempts to keep Jay from his chosen gender and sexuality as she gets in the way of he and Logan and refuses to call him by his chosen name. This leads to Jay's "anger problems," and a confrontation where Jay punches the lockers, the architecture that is controlling him. All the while, the science teacher is telling him, like the Benny lyrics suggest, to "hush," that he is "excess," and that he cannot be trusted.

While Benny's "Little Game" magnified Jay's narrative in ways that made it coherent, other parts of Jays multimodal exploration were contradictory and in that contradictory space, a more nuanced vision of power relations and internal turmoil came to the fore. Below is a collage that features song lyrics from Of Montreal, a picture of the band's album *Skeletal Lamping* is in the bottom left, two pieces of art that Jay created are in the top left and right hand side of the collage, his narration of the present timeframe is in the middle and two pieces of poetry are on the right.



We can do it softcore if you want, but you should know I take it both ways. I'm cracking my sweet love. Why am I so damaged girl

When I come home from school… I'd just go around the house naked, since I'm all alone. Trans people get dysphoria, they don't accept their body. I think that's the first thing you should do. And over time, recently, I've learned that I accept my body because I'll just get naked. I will feel like I'm connected. And it's also because of my religion, paganism, it's about being one with yourself and acceptance of our nature.

When I first had sex, I got naked in front of someone for the first time, and they didn't seem to have a problem with it. So I was like, 'You know what? I think I look great.' And I started exercising more, and wanted to look really good. And just recently I looked in the mirror and I was like, 'I'm really cute. Why am I single?' … It's the fact that you're just like, 'Yes, I have these things that I don't need and I don't want, but it's who I'm going to be for a while.' So I might as well learn how to deal with it, or accept it.

My best friend and I recently had a sleepover. And I… I feel like I really love being nude, and my body's great, so my friend was, like, 'I'll take a nude picture of you.' And I was like, 'Awesome!' So we set up this whole thing where we did 2-3 pictures. There was one where I was smoking, the smoke was coming out of my mouth, and I didn't have my top on. It was a polaroid. And there was another one where I was sitting down, and my dog was, like, right here. And I was fully naked. And I would just sit there, looking up. And there's another cool one. Like, those are the best two pictures ever.

I don't really know who
I am or who I want to be
I just know I don't want
to be like this anymore

I keep telling everyone
even myself that I'm
alright
but truth is…
Truth is, I ain't even
close
In a sense, I am alright
Aside from not sleeping,
going weak,
almost hopeless.
And I am so afraid.

Why am I such posion? I wanna hurt your pride I wanna slap your face. They're monitoring my subconscious massacres.

In contrast to the piece above, what follows is a discussion of how this piece of Jay's life history came together over the course of a few different interviews. Thus, it magnifies what can happen when students are able to keep returning to their life histories. The analysis and creation is, once again, my own.

While discussing his present-day self, Jay mentioned one of his favorite bands, Of Montreal, and some of their songs from the album *Skeletal Lamping*. The album itself is frenetic as it explores different aspects of power and play. All of the songs were created by Of Montreal lead, Kevin Barnes in 2008. It begins with an upbeat ode to a lover and then quickly takes a dark turn, ending its first song with the repeated lines, "I'm cracking my sweet love." The album continues with more twists in "For Our Elegant Castle" which starts off with a declaration of the speaker's desires, "We can do it softcore if you want, but you should know I take it both ways." Without much warning we move from the playful tune to "Touched Something Hollow." One of the only songs from the album that begins and ends with finality, the singer croons, "Why am I so damaged, girl? Why am I such poison, girl? I don't know how long I can hold on. If it's gonna be like this forever." Still, the album moves on to "Gallery Piece," one song that Jay deemed "inappropriate" for us to listen to together. It describes a relationship that is based on a sadomasochist mixing of pleasure and pain. It repetitively goes through different things that the singer wants to explore with another person or perhaps themself. It states, "I wanna hurt your pride. I wanna slap your face. I wanna paint your nails. I wanna make you you scream. I wanna braid your hair. I wanna kiss your friends." Then, all of a sudden it ends by saying, "They're monitoring my sub-conscious massacres I know. Bringing it closer to the surface so it's easily pervertable." This line, which musically pops out of nowhere and can be read in multiple ways, implicates an overarching force that is seeping into the singer's thoughts, twisting them into perversion and exposing them to others. Finally, in "St. Exquisite's Confessions" listeners are told, "We function on the lowest human level, but still somehow keep living. I thought it was over but it all still hurts the same. It still hurts the same." In this way, the album never lets listeners have a moment of peace but continues to push listeners to explore both pleasure and pain simultaneously.

While listening to this Of Montreal album, Jay drew his present-day self. When he finished, he focused on one particular word he had written – nude. He explained,

> When I'd come home from school… I'd just go around the house naked, since I'm all alone. Trans people get dysphoria, they don't accept their body. I think that's the first thing you should do. And over time, recently, I've learned that I accept my body because I'll just get naked. I will feel like I'm connected. And it's also because of my religion, paganism, it's about being one with yourself and acceptance of our nature.
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> When I first had sex, I got naked in front of someone for the first time, and they didn't seem to have a problem with it. So I was like, 'You know what? I think I look great.' And I started exercising more, and wanted to look really good. And just recently I looked in the mirror and I was like, 'I'm really cute. Why am I single?' … It's the fact that you're just like, 'Yes, I have these things that I don't need and I don't want, but it's who I'm going to be for a while.' So I might as well learn how to deal with it, or accept it.
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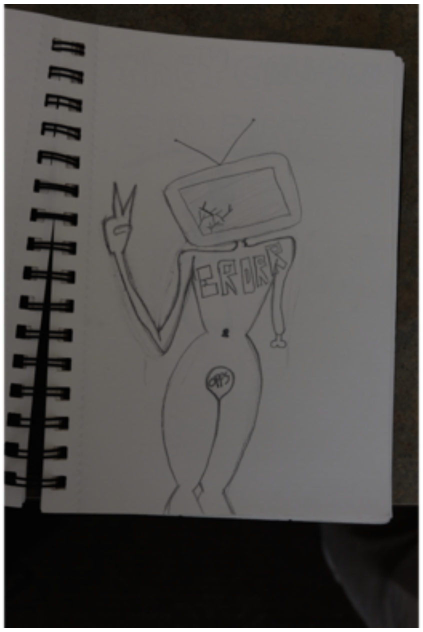
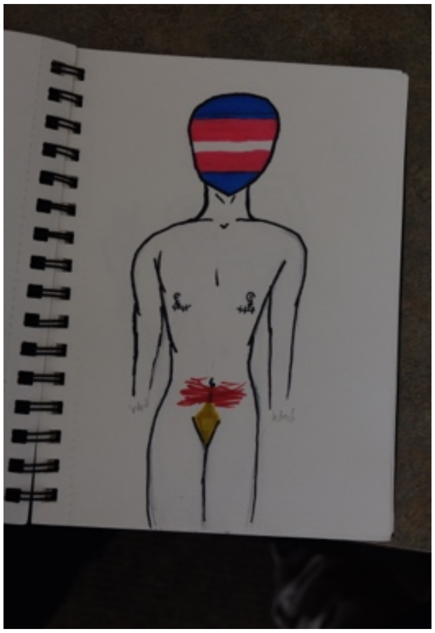
> My best friend and I recently had a sleepover. And I… I feel like I really love being nude, and my body's great, so my friend was, like, 'I'll take a nude picture of you.' And I was like, 'Awesome!' So we set up this whole thing where we did 2-3 pictures. There was one where I was smoking, the smoke was coming out of my

mouth, and I didn't have my top on. It was a polaroid. And there was another one where I was sitting down, and my dog was, like, right here. And I was fully naked. And I would just sit there, looking up. And there's another cool one. Like, those are the best two pictures ever.

Jay finished his present-day discussion with a sense of finality – everything was better. However, in our next interview we started putting more pieces into play. We added in artwork and poetry that he brought in and let it manifest side by side with his former conceptualization of the present. Two pictures and two poems stood in contrast to our prior discussion and talked more in depth about his dysphoria and depression.





Jay's Poetry:

I don't really know who I am or who I want to be
I just know I don't want to be like this anymore
I keep telling everyone
even myself that I'm alright

> but truth is…
> Truth is, I ain't even close
> In a sense, I am alright
> Aside from not sleeping,
> going weak,
> almost hopeless.
> And I am so afraid.

These competing narratives of acceptance and not having full closure mimic the back and forth expressed in the Of Montreal album. As Jay playfully explores his body in both the presence of himself, his friend and his lover, he speaks back to the rhetoric that tells him he is supposed to hate himself. Jay finds solace in the ways that his religion gives him the power to be nude along with his first sexual experience and the pictures he takes with his friend. His artwork, on the other hand, tells another story. One, with a broken TV as a head, a severed arm, "erorr" across the chest and "opps" across the groin indicates a different interpretation of self. All of these express discontentment and an anger at the forces that shaped Jay's body incorrectly. However, the figure is also holding up a peace sign as if to mockingly suggest that everything is fine. In some ways this reads as a commentary on how one might try to cover up what is going on. Alongside this dysphoric image is one of possibility. The face is draped in the transgender flag, accompanied by a body that reads as more masculine – the hips are narrow, the shoulders wider, scars across the chest indicate the completion of top surgery and the possibilities of different genitals. Finally, the poems, like Of Montreal's "St. Exquisite's Confessions," linger alongside Jay's optimistic moments. He is overwhelmed by depression in these pieces and when he discussed them expressed that he is so afraid that the crushing feelings of despair would consume him. The highs and lows resonate across Jay's narrative without completion.

Conclusion

Jay's work is one example of how students' life histories can ignite crucial, unanswerable questions that are valued in ELA contexts and Common Core standards. In response to life histories like Jay's, students could ponder how it is that our bodies are subjected to violence, where we can find moments of agency, and how the literary helps us to make sense of these issues. The creation of life histories also positions students as authors in their own right, placing value on what they have gone through and who they want to become.

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Conclusion

While writing the three papers, I was engaged in work with educators. I often floated some of my ideas and questions during our discussions. I found that educators were grappling with the same issues: How do we make room for the weird? How do we combat the administrative pull to standardize? How can we support those who cut? What can we do, given the constraints of the Common Core, in our own classrooms? In each paper, I tried to address the theoretical and practical simultaneously in order to create a queer and transgender pedagogical praxis that centralized the tenants of black feminism, desire/rage, and the lived realities of queer and transgender youth lives. While the stories of Harper, Sam and Jay made their way into each paper, Draco and Jacob were often left behind due to space constraints. In this conclusion, I will address how Draco and Jacob were present in the previous papers. I will also discuss aspects of their life histories that are in need of further study. More specifically, I will attend to their understandings of reality and fantasy and how these understandings allow them to explore different visions of themselves.

Draco and Jacob did inform the previous papers in this dissertation. It was on Jacob's social media site that I first spotted "The Butterfly Project" and asked about its relevance. In his interview, Jacob relayed that he had utilized the technique but that, like the butterflies themselves, the effectiveness quickly faded. It was his social media post that lead me to recollect that others, like Jay, had posted a link to the project as well. Jacob's discussion of piercings also informed the paper on cutting. I consistently thought about the stories that he told that detailed how he had managed to pierce his own face. As someone who was into body modification, he found great pleasure in the painful process of self-piercing. Piercing does not necessarily count as cutting but appears to offer a similar kind of self-fashioning that cutting also enables.

Both youth also provided many instances where they faced adversity, especially in terms of how to keep up with schooling when they were put into different foster care situations. Throughout their high school years, both youth had to move multiple times due to their parents either giving up (as was the case with Jacob) or losing (as was the case with Draco) custody of their child. So, each had to figure out how to make constant movement and schooling work. Thankfully, their respective schools supported them through online, self-guided learning systems. This gave Draco and Jacob the opportunity to be away from and come back to school. They each ended up with a formal high school diplomas because of the flexibility the school offered.

In Draco's life history there was a fondness for fantasy and animation which he described as a far better medium for exploring sexuality than real-life depictions. He explained,

> **Draco:** So, I discovered Sekai-ichi Hatsukoi, which is an anime about three different gay couples. And then I discovered Junjo Romantica and it, kind of, branched out from there and I was, like… and I was, like, 'I wish I were one of those boys, I want to have a boyfriend like that!' but I didn't want a boyfriend in the sense that I was a girl, I wanted a boyfriend in the sense that I was a boy.
>
> **Bess:** Was there any particular thing, I mean, so, I don't know if there is non-anime shows that would have the same sorts of storylines or…
>
> **Draco:** Yeah.
>
> **Bess:** Would you… Could you only find that in anime?
>
> **Draco:** I mean, I'm sure there was probably non-anime shows, in all honesty, but I've never, even as a kid, I mean, because we touched base a little bit on this, but even as a kid, I've never been interested really in reality. Even today I'm not really

interested in realistic things. Sexuality-wise, I prefer animated stuff. So, I mean, like, actually, can I be explicit?

Bess: Yeah.

Draco: I started discovering sexuality and porn and stuff around that age-ish. I was still, like, 'Ah! Kissing!' but I don't think I ever actually watched porn until I was… fourteen or fifteen. I don't know. Where was I going? I lost my train of thought.

Bess: You were talking, well, we were first talking about how anime had that for you…

Draco: Oh… Right. Yes. I was going to say how in preference to anime and gay stuff and smut and stuff that I never ever really liked realistic stuff. If anything, that stuff is just gross, ew. I'm sorry. Dicks aren't pretty.

Bess: Right.

Draco: Sorry.

Bess: And anime is an alternative version of that?

Draco: Yup. And it was unrealistic and everything, and, I don't know, I just, I don't know, I've always liked anime, I've always liked cartoons. Realistic stuff, real people, it's always seemed fake to me.

Bess: So, the real stuff seems fake?

Draco: Yeah.

Bess: And the fake stuff seems more real?

Draco: Yeah, because, I mean, anime is scripted and same with realistic stuff, but with anime, those characters don't have any place in reality other than that anime, whereas with realistic stuff, they're actors, they have lives, you never can actually

> know what other character is. And, so, for me, anime, cartoons and other media similar to that have a more realistic quality and sense in the fact that that character exists in that universe, at that time and only that. And, sure, you can deviate away from that reality and twist the character a bit, but that character will always remain what it is in the present. And, so, I think that's why I enjoyed anime more than realism.

Draco remains uninterested in reality because it bears with it impossibility. Real life actors have lives, when they act what they are doing is essentially fake. Possibilities appear to be foreclosed when reality hits. The penis that is centralized in classic pornography is something that Draco disidentifies with as it presents itself in unsavory ways. So, while Draco may want to embody maleness, it is not the kind that is valorized in "gross" pornography. This is not the case with anime as Draco knows that these characters are not real and because they are not real they provide a flexibility and opening for Draco. He sees himself, his desires and his ideal role embedded in a fantasy world. The unreal is attainable for Draco and becomes his new reality.

In Jacob's interviews what I found compelling was his decisions around how, when and where to be open about his feelings. His interviews had many minutes of silence where he sat thoughtfully, deciding whether or not he wanted to answer my questions or what he wanted to add next to his story. When we walked through his social media presence he was able to articulate a different side of himself that was not apparent in the other parts of his interviews. Social media platforms, as they gave him the ability to articulate how he was feeling through other people's pictures, words and videos, were the one place where he seemed to feel less encumbered. He was part of a much larger youth trans community, and like his fellow peers he posted pictures of his top surgery and recorded himself when he began testosterone so that he could document his transformation as he continued his treatments. Along with videos that celebrated his new body, he simultaneously posted poetry that dealt with feelings of great sadness and wanting to be a different person. He also mentioned the he felt like he was always the one to give emotional support yet never receive it from other people.

When I reflected with him, I mentioned that his online presence seemed different and more vulnerable. He said that he had heard that before and that, “people don’t see this side of me.” I pondered what Jacob had said for some time. People, obviously, did see that side of him. Real-life friends commented and connected with him through his social media presence. Still, in daily real-life, Jacob’s feelings were not affirmed. For Jacob, there is no apparatus or mutual understanding that allows for his online presence to share the same social meaning as his real-life presence. Like Draco’s exploration of sexuality through anime, Jacob also needs a different kind of platform to further understand himself away from what is valued as real-life. Both need others to understand that about them.

These two disparate yet interconnected stories leave more to be explored. As queer and transgender youth lives suggest, educators need to rethink how it is that reality functions in their classroom. Where is there room for imagination, the integration of online texts and fantasy worlds where anything is possible?

Appendices: The Interviews

Appendix A: Introduction and General Questionnaire

Opening: I am collecting the life histories of queer and transgender youth. I am hoping to showcase the diversity of opinions, unique life trajectories and concerns that need to be acknowledged. This is an anonymous process meaning I will not use your real name or any information that could potentially lead back to someone identifying who you are. In the following interviews I would like to talk about your childhood, your adolescence, your time at school, who you are as a person now and who you are online (for example, what are you like on Facebook, SnapChat, Twitter or Instagram). However, I am also open to adding anything specific that you would like to talk about. This is your life history, so I want you to feel that you have a say in how it gets constructed. You can let me know at any time that you would like to talk about something else or that you would like to add to anything that we have. You can also ask me questions. You also have the right to change your opinions, feelings and beliefs along the way. Before I begin with my questions would you like to tell me anything specific that you would like this research to be or to look like?

General Questionnaire:

How do you understand your race?

How do you understand your gender?

How do you understand your sexuality?

Are there unique attributes to yourself that society does not accept?

Do you work?

Do you volunteer?

Are you a member of any clubs at school or outside of school? If so, what are they? What are they like?

What attributes about your personality do you love?

Who are your friends and what are they like?

Are you dating anyone? If so, what are they like?

What is your school like? Do you have favorite classes? Favorite teachers?

Are there things about school that you love?

Are there things about your school that you dislike?

How did the school you attended understand you? Did they make room for your unique personality? Did your classes reflect who you were?

Who do you consider to be part of your family? What are they like?

What social issues, if any, are most important to you? Have they changed over time?

Appendix B: Childhood Questionnaire

Drawing: Here is a piece of paper, in five minutes can you draw yourself as a child? This does not have to be a "good" drawing and it can be abstract meaning you can draw shapes, use words - whatever you like. Represent yourself as a child to the best of your ability.

What does this drawing mean to you?

Questions: You can pick from the questions on this page or choose to talk about this period of your life in a way that you see fit. If you want to jump from one question to another, please feel free.

What are some of your most vivid memories as a child?

What was your home like as a child?

Who did you consider to be part of your family as a child?

What was your family like when you were a child?

What were your favorite songs? Why did you like them?

What were your favorite TV shows? Why did you like them?

What was your school like?

Who were your teachers? What were they like?

Did you confront any issues in school when you were young?

How did the school you attended understand you? Did they make room for your unique personality? Did your classes reflect who you were?

Who were your friends?

What kind of place did you grow up in? Can you describe your neighborhood?

Did you confront any issues at home when you were young?

Did you have a crush on anyone?

How did you understand your sexuality when you were a child?

How did you understand your gender?

How did you understand your race?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix C: Adolescence Questionnaire

Drawing: Here is a piece of paper, in five minutes can you draw yourself when you were 13? This does not have to be a “good” drawing and it can be abstract meaning you can draw shapes, use words - whatever you like. Represent yourself as a 13-year-old to the best of your ability.

What does this drawing mean to you?

Framing the Interview: For the rest of the interview I would like you think about when you first became a teenager.

Questions: You can pick from the questions on this page or choose to talk about this period of your life in a way that you see fit. If you want to jump from one question to another, please feel free.

What are some of your most vivid memories?

What was your home like?

Who did you consider to be part of your family?

What was your family like?

What were your favorite songs? Why did you like them?

What were your favorite TV shows? Why did you like them?

What was your school like?

Who were your teachers? What were they like?

How did the school you attended understand you? Did they make room for your unique personality? Did your classes reflect who you were?

Did you confront any issues in school?

Who were your friends?

What kind of place did you grow up in? Can you describe your neighborhood?

Did you confront any issues at home when you were young?

Did you have a crush on anyone?

How did you understand your sexuality?

How did you understand your gender?

How did you understand your race?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix D: Current Life Questionnaire

Drawing: Here is a piece of paper, in five minutes can you draw yourself? This does not have to be a "good" drawing and it can be abstract meaning you can draw shapes, use words - whatever you like. Represent yourself to the best of your ability.

What does this drawing mean to you?

Questions: You can pick from the questions on this page or choose to talk about this period of your life in a way that you see fit. If you want to jump from one question to another, please feel free.

Has anything big happened in the last month or so?

In the past year what are your most vivid memories?

What is your home like now?

Who do you consider to be part of your family?

What is your family like?

What are your favorite songs? Why do you like them?

What are your favorite TV shows? Why do you like them?

What is your school like?

Who are your teachers? What are they like?

Are you confronting any issues at school?

How does the school you attend understand you? Do they make room for your unique personality? Do your classes reflect who you were?

Are you in health class or sex education? What is it like? Do you feel like the class helps you?

Who are your friends?

What kind of place do you live in? Can you describe your neighborhood?

Are you confronting any issues at home?

Do you have a crush on anyone?

Are you dating anyone?

How do you understand your sexuality?

How do you understand your gender?

How do you understand your race?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix E: Discussion of Art Creations

For this interview please bring any poetry, artwork or songs that you have written. We will look at them together and discuss their significance to you.

Appendix F: Digital Worlds

What kind of online communities do you participate in?

Do you read or write fanfiction? If so, what kind? Can I read it?

Questions: You can pick from the questions on this page or choose to talk about this period of your life in a way that you see fit. If you want to jump from one question to another, please feel free.

Are you on Facebook? If so, can you show me?

- How far back does your profile go?
- Can you narrate your thinking and what was happening with each post?
- Can you explain what was happening when you wrote this comment?
- Why did you choose to link to this video?

- Why did you share this news article?

Are you on other social media platforms? If so, can you show me?

- How far back does your profile go?
- Can you narrate your thinking and what was happening with each post?
- Can you explain what was happening when you wrote this comment?
- Why did you choose to link to this video?
- Why did you share this news article?

Do you think that you are your true self online?

Appendix G: Artifact Conversation

For this interview I would like for you to bring in different objects (pictures, songs, stuffed animals, toys, school projects, etc.) that represent you at different points in your life. We will go through them together and you can let me know why you chose them and what they mean to you.

Appendix H: Creating an Album

For this interview please bring in any music that defines your life. When we are together we can create an album that defines who you are.

Appendix I: Piecing Together the Data

We have now completed all of our interviews. I have transcripts, photographs and screen shots from all of our interviews and I would like to go through them with you. While we go through them you can make comments, fill in gaps or extend on stories that you think are particularly important. Then, you can tell me what stories are the most important and that you think need to be heard by others.