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NARRATIVES OF QUEERNESS: QUEER WORLDMAKING (IN) THE CLASSROOM WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

A Dissertation Presented

by

RACHEL R. BRIGGS

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2019

Department of Communication

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ABSTRACT

NARRATIVES OF QUEERNESS: QUEER WORLDMAKING (IN) THE
CLASSROOM WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

SEPTEMBER 2019

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This research brings together education research, queer theory, and performance theory to consider the worldmaking potential of the queer classroom. Using students' stories about queerness in the classroom and my own stories about the classroom, I ask what we can learn from students' voices about how queerness is/can be performed in the classroom and through relations. This study uses critical ethnography, personal narrative, and performative writing to examine the production of subject positions in the classroom, to connect this to a queer theoretical framework, and to explore the worldmaking potential of the classroom. I interviewed seven undergraduate students at a large, public university in New England. Participants identified as LGBTQ+ and had enrolled in at least one Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies course within the past two years. In each chapter, I use my own narratives and utilize a reflexive turn to examine the ways in which I make meaning about experiences with students in the classroom, and I present students' stories to understand how they are making sense of queerness in the classroom. Analysis attends to the ways that students' stories are constrained by and

resist discourses of queerness, how the broader context of power structures produces and shapes the subject positions available to students, and the limits of possibilities of worldmaking in the classroom, including an imagined narrative of a queer classroom. I argue that the students' narratives engage in discourses of power in complicated ways that reflect both constraints of discourse and resistance to normalizing processes of discourse, which, in turn, problematizes my own narratives about students' uses of identity politics and attachment to structures of normativity. I argue that their stories reflect a complex understanding of classroom performances and queerness, and that, ultimately, we as educators should find ways to create the space to engage these performances in our classrooms. In conclusion, I address what we might do with our bodies in a queer classroom, reflecting on my own experiences in the classroom to show how we can struggle with queerness in productive ways.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: TELLING STORIES ABOUT QUEERNESS

Teachers like to tell stories about teaching. *I* like to tell stories about teaching.

And about students. Sometimes, these stories are joyful, fun stories. Like, my third grader

who said to me, "Miss, we can play 'rock, paper, scissors, shoes!'" Often enough,

though, I tell about my own frustrations in a class. Many of my stories are about young,

progressive, queer students in my women, gender, and sexuality studies (WGSS) classes.

The student who didn't "get" my lecture on gender performativity. The student who

"called out" another student for their "incorrect" language use. A student criticizing me

for not including a particular sexual or gender identity in the course content or not

including all 70-something sexual and gender identities. A student that regulated the

speech of other students or instructors through employing discourses of trauma and

offense.

In the past few years, I have often found myself engaged in conversations with

other instructors of WGSS classes about these contentious interactions that happen with

students—often with students who identify as queer. These conflicts occur between the

politically radical queer-identified students and instructors who are, themselves,

politically progressive or radical and, often, also queer. And we instructors often share

our stories and nod in agreement and sympathy. These stories about the classroom are

always framed through my own experiences as the instructor. Whatever the story may be,

I spin a narrative around it, making meaning of my experiences as a teacher and making

assumptions about my students and their actions.

Several semesters ago, I taught a section of Introduction to WGSS. This section of 25 students was one of six sections of a large lecture of 150 students. We met once a week, and this was our first meeting. In the large lecture, the students were tasked with bringing to our first section a reflection on the activity of asking their friends about their definitions of feminism. The exercise was intended to be an entry point into thinking about and discussing definitions of feminism.

The WGSS course satisfied a general education requirement, and there were students from many different majors and a range of experience and interest in issues of feminism. I expected varied responses to this exercise, knowing that some students were politically active on campus and others were thinking about feminism for the first time. I expected that race, gender, sexual, and other identities might affect the answers and that this could be one focus of our conversation. Ultimately, the goal of the discussion was for the students to understand that WGSS is an academic discipline with a body of literature that we would be studying throughout the semester.

During the discussion, one student raised her hand to share her response, and I called on her. The student read to me as a cis-gender woman and as normatively gendered, though she had not explicitly identified as such. She shared that her friends' responses differed along lines of gender—the men's answers differed from the women's answers. Another student, who had already self-identified as queer and as using the gender-neutral pronoun "they," responded by saying, "She said men and women, and that's a binary, and we should never use a binary." The student stretched out their tall, thin frame and put their legs into the center of our circle. "It's offensive." They didn't

look directly at the other student, instead, addressing the class as a whole, glancing around at the other students, at me.

I'm familiar with this performance—the ways that young, politically progressive queer students do queerness in the classroom. Doing queerness through regulating the language of others and a competitive posturing of who is doing queer "right." I've seen these interactions turn into conflicts between WGSS instructors and students or derail a class discussion. I didn't want this to become a time drain, another conflict with a young queer who though I was teaching "wrong." And I knew I had content I needed cover during the class period. It was a standardized general education course, after all, and the students would all be required to take the same exam.

I said something vague about how the binary is a construction and not everyone identifies as one of the categories in the binary, and it's important we remember this. I then quickly moved on, calling on another student to share the responses they found. In my haste to avoid a conflict and move through the set agenda, there was a missed moment of possibility and of potential connection and transformation. And, not for the first time, I was left wondering exactly what the student was trying to achieve in my classroom with this particular performance of queerness.

I told this story to another instructor in the WGSS department. She nodded in understanding and shared her own recent story of working with these young, politically progressive queer students who often take our classes. Several students had taken issue with how trans identity was theorized in a reading a decade old, refusing to historicize it and, instead, claiming it is oppressive to even be in the curriculum. I nodded in understanding.

One of the narratives that I tell to understand these classroom conflicts is that they are connected to a broader pattern of conflicts that are occurring around issues of gender and sexuality and what it means to be queer beyond the classroom. For example, in the fall of 2016, Kimberly Pierce was scheduled to speak at a private liberal arts college in Oregon after a showing of her 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry* (Sharp, Hart, Kolodner, Vachon, & Pierce, 1999), a fictional account of the real-life events of the sexual assault and murder of a young, gender-non-conforming person, Brandon Teena, in rural Nebraska. A group of undergraduate students showed up to protest the event, accusing Pierce of transphobia and of making money from the exploitation of trans lives and murders (Halberstam, 2016). They hung signs on the walls of the event space and yelled at Pierce, at least one person calling her a bitch. As Halberstam notes in the BullyBloggers post covering the event, when released, this film was lauded by many in the queer community as a breakthrough in "representation of gender variant bodies" (para. 1). But now, young queers are, according to Halberstam, taking offense to this film. Halberstam names this difference as a clash between different historical paradigms of queerness. The lack of understanding about this paradigmatic shift becomes apparent in the conversations in the comments section of the blog with many of the commenters wondering about the purpose of the students' protest.

Similarly, there was a recent public conflict on the FaceBook page of a friend of mine who does consulting work on gender and trans issues. This person had written a book called the *Trans* Ally Workbook* (Shlasko, 2014). A young, politically progressive, queer, undergraduate student took issue with the use of an asterisk, a language convention that was commonly used at the time of the book's publication and generally

accepted by queer communities as a way to represent the multitude of and fluidity of

gender identities that "trans*" might refer to. It's representative of a particular historical

moment but is no longer the "right" way to write trans. My friend and I were discussing

this, trying to make sense out of what happened. We assumed that the young queer shared

our (queer) political aims and should be able to historicize this use of an asterisk. My

friend is currently revising the book (without the asterisk). This student's comment was

on a public Facebook page and was a public performance of queerness, audienced by

other Facebook users and subsequently taken up in a longer conversation on the

Facebook page. My friend and I wondered if we were understanding queer differently

from this student or, perhaps, performing queer differently. We questioned if

conversations like this were taking time and energy away from other, more important,

queer political goals. As my friend and I debriefed this conflict, we asked, what was that

young person trying to accomplish?

In the classroom setting, these moments can feel to me like a failure of connection

with the students. Sedgwick (2003) writes of "near-miss pedagogy." In our teaching, we

encounter these near misses—a pedagogical technique meant to invoke a symmetrical

response instead invokes a complementary one. For example, in the case of the WGSS

context, in the intent to invoke a complementary response, I instead invoked ire.

Sedgwick tells a story about pointing out the moon to her cat, wanting the cat to look at

the moon. The cat inevitably sniffs her finger, unaware that she is trying to bring his

attention to the moon. And Sedgwick doesn't learn to not do this, and the cat doesn't learn

to not sniff her finger. I can't help but think that the students are futilely gesturing at

something, while I'm just watching their fingers. What are they pointing at? How are

students understanding/doing queerness in the classroom? What can we learn about queer worldmaking from their meaning-making about queerness in the classroom?

In this dissertation, I interview undergraduate students about their experiences of queerness in WGSS classrooms. I consider the students' subjugated knowledges as worthy of understanding and ask how the students are understanding queerness.

Using critical ethnography (Madison, 2012) and personal narrative (Langellier & Peterson 2011) methods, I examine the normative discursive structures of their narratives from a queer theoretical framework. In each chapter, I present my own narratives about the students, reflexively presenting my own subject position to contextualize the stories I tell about my students, and I use the students' stories about classroom experiences to show the ways in which they are making meaning of queerness in the classroom.

In Chapter 2, I look at the ways in which students' stories are constrained by discourses of queerness and the ways that their complex understandings of the classroom reflect how they resist these normalizing forces in the classroom. This chapter is also framed by my own narrative of the classroom that I tell—that students are using simplistic identity politic frameworks in the classroom—a narrative that is ultimately troubled by the students' stories.

In Chapter 3, I examine the context of our stories in higher education, directly examining the ways that neoliberalism, systems of oppression, and traditional educational methods shape our stories and the ways that some subjectivities are produced as belonging and other subject positions as made invisible in education and in research. This takes the context as object-of-study and reflects the inextricable nature of text and context in narratives (Madison, 2012; Langellier & Peterson , 2011), and addresses the ways in

which power works to form subject positions, an analysis of which is often outside of the scope of traditional research (Madison, 2012). Finally, I address worldmaking through the performative writing of imagined narratives and the theoretical framework of Butler's (1997) *Psychic Life of Power*. I begin with my own narratives about my experiences queer worldmaking in higher education and the challenges I've encountered. I use *Psychic Life of Power* to understand how the students' engagement with worldmaking is limited by the process of subjection. And, finally, to reflect worldmaking here in this text and through this text, I offer a short, imagined narrative about a queer classroom composed from the various suggestions of the students in their interviews and my own imagined queer classroom. This imagined narrative attempts to engage in imagining the queer possibilities that could be on the horizon (Muñoz, 2009) through performative writing (Madison, 2012; Pollock, 2010). In the conclusion, I tell a story about my connection to my students to show my changing relationship to students and to examine my own queer worldmaking in the classroom.

This interdisciplinary work focuses on meaning-making through the stories students told in interviews and the stories I tell about students. It's a communication project that examines how students construct meaning from their experiences of queerness in the classroom. This focus on production of meaning is in line with queer theory as well, in that a theory of performativity (Butler, 1993a) asks that we consider the production of categories and not take categories as a given. In other words, though I interviewed LGBTQ+[1] students, the aim here is to look at how they and I produce

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[1] I use LGBTQ+ to refer to the multitude of sex and gender identities that can fall under this umbrella term. When referencing or quoting an author, I use the terminology that they use in the original text. I also want to note that while all of the participants identified as some identity within

meaning *about* queerness and how to do queerness and not to assume that there is any

given queer identity or category of student whose experiences we might examine.

I use a queer theory lens for understanding the meaning-making processes of

LGBTQ+ students by examining how their stories draw on, resist, and complicate

discursive formations of queer. This includes looking at the ways in which stories are

constrained by discourses of power, push toward action against power, and imagine

worldmaking possibilities. If we understand the students better, we might further our own

understanding of queerness in ways that are useful and radical, and we might better act

together and open the space for queerness, queer transformation, and worldmaking in the

classroom.

Ultimately, I argue that the students' narratives engage in discourses of power in

complicated ways that reflect both constraints of discourse and resistance to normalizing

processes of discourse, which, in turn, problematizes my own narratives about students'

use of identity politics and attachment to homonormativity. I argue that we should see the

students' disorderly bodies not just as chaos but as doing something (Halberstam, 2011),

that their stories reflect complex understanding of classroom performances and

queerness, and that, ultimately, we as educators should find ways to create the space to

engage these performances in our classrooms.

Review of Literature

In this section, I review the literature of interdisciplinary fields of performance

studies and education. I describe the ways in which scholars have theorized the classroom

as a site of transformation and politics to place this research project within a broader

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LGBTQ+, not all students identified as queer. Bree, in particular, specifically does not identify as
queer and asked that I not identify her as queer in this dissertation.

conversation with those doing social justice work in the classroom. I look at the literature on performance studies pedagogy to examine the ways that performance studies scholars are understanding the classroom as a site where we struggle with and negotiate power structures. I then highlight the ways in which education research and theory has examined queer theory and queer pedagogy in the classroom. Finally, I outline queer worldmaking as the transformational goal of my classroom practice and this research project.

Classroom as Site of Transformation

I chose to look at the classroom, both because it's where I do much of my social justice work and because it's a political site of potential transformation. The classroom is embedded within and produced by the larger systems in which it's situated. It's a site of cultural production (McLaren, 1995) where the complicated politics of gender and sexuality play out. Warner (1993) argued that the sexual order—heteronormativity—permeates all social institutions, including higher education. The broader structures of oppression play out in the microcosm of the classroom, and education has long been at the center of research on and critique of social inequalities and cultural bias (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985).

Our bodies and the bodies of our students produce and reproduce sociopolitical relationships of structures of power (McLaren, 1995; Pineau, 2002) within a society rooted in historical legacy of social divisions and oppression (Adams, Bell, & Goodman, 2016). The system of education in the US is often framed in mainstream discourse as operating as an equalizer, though it's clear that it does not function this way (Young, 2011). A framework of "inclusion" comes to stand in for the actual process of equalizing. Rather, classrooms are often sites where oppression gets perpetuated (hooks, 1994), a

microcosm of broader power structures. The classroom is a site of production of categories—including sex and gender. It is a site where even "student" and "teacher" are produced through discourses of power. We all, in some ways, are disciplined subjects in the classroom (Dolan, 2001). As instructors, our pedagogies often reproduce relations of domination, and we are rewarded for teaching in more traditional styles that favor the banking method of education (Freire, 2001; hooks, 1994) in which students are viewed as empty vessels who the expert teacher can "fill" with knowledge. Traditional models of teaching often take the form of a banking method of education and have become part of the status quo in schooling. We risk real life consequences when we challenge the status quo (hooks, 1994)—getting poor evaluations from students or even being fired. Even when we have more agency over our classrooms and our pedagogy—for example, if we teach in departments that value social justice in the classroom—we can unintentionally teach in ways that reinforce the dominant culture (Pineau, 2002).

The classroom is also a site in which transformational change is possible. We can use pedagogical practices to create classrooms that are not sites of oppression and enact pedagogical practices to make change (hooks, 1994, 2003). Education can transform society (Freire, 1970). In the classroom, we can further utopian ideals (Denzin, 2003), foster critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), and develop a critical imagination (Denzin, 2006). We can push back against schooling, remaining an agent of the status quo (Giroux, 2003).

To different authors/educators, transformation takes on multiple meanings. Drawing on the work of Freire (2001), Eder and McCluskey wrote about the importance of deconstructing the distinction between knower and learner. Giroux (2003) argued that

we, as teachers, should educate students to think critically and resist dominant forms of oppression. Other educators advocate for anti-oppression education (Adams, Bell, & Goodman, 2016; hooks, 1994) and to work agents of change to disrupt and resist all forms of oppression. In this study, I use queerworldmaking as the type of transformational change that I work toward in my research and teaching practices.

Performance Studies and the Classroom

In performance studies, teaching and learning are embodied processes (Alexander, 2006). "Activating the performing body in the classroom suggests a repertoire of teaching strategies that encourages students' active and critical participation within and beyond the classroom" (Pineau, 1998, p. 132). With an emphasis on embodied practices in the classroom, Alexander argued that performance studies pedagogy can challenge the status quo through the interrogation of legitimated forms of teaching and learning. Performance pedagogy should be committed to transforming social systems rooted in inequitable power structures.

Performance becomes the lens through which educators can be critically reflexive and explore privilege and the complex intersections of social identities, such as race, sex, class, and gender. Cooks and LeBesco (2006) have similarly written about the importance of the teacher's body in the classroom and the importance of what practitioners *do* in the classroom. Stucky and Wimmer (2002) explicitly connected performance studies pedagogies to social justice and pointed to the inseparability of scholarship, performance, and teaching, disrupting the boundaries between them.

Johnson (2001) made explicit connections between performance studies, pedagogy, and queer theory in his seminal work, "Quare studies." He critiqued the

whiteness of queer studies through a performance of being queer in the classroom. His work resists the discursive formations of normalization that occur when all bodies—including black and brown bodies—are subsumed under one label and then assumed to have the same experiences as White queers. He makes a case for quare studies in the academy to disrupt operations of racism in education.

Alexander (1999) also examined race, class, and gender in the classroom, examining the cultural performances in a classroom through his own experiences and the experiences of Black male students whom he interviewed. In this (auto)ethnography, he speaks to the complexities of negotiating race in the classroom in which Black students were struggling to celebrate their own cultural performances within the larger discourses of power. He offered his own experiences as a Black male to demonstrate that he also negotiates power within the borders of education and the classroom, finding connection with his Black male students in the classroom.

These scholars offer a range of contributions to pedagogy and to understanding dynamics of the classroom. I add to this body of work by including more student voices in this literature, adding their stories to the larger narratives about liberatory pedagogies and education. Like Alexander, I offer my own stories and the students' stories together to interrogate the meaning-making that happens about the classroom and queerness.

Queer Education Theory

In educational research, there is a dearth of literature that looks at queerness, specifically, in the classroom setting from the student's point of view. Much of the research on "queer" students has focused on the negative experiences of LGBTQ+ students and how to support them, but several authors have explored ways in which queer

theory can be applied to education research and pedagogy. For example, Coloma (2006) brought together postcolonial framework and queer theory to examine experiences of Philipino schooling. Using these two frameworks, he looked at how power structures work to normalize particular subjectivities through the intersection of heterosexism and colonialism.

Abes and Kasch (2007) applied a queer theoretical lens to their data, presenting the story of one lesbian-identified student's stories about her sexuality. They noted that her identity and the identities of LGBT students are negotiated through experiences that are posited as abnormal by the system of heteronormativity. Students are negotiating these sometimes-violent power structures in order to understand their own self as students. Their definitions of self are, by necessity, in opposition to heteronormativity. This opposition, while it can create challenging conditions for students, also allows the possibilities of fluidity and identity development that isn't in any traditional linear trajectory nor an "arriving" at a stage of development. This also speaks to the political possibilities of queerness. These authors are using the queer theoretical framework to challenge more traditional theoretical frameworks relied upon in student development theory, such as the constructivist-developmental theory. They argue that various power relationships need to be taken into account to better research students' experiences and to more effectively teach students.

Mitchell (2008) studied how widespread heterosexist speech is among students in a first-year writing class. She noted that often first-year writing instructors must not only take on the task of teaching writing but also help students navigate the cultural contact that occurs in the classroom. In this piece, Mitchell sought to show how campus climate

is produced by curricular, administrative, and cultural forces). She shared with us her own experiences in a first-year composition classroom as it related to cultural awareness and LGBT issues, namely the ways she had encouraged students to move beyond rhetorical analysis and into ideological analysis. She walked us through examples of students feeling tension, discussion, and even a student walking out on her. Ultimately writing courses are often some of the smallest, most accessible courses rural students may have, and Mitchell calls on us to engage them there, even when it seems difficult or daunting.

J. Alexander and Wallace (2009) examined the extant literature on queer issues in composition. They found that there are three ways that composition studies addresses "queer" issues. The first is addressing homophobia in the classroom and students writing but that this lacks a view of heterosexism as a driving force and as more systemic than the narrowly defined homophobia. Other literature in composition studies has advocated for inclusion of LGBT curriculum in the course content. These authors argued that instructors should make space for non-normative sexual identities. Though J. Alexander and Wallace said there is not a progression from gay and lesbian identity to queer theory, they ended with a discussion of the way that queer theory has been taken up by composition studies, including a critique of how the previous inclusionary work in composition studies reinstates the very hetero/homo binary of identity, reinforcing the power structure through this. They noted that authors have called for challenges to binary expressions of sexual identity, a focus on intersectionality, and deconstructing identity in the classroom. One author (J. Alexander, 2005) had students examine a (fake) website about a straight boy liked the boy band group, n*sync. They argued for substantively

addressing heteronormativity in ways that move beyond inclusion. J. Alexander and

Wallace (2009) argued that queerness provides opportunities for students to examine how

the most personal parts of our lives are connected to larger sociocultural and political

narratives that shape how we think of ourselves. Queerness helps students see the

connection between their stories and these larger structures and offers the opportunity for

students to examine how cultural stories shape how we understand identity and intimacy.

E. J. Meyer and Carlson (2014) edited a volume that does look explicitly about

the ways that gender and sexuality is constructed by the institution of education and

through schooling. One of the examples they used is bullying to illustrate the importance

of queer theory and looking at constructions of categories. They argued that identity-

based models lead to individualistic solutions to problems, such as bullying, rather than

addressing systemic issues that give rise both to bullies and to bullying of LGBTQ

students. This volume looks at K-12 classroom spaces a lot and even includes online

spaces and multiple countries. Overall, the scholars took a nuanced view of how

sexualities and genders are constructed *by* schools and the institution of education. These

structures are complicit in the formation of the categories that are often presupposed by

research. Many of the authors, though, ultimately offer recommendations similar to the

other research on LGBTQ students, asking for more support through advocacy, policy

change, and overhauls of curricula to be more inclusive. The volume does, though,

through its critical framework, ask readers to think about the ways in which we reproduce

the very categories that we are advocating for. This interrogation of reproduction of

categories is commensurate to my own focus on productions of queerness in narratives.

Because this is a performance studies project, I trouble assumptions about methods and

methodologies, as well, bringing a queer theoretical analysis to performance studies methods of personal narrative and critical ethnography.

Queer Worldmaking

One goal of this project is to examine the potential for making change in the classroom. Queer worldmaking offers a frame for this goal without being prescriptive in the answers. Cohen (1997) argued that the radical potential of queerness is the ability to create a space to oppose dominant norms and to create a space where transformational political work can begin. Queer worldmaking is about projected horizons (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Muñoz, 2009). A horizon is not a fixed destination or a place at which we arrive. Horizons change and shift as we approach them, never to reach them. "Even when coupled with a tolerating of minority sexualities, heteronormativity can be overcome only by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world" (Warner, 1993, p. xvi). Queer worldmaking moves to a futurity of possibility (Muñoz, 2009). This creation of space "without a map" (Yep, 2003, p. 35) offers the possibility of collective action. It opens the space for queer collective possibilities (Duggan, 2014; Yep, 2003).

Berlant and Warner (1998) looked at how queer worldmaking occurs outside of the official context of the state through the development of different kinds of intimacies not sanctioned by the state. Muñoz (1999) wrote about the ways that theatrical performances by minoritarian subjects can form new worlds by using the raw materials of the dominant culture in transformative ways. These minoritarian performances offer the possibility of establishing an alternative view of the world, a view that is not merely another point of view but is an oppositional ideology that critiques oppression and engages in transformational politics. These intimacies and performances offer queer

16

worldmaking potentialities. Everyday rituals can create alternate views of the world, as well (Muñoz, 1999). The everyday rituals and performances within a classroom hold the potential to create alternative views of the world and offer queer collective possibilities. If worldmaking is the objective, the direction we're traveling toward a horizon, what does this worldmaking look like in a classroom? What do students think it should look like? If we understand the students better, might we further our own understanding of queerness in ways that are useful and radical and might we better act together and open the space for queerness, queer transformation, and worldmaking in the classroom?

Drawing on various scholars, I use the term transformation to mean resistance to intersecting systems of oppression and working toward a socially just vision of the world through queer worldmaking in ways that are not prescriptive but open up possibilities for change. This includes a critique of the ways in which the institutions of education and our role within it perpetuates oppressions in various ways (Adams, Bell, & Goodman, 2016) and how we can resist normative power structures. I believe the task of higher education is critical consciousness and social justice. In our roles as critical educators and as agents of change, we create classrooms that foster critical thinkers and resist the role of schools only as job-preparation for the capitalist economy. We find those teachable moments to push against neoliberal thinking and to disrupt norms (Feigenbaum, 2007) and moves us toward utopia (Muñoz, 2009). To posit utopia as goal does not determine particular ways of behaving but, rather, a continuing process in which we must all be involved. We resist. We queer.

Methodological Framework

In this section, I take the queer theoretical framework of performativity and connect this to ongoing critiques of research in multiple fields and posit the performance studies methods of critical ethnography, personal narrative, and performative writing as a way to address these methodological issues. I present Butler's theory of gender performativity to explain how I'm theorizing the production of categories of identity and resisting assumptions of an *a priori* existence of gender and sexuality categories. This focus works to disrupt post-positivistic assumptions of identity categories while posing a problem for a methodological interrogation into queer lives and queerness. I also offer a critique of evidence and research in the fields of feminist/queer theory and performance studies to situate my methodology within the broader critical work that is being done in these fields to which I'm adding. Then, I describe critical ethnography and personal narrative as a methodological means of addressing performativity and answering critiques of evidence and research in these fields. Finally, I describe the ways in which I connect the methods I used in this study and highlight how I analyzed the interviews and examined my own stories about students and the classroom.

Theory of Performativity and Power

This project takes performativity as central to an understanding of queerness, looking at the production of queer, rather than using "queer" as a preexisting category. Queer is not a fixed identity. However, the western political tradition of identity politics shapes how we understand queer. The term is, at times, used as an identity label that represents a certain group of LGBT who are working for representational politics within the power structure (Warner, 1993). Warner wrote that his type of "diversity model" is

18

based on a model of ethnic and racial identities that does not work for queer as an identity. Duggan (1994) related a story about a Rolling Stone fact-checker who was tasked with calling Eve Sedgwick and verifying that she was really straight, as the article stated. Predictably, Sedgwick evades a straightforward answer, much to the consternation of the fact-checker. Duggan pointed out that this story illustrates the gap between queer theory and the assumptions of essentialist, identity-based politics of current public discourse.

The production of categories in themselves is often the focus of queer theory, and I take as a theoretical framework Butler's theory of performativity. In *Gender Trouble,* Butler (1990) brought into question the constitution of the subject by/within normative power structures. The subject is constituted by power structures. "The 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (p. 23). There is no "I" underneath the acts or prior body on which power structures can act (Butler, 1993a). Gender is the repetition of acts, a "doing." Identity is constituted by the very acts that are generally conceived of as a result of identity.

Any time we claim to represent a unified category, for example, "queer," we constitute the category through this representation (Butler, 1993b). While we claim to only represent a preexisting category through performative acts, we actually produce the very category we claim to merely represent (Butler, 1993a). Identity is not expressive in that it does not express something that is already a given, something that is already "there." There is no subject before the expression. The body has no ontological status apart from performative acts (Butler, 1990). The acts themselves give the appearance of

substance by sedimenting over time to produce the effect of materiality. This production

is then naturalized and, thus, obscured. We then see identity as an "interior" or as existing

before power, rather than seeing the production of the category as the very workings of

power. This naturalization obscures the operations of power that produced the category.

This process of naturalization forecloses particular types of agency, and so a shift in

understanding subjectivity as performative has political consequence. Agency is not

found in a turn to the "I"—to the self or to identity. The terms of identity are political *in*

themselves. If power works through the production of categories, we must also examine

this production—these performative acts. The implication of a performative lens is that I

can't assume an interior "queer," as there is no interior identity prior to the performative

utterance (Butler, 1993a). In other words, I'm studying students' understanding of

queerness in the classroom and the production of queerness through their stories.

A lot of research on LGBTQ+ students examines the experiences from an identity

category perspective and offers various inclusionary tactics to support LGBTQ+ students

in education. Though the inclusionary tactics are an important part of supporting LGBTQ

students, the reification of categories also has the discursive effect of constituting the

very categories it claims to merely represent. In other words, it participates in the

reproduction of categories it claims to only represent. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) argued

that "practitioners and scholars have an ethical responsibility to understand what the

underlying assumptionss of the models are" that they are using their practices. (pp. 36-

37). Research continues to assert a cohesive and stable gay/lesbian identity (Kopelson,

2002).

In "Towards a Queer Research Methodology," Warner (2004) wrote about how even research whose aim it is to make the world a better place for gays reproduces an exclusionary category. He writes extensively about Evelyne Hooker's research on "homosexuals." Hooker's research, revolutionary at the time, argued that there was not a connection between neurosis and homosexuality. This was the first study that argued that homosexuality was not pathological. The research did have a positive impact for some groups of gay men. However, her research also worked to construct a particular category in which certain bodies were excluded and controlled. The "normal" population of gay men that she studied were mostly White, middle class, lived in an urban area, and valued monogamy in their relationships. Homosexual normality was thus constructed through the research, not "found." The effect of research such as this is the continued marginalization of gay people who are not "normal." This research was absent of prisoners, poor gay people, gay men in rural areas, among other absences. This, in effect, constructs a new category of otherness. When research constructs a norm such as this, those of us who fall outside of the new norm continue to be marginalized. Warner (2004) also argued that underlying any project that is trying to identify truths about homosexuals and, thus, in identifying true homosexuals, is the "will to modify them" (p. 329). Though we should be suspicious of any research that claims to represent an entire category, this is not to argue that we should stop doing identity-based research. There is nothing inherently radical or liberational about a lesbian or gay identity (Vaid, 1995). Taking a queer theory approach to research demands that the preexisting categories of sexuality and gender that are presupposed by identity-based research be questioned.

According to Butler, performative acts are not freely chosen; they occur within the regulatory framework of reproductive heterosexuality and are constrained by the sex/gender matrix (Butler, 1990). The performative is where power acts as/through discourse. If the "I" is a consequence of power structures, this raises the impossibility of ever giving an account of oneself "beyond" the power structure (Butler, 2005); the "I" is governed by the very power structures that we wish to change and/or dismantle (Butler, 1997). But in each performance, there is slippage, and there is anxiety around those slippages. These slippages are locations where we might exert political pressure and change. Butler offered drag performance as one example of how this change might occur. But she does not posit drag as always exerting pressure through a performative act. These moments of slippage, though, are where we can get out of a deterministic bind of the subjection. In other words, the regulatory sex/gender matrix may constrain subjectivity but is not deterministic.

The process of subjection, though, in itself can work to create a barrier to doing queer worldmaking or being able to imagine the possibilities of queer worldmaking. Power structures are, thus, constitutive, rather than prior to, the constitution of the subject. In *The Psychic Life of Power,* Butler (1997) examined subordination as a part of subjection. Because we are constituted by power structures and, thus, subordinated by power structures, we become attached to subordination in our desire for intelligibility because only through the power structures can we be seen and heard by another. Thus, at times, we desire our own subordination. Butler's view is not deterministic; however, as the moment we become subjects, the power that had once constituted us then transforms in that very moment, creating a possibility of agency and resistance. Though we can

never be truly "free" from the power structures, we can operate in ways that offer the possibility of agency within the structures. This agency may, at times, reinforce the status quo of normative power and, at times, may resist normative power structures. This complicated negotiation of subjection manifests in our stories, as well.

Finally, queer may not be exclusively about sexuality and gender, and yet, queerness is about sexuality because it's about heteronormativity and the examination of the ways that heteronormavity are woven into the very fabric of our society. I've interviewed LGBTQ+ students about queerness, even though one goal of this project is to explore the construction *of* queer. Queer theory centers the constructed nature of sexuality and the ways in which power is distributed through categorization of sexuality (Cohen, 1997). Heterosexuality—and, I would add, being cisgender—become synonymous with humanity (Warner, 1993). For example, notions of family, reproductive politics, class identity, censorship are all tied up in power structures and, as Warner (1993) noted those who come to an understanding of self as queer know that their gender and/or sexuality is connected with these issues. According to him, one *must* reflect on these relationships just to be queer. Queer works to destabilize heterosexuality (Jagose, 1996). Though queerness is tied up with gender and sexuality through its examination of and critique of heteronormativity, queer offers the possibility of examining the production/constitution of categories in discourse as a way to offer political possibilities, thus, my focus in this research on the ways in which we make meaning of queer and what this says about productions of queerness.

Critiques of Evidence and Research

At a conference, I once attended a presentation on drag king performance. I was curious, as I've been performing as a drag king for many years. The presentation was qualitative research on a group of drag kings and drag queens. It's always a strange experience for me to read an article or attend a presentation in which I belong to the subject population being researched. I agreed with the findings—that drag can both reify existing power structures or resist them. The interviews of drag kings offered interesting insights into drag performance as political. However, I was left wondering, why this research? Who is this for? What does this do to drag kings? To me as a drag king? To queer people? To queer bodies? Suddenly, I was the object of the research. And though the findings were "positive," drag kings were being represented as other. I was *being* othered through the research.

In this section, I offer a critique of research and evidence from feminist/queer theory and performance studies theory to demonstrate the connections between the two fields and to contextualize this project within the broader critical work being done. This situates my project within long-standing critiques of research in both feminist/queer studies and in performance studies and explicates how this project responds to those critiques.

There is a history of feminist scholars who critique evidence and research and the assumptions that underlie much research. Some of these scholars posit that research is always about politics of representation and evidence. Research is about issues of representation. Who is represented? Who is not? What do the representations do? The power structures of the institution of education posit evidence, validity, and reliability as

the goals of our scholarly knowledge production (Lather, 1991). To queer research is to look at the normalizing assumptions that undergird our research processes, including a critique of evidence and the valorizing of evidence within the academy, the normalization processes that our research participates in, and assumptions about the existence of and production of subjects in research. This is also in line with the aims of performance studies—the critique of "evidence" and a critical interrogation of normalizing in the power structures.

Research on LGBTQ+ students claims to represent an existing group: homosexuals, LGB people, transgender people. However, that which is claimed to be merely represented is actually produced through language. One is not merely representing a queer student but is producing the queer student, the LGBT person, the homosexual, through that so-called "representation." And language sediments performative acts into what we see as a coherent, stable subject. Claims of representation in our research ultimately produce the categories we claim to represent. Visweswaran (2008) has even argued that the subjects of anthropological research were figments of the anthropological imagination. In other words, we—as researchers and readers—come to believe that groups really exist, and the process of the production of these groups in research is obscured.

A critique of objectivity in research has long been a topic in feminist methodology. Visweswaran (2008) wrote that both ethnography and fiction build a world through writing. However, the "objective" research of ethnography assumes that the audience will read this world as "factual" rather than as a fictional construct. She argued that both are constructed—are "made" by authors. Similarly, Diamond argued that we

make epistemological assumptions that there exists a separation between doing and the thing done. She argued that we focus on ways of knowing, rather than the distinction between truthful and fictional representations. Within this framework of objectivity, the process of authoring worlds and of being a researcher is obscured, thus positing the researcher as invisible. Alcoff critiqued the position of researcher and said that when the position of the researcher is obscured, we are unable to examine how the researcher's social position influences how they made meaning of evidence. The researcher has authorial power to name the world (Gergen & Gergen, 2003) and does name the world through research. However, under the guise of "objective" research, the author is rendered invisible.

This shifts the focus from the discovery of "what happened" or of "what really happened" to the process of meaning-making about the classroom and the ways that meaning-making are constructed and constrained by discourse. This highlights the process of meaning-making. The implication, then, is that any research process and writing process becomes a layered project of meaning-making—during the students' experiences, in the interview, during my writing, while you are reading.

Assumptions that research participants are all-knowing subjects has also being critiqued. Particularly relevant to interviews, researchers assume that the interviewee has access to themselves and knows themselves (Lather, 1991). When we tell stories about ourselves, we reframe our experiences. We interpret them. In other words, we make meaning out of them. Within the interview setting, we also assume that the interviewee can then communicate what they know to the researcher (Lather, 1991). However, from a queer theoretical perspective, there is no *a priori* self that one can access. When one

reflects on experiences, as Diamond (1996) noted, once something has occurred, it is remembered and misremembered. The self is not a unified whole autonomous from others. The speech act of speaking for oneself necessarily participates in a discourse in which others are constructed. Utterances and the meaning of utterances exists within a larger discursive context in which meaning is not fixed (Alcoff, 1991). To understand an utterance, we must examine who said it, where it occurred, and the value and impact of the speech act (Alcoff, 1991; Langellier & Peterson, 2011).

Performance studies and queer methods overlap in their use of a theory of performativity to frame the production of subject positions as knowable and self-knowable subject in traditional qualitative inquiry. In this study, I focus on meaning-making, thus situating this study as a performance studies in communication project. It is an intervention into the regimes of knowledge that posit validity, reliability, and evidence as the most important/the goal of "research" and knowledge production. A performance studies methodology and queer theoretical lens allow me to examine the ways in which identities and subject positions are produced. In terms of my study, to study queerness is also to produce and reproduce it.

Research that purports to only examine this something called "queerness," as I do in this dissertation, actually constructs and reconstructs queerness itself. This dissertation is focused on how queerness is produced. To examine students' stories about the classroom through the lens of performativity is also to recognize them as being produced within discourses of power (Langellier, 1999) and to interrogate the ways in which power structures constrain and construct stories we tell about ourselves and the classroom. The focus, then, is to look at how students make meaning of the classroom through stories

about their experiences and to be reflexive about the ways that I make meaning of

queerness in my own stories and through my own position as researcher and educator.

Methodology

Queer theory and performance studies align in their examinations of how

knowledge is organized and produced—how we know what we know and the contexts in

which we have come to know it. In line with queer theory as analyzing what things *do*

and not just what they are or say or represent (Muñoz, 1996), I am concerned with what

my research and my writing *does*—that this project interrupts post-positivistic notions in

qualitative inquiry of a knowable and self-knowable subject; that it asks an audience to

think about their own assumption about evidence and reflect on their own meaning-

making processes.

To take a performance studies and queer theoretical approach to research is to put

power first. When I shift my research to put power first, it changes the approach I must

use. The analysis must shift to look at not just the text. Ward (2016) addressed this in her

work on queer methodology, stating, queer methodology "is a praxis aimed at undoing

prevailing assumptions about epistemic authority, legitimate knowledge, and the very

meaning of research" (p. 71). When we put power first, our analyses and research choice

change. When I begin with power and the ways in which power constitutes us, I must

examine how categories are produces within the discourses of power.

This research acknowledges and addresses the production of categories and

identities through discourses of power in the classroom. The production of categories of

queer and how to do queer are examined through the narratives of queer undergraduate

students about their experiences as queer in the classroom. These interviews were not an

attempt to discover some objective description of what happened during these moments. Rather, it is an exploration of the students' meaning-making around their experiences of being/doing queer in the classroom. Interviewing students puts their stories and knowledges at the center of this research. I interviewed undergraduate students who identify as LGBTQ+ and who have enrolled at least one Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies course. And, to highlight how I make meaning, I draw on several different methods for engaging with stories about the classroom.

Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography is committed to addressing injustice and disrupting the status quo through research (Madison, 2012). In critical ethnography, Madison argued, the researcher must be reflexive by explicitly addressing their own subject positions as researcher and acknowledging their biases. Critical ethnography renders visible the embodiments of subjectivity in a particular space through the researcher's reflexivity. In other words, embodiment points to the subject positions and relations—the relationship of the students to me, to each other, and to the power structures in which we operate. Analysis of data can offer us greater insight into the political nuances and consequences of participants' stories. Madison (Critical Ethnography) explained that method and theory are connected and argued that critical ethnography is the application of critical theory. As a critical ethnographic project, my research looked at the interviews of the students as narratives of the classroom and also my own narratives about the students and about the classroom from a queer theory framework, performing queer theory through the text.

Queer Theory

Queer theory is the theoretical framework through which I looked at students'

narratives about queerness in the classroom. Queer theory is about the process of

normalization and which bodies are (or are not) normalized. Queer moves beyond a

politics of inclusion to challenge institutions of power and the status quo (Warner, 1993).

Queer offers a critique of the political strategy of assimilation (Cohen, 1997). It

challenges the hetero/homo binary that reiterates heteronormativity (Seidman, 1993) and

is resistant to the normalization of heterosexuality. This includes more than just gender

and sexuality. It turns the focus to the processes of normalization and the production of

categories of meaning—it examines the production of subject positions. Queer subject

positions in higher education have been explored by scholars in multiple contexts and the

ways in which racism, neoliberalism, and empire work to construct particular gay and

lesbian subjectivities.

Scholars have examined the ways that race and citizenship produce subject

positions that include white, middle-class gays at the expense of brown bodies, whose

lives are produced as undesireable. Chandan Reddy (2011) addressed the ways that the

nation state already defines itself by a series of exclusions of non-normative bodies. As

Puar (2008) demonstrates, gay subjects are constituted by series of exclusions and

inclusions that rely on racist formulations of queerness. This "homonationalism"

highlights the ways in which gay identity gets constituted through nationalist discourses

that draw on racist and xenophobic notions of citizenship. She wrote that working for

inclusion yearning for national love requires normativity of gender and sexuality if a

subject desires the privileges of citizenships within the global economy. The perceived

homophobia of "savages" in "other" countries fuels this nationalism in the name of lesbians and gays, when we live in a country that subjects queers to incredible violence, both physical and psychological. This separation of race and queerness works to support formations of white supremacy. These (White) gay subjects—exceptional gay subjects—become aligned with national interests that, in the global economy, uphold discourses of whiteness and citizenship. In effect, some queers are then considered to be citizens and worthier of state protection at the expense of other queer bodies that continue to be the targets of violence. White homonormativity, thus, becomes protected by the state. In the classroom space, certain gay bodies (White, middle- and upper-class) get produced as acceptable and normative. Certain bodies are legitimated and get to be accepted and "comfortable" in the classroom (Ahmed, 2014).

The depolicizing of gay subjects through inclusion and rights-based activism has been critiqued. Duggan's (2002) "homonormativity" illustrates how gay identities have been commodified and normalized in ways that privilege certain gay bodies (White, middle- and upper-class). Homonormativity has depoliticized gay communities and movements and produced a neoliberal gay politics within the framework of neoliberalism (Duggan, 2003). It's a politic that does not critique or resist the broader powers structures and institutions. It works within the neoliberal logic of a narrowly constrained pubic life. Institutions are thus upheld through this individual notion of the right to sexual policy. Homonormativity is an inclusion politics of gay people in which the individual fights for the rights to participate in domesticity and consumption—without ever posing a threat to the political order.

D. Richardson (2005) has similarly examined how queer politics have been pulled in a direction of inclusion into mainstream culture under the guise of equality. He looked at how the gay rights movement has worked for greater visibility of lesbians and gay men as consumers, pushing a politics of identity-based consumption. In Eng's (2010) "queer liberalism," inclusionary politics frame gay and lesbian citizens as deserving of "rights," such as marriage and being in the military. This relies on colorblindness and effectively creates a new category of normalization of certain bodies while excluding others (Brown, disabled, poor, Black). He critiques how queer liberalism separates race from sexuality in the era of global capitalism.

What all of these are about is the formation of some lesbian and gay subject positions as legitimized by the state at the expense of the exclusion and denial of others. In all of these queer critiques, some queers benefit from these formulations (US citizens, White queers, middle-class queers). Others do not. This constitutes subject positions as unliveable. The point is not to replace gay and lesbian with queer but to queer to open more possibilities, to define problems in new ways (Warner, 1993). This is not to posit queerness as an answer to transformation for social change. Queer has been and continues to be shaped by structures of power.

Personal Narrative

Madison (2012) wrote that personal narrative is one frame for understanding the "data" collected in ethnographic interviews. I use this framework of personal narrative to interpret the students' stories when they recounted their experiences to me in the interview. I also take my own experiences as personal narrative. Meaning is embedded in discourse (Langellier & Peterson, 2011). Discursive formations shape which subject

positions and stories are available to the students (Langellier, 1999). In the act of storytelling, people produce subjectivities, and our narratives speak to identity claims and the broader structures in which we tell our stories (Bamberg, 1997).

Narrative is a way we make meaning out of experiences. Stories speak to the discourse in which we live; they are both produced by and constrained by these discourses while also contributing to them, creating a circular process of meaning-making and of constituting the very world in which we live. Stories are embodied, interactional, and social (Langellier & Peterson, 2011). Mishler (1991) has argued that the traditional framework in which interviews are examined as text is inadequate in that it does not include an analysis of power. Stories, rather, are produced and performed (Riessman, 2008). "People make sense of their experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural conversations through storytelling" (Langellier & Peterson, 2011, p. 1) Langellier and Peterson shifted from a focus on narrative as text to storytelling as performance embedded in discourse. When students produce stories, they draw on existing cultural resources and conventions of language (Riessman, 1993)—their personal narratives are embedded in discourse (Peterson & Langellier, 2011). Looking at storytelling through the lens of performativity allows us to examine stories as situated within discourses of power and to examine how power relationships produce our narratives (Langellier, 1999). It's a systemic examination of the broader systems in which our stories arise and are constructed, an analysis in which stories are dialogic and political (Langellier & Peterson, 2011). A performance lens includes an analysis of the complex dialogic environment in which stories emerge (D. Richardson, 2005).

Peterson and Langellier (1997) wrote that scholars and practitioners need to see personal narrative as occurring within a performing body. Narratives are embodied, with all of the implications and constraints that the body points to—which bodies can tell which stories in particular context. Through storytelling, people become social beings—produce subjectivity—by producing each other and themselves in the interpellative act of storytelling (Bamberg, 1997). These interpellative acts are relational and speak to the broader context of power relations in which the stories emerge. Narratives are often assumed to belong to a stable self—a narrative about one's experience—but are actually within the space of the cultural (Hantzis, 1998). Though it may be "experienced" by an individual, the story told is produced by the social and political moment (Hantzis, 1998). A methodology of personal narrative, then, also answers to critiques of evidence and research by shifting the focus from text to the complicated relationship between text, context, and power relations, putting power at the center of the research. Also, to posit that personal narrative as an interpellative act opens the space to examine my relationship to the students, as well—to utilize the reflexive turn of critical ethnography (Madison, 2012). I use personal narrative methods to conceptualize the stories that they tell in the interviews as personal narrative and connect these narratives to a queer theoretical framework, looking at the ways in which discourses of queer constrain their understanding of queer.

Performative Writing

Finally, storytelling as a speech act offers the potential for resistance and change. Dominant power structures are vulnerable (Mumby, 1997). Storytelling as a form of communication both draws on existing discourses and rearticulates new possibilities

(Mumby, 1997). In personal narrative, a storyteller offers a moment of interpellation in which, in that moment of the utterance, power is transformed and there is slippage, a place where we might exert political pressure on discourse. (Butler, 1993a) This is not to say that personal narrative is inherently liberatory (Langellier & Peterson, 2011). However, in each telling, there is potential for transformation. Pollock (2010) wrote that creative and critical writing are often posited as mutually exclusive categories of writing and that performative writing should intentionally blur these distinctions. Knowledge is enacted and reconfigured through the act of storytelling (Conquergood, 1993). I use performative writing (Pollock, 2010) to use the acts of storytelling in this dissertation to enact critical theory in research (Madison, 2012).

As a method of queer studies, changing the *way* we write attends to post-structural understanding of evidence and research and the contingency of evidence (Muñoz, 1996). Lather (1991) has argued that the goal should not be to create a unitary voice or generalizations about a population but to engage in a process that resists and disrupts notions of a positivistic "reality" and the tendency to categorize within these post-positivistic assumptions. The writing constitutes the thing it claims to represent (Rhodes, 2001). The "neutral" and "clear" writing of academic research obscures the production of knowledge and adds to the assumption that there can be an objectivity when writing research (Lather, 1991). Knowledge is an effect of power—power that is exerted through the text. Language cannot provide an adequate description or a description that does not at the same time inscribe meaning. Changing the writing style within the academic genre addresses these critiques of evidence and academic writing. I use performative writing to

offer both an analytical and creative piece of writing that challenges normative structures of language (L. L. Richardson, 1994).

Methods

The participants of the interviews consisted of seven undergraduate students at a large public university in New England. The students had all enrolled in a Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies course at the university within the past two years. The students represented a range of races, gender identities, and sexualities. Two students identified as people of color. Four identified as white. And one didn't identify her race but did identify strongly with her Sikh identity. All participants identified as LGBTQ+. They were recruited by emailing the undergraduate Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies listserve and emailing former students. Four of the seven participants were former students of mine.

The interviews took place at a large public university in New England. The school has been lauded by Campus Pride (Campus Pride Index, 2019) as an inclusive and safe space for students who are LGBT. The school offers a certificate program in sexuality studies, and each semester offers multiple courses on gender and sexuality. The university is in a state that has relatively strong laws protecting LGB rights.

Interviews were conducted between August 2017 and December 2017. They were approximately one hour long. Five occurred face-to-face in my office on campus, and two were conducted via Skype. Interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview protocol with questions attended to how students understand queer and how they see queer in the context of the classroom (see Appendix). The students were asked about specific experiences they have had advocating for queerness in the classroom.

Questions also addressed queer worldmaking in how students envision a perfectly queer classroom and what they think the space of a classroom offers for queer possibilities. Though interviews generally followed a question and answer format, the goal was to generate accounts of experiences in the classroom about queerness between the two active participants of the interview (Riessman, 2008). At times, some interviews strayed from the protocol.

Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim by me. The student stories that are included in the analysis chapters were told during the interviews. These stories were edited for readability, editing out repetitions, "ums," and other filler phrases, while attempting to keep intact the voice of the individual students. Narratives often emerged from the give and take of regular conversation. I found myself asking for stories and pushing for them, and when I explicitly did this, stories were not likely to emerge. Ultimately, asking students to "tell me about" the classroom was the most likely to yield a story about experiences.

All names are pseudonyms. I offered participants the option to choose their own pseudonym. All either declined or did not ultimately provide one. I use the pronouns that the students preferred at the time of the interview, unless they have since communicated to me that their pronoun has changed.

Analysis

In this section, I make clear the connections of the three different methodologies that I drew on in this study—critical ethnography, personal narrative, and performative writing—and the connections to a queer theoretical framework. Aligned with an understanding of interviews as acts of meaning-making, analysis attends to the narratives

from several different lenses, including an analysis of the ways that stories draw on discourses about queerness, an examination of context, and a consideration of the worldmaking possibilities and constraints offered in a classroom setting. I highlight the ways in which methods and theory are utilized to analyze the stories in different ways by describing how the chapter will connect different methods and the theoretical framework.

Discursive Formations of Queer

In Chapter 2, I examine contested meanings of queer that emerged in the students' stories about classroom experiences, with a focus on the ways that discourses of power are being employed by the students in their language around queerness and ways that their understandings of queerness exceed and push against discursive constraints. I also present my own narratives about queerness and the classroom and look at the ways in which my own narratives are contradicted by the students' narratives to be reflexive about my own relationship to the students (Madison, 2012).

Storytelling is a speech act that is produced within a complex environment (L. L. Richardson, 1992). This chapter examines my stories and the students' interviews as interpellative acts of storytelling (Bamberg, 1997). Storytelling is always situated within discourses of power that both enable and constrain the stories (Langellier & Peterson, 2006). Langellier and Peterson (2011) examined what gets told and how it gets told in the narrative—what they call ordering the narrative. In this dissertation, I focus on the stories the students told and how they told them in relation to discourses of queerness—how discursive regularities of "queerness" shape the narratives.

My analysis attends to the ways in which students are constrained by the discursive formations of queerness and the ways in which their stories exceed these

constraints and push against them. Though meanings are not fixed, students' stories offer a point of sedimentation of meaning (Langellier & Peterson, 2011) through which we can better understand discursive constraints of the power structures and the consequences of telling stories in particular ways (Langellier & Peterson, 2006). These students' narratives do not fix meaning (Langellier &Peterson, 2011), but they sediment, they struggle with, they draw on previous discourses out of our control, and they *do* something. Looking at what these stories do—where they reunify dominant formations of power and where they can and do transgressive the constraining discursive forces at work on our selves and on our stories. I analyze their usages of queer through a queer theoretical framework—looking at how they produce and understand queer. Queer theory creates the framework to look at the normalization of the production of categories. Through the classroom narratives around queerness, queer subject positions are produced and taken up. These subject positions construct who gets to be queer, how we should do queer, and who is queer enough. Queer theory, thus, offers a framework to both recognize the various ways that these oppressions might and do manifest while asking us to look at the productions of the categories that oppression frameworks often assume to be pre-existing.

Context

In the third chapter, I examine the context of higher education as an object of study, looking at the ways that particular subject positions and narratives are produced by the power structures shaping academia, while other subject positions are excluded, thus making some stories available to some bodies and others unavailable. Using the lens of context-as-object-of-study also offers an alternative to traditional research in which

context becomes the background of a study or of the participants. In this chapter, I situate my own stories about students within the broader context of higher education and ideologies of neoliberalism that permeate higher education. I place my own narratives next to the students' narratives, highlighting the ways that the complexity of their positions complicates the narratives I have constructed about my experiences with them. In this chapter, I also attend to the ways in which the constitution of belonging subjects is produced in a higher education classroom.

When personal narratives are performed, text and context are inextricable (Langellier & Peterson, 2006), and narratives cannot be examined apart from the context in which it emerged. To use storytelling as a framework is to look at text within context (Riessman, 1993). The contexts in which we produce our stories have already structured the ways in which we understand our experiences, what subject positions are available to us, and how we perform our stories. The discursive forces of identity, such as sex, race, class, and age, work in ways that certain performances are *allowed* to emerge at a particular moment (Langellier & Peterson, 2006). Gergen and Gergen (2003) argued that experience can be better understood as the outcome of a particular cultural history within which people make sense of their lives through storytelling. These narratives reflect the sense-making processes of a particular social and historical moment/context. In the instance of education and the classroom, the ways in which power has already worked upon subjects within the system of education has produced certain subjectivities as belonging and excluded others. This necessitates a focus on the conditions in which we tell stories (Langellier, 1999). Using the framework of storytelling within performance studies also allows a critique of higher education as the context that produces the

students' stories—the context in which we are making meaning of queerness, identity, and the classroom.

Only within particular historical conditions can anyone consider themselves to have any particular gender or sexuality (Cohen, 1997). Power relations produce narrative (Langellier, 1999), and situational constraints give rise to particular stories. In other words, only in a particular context can we make meaning out of our subject positions and our stories. Our context—our situational constraints—give rise to particular stories as a particular historical moment in time (Langellier & Peterson, 2011). The content of a story has already been shaped in various ways even before it is told, audienced, and, in this case, examined from a research perspective. Thus, we need to look at the relationship between text and context (Langellier, 1998) and examine the context (Peterson & Langellier, 2009). A critique of evidence in research also challenges us to undertake a serious exploration of context (Peterson & Langellier, 2009). Context is not simply what is around the story. Context constructs what can be in the story and how it is that these stories can and do emerge in our particular moment. Thus, I examine the context as an object of study, looking at how higher education gives shape to the students' narratives about the classroom.

This chapter is queer in that it doesn't take for granted the production of subject positions. Rather, it takes the approach that subjectivities are produced through the broader context. Taken in conjunction with Langellier and Peterson's call for examining the text-context relationship, I analyze aspects of context that emerge in the students' stories and in my own narrative about students and the classroom. While Chapter 2 looked at how these subjectivities are in relation to discourses of queer, this chapter takes

a broader look at how the context is implicated in the production of these subject

position. In other words, what are the contextual factors working to produce some bodies

as belonging and others as not belonging?

Queer Worldmaking

Finally, I read the interviews for themes of the visions that students have for a

queer classroom and what queer worldmaking in the classroom means to them and used

performative writing to both present the stories and concurrently engage in queer

worldmaking through the research/writing/reading process. In the interviews and in some

of my own experiences doing worldmaking in the classroom, the focus is often on the

limits of the classroom and the impossibilities of worldmaking. I use Butler's (1997) *The*

Psychic Life of Power as a way to theorize this continued focus on impossibilities.

Through the performative process of writing, I continually returned, often

unintentionally, to impossibilities, rather than the possibilities of queer worldmaking. To

attend to this and to the creative queer worldmaking suggestions that the students had in

interviews, I use performative writing to construct an imagined narrative about a queer

classroom that does not currently exist. I present a narrative of utopian possibility,

composed by drawing upon the students' experiences, my own experiences, and literature

that addresses utopian possibilities in the world.

Performative writing addresses the methodological issues posed by

postmodernism that I outlined in the methodology section. As an effort to show through

text that interviews are led by researchers' vested interests, Kong, Mahoney, and

Plummer (2002) argued that a shift in writing style "would help to create a new way of

looking at things by blurring representational distinctions (e.g., between philosophy an

literary) and subject matters (e.g., between 'hard-core' sociological writing and autobiography)" (p. 247). Hantzis (1998) has argued that avoiding a singular "coherent" voice of the post-positivistic research can disrupt assumptions about a coherent self. Gergen and Gergen (2003) wrote that using multiple voices is a way to disrupt the omniscient voice of the expert scholars, providing multiple perspective and interpretations.

In constructing a narrative from the interviews, I highlight the meaning-making that is always happening at all steps of the research process, to blur the line between what we consider to be fact and fiction (Visweswaran, 1994). I offer a story of possibilities that doesn't yet exist but could exist. Performative writing also can make the reader question what I have presented as a narrative to push readers into a critical reading practice, in other words, to get readers to think about the ways in which they are making meaning while reading the narrative and to call attention to the ways in which we create understanding through narratives—narratives that are constituted by power structures. This final narrative offers possibilities "on the horizon" for what queer worldmaking in the classroom and learning could and should be. Queer worldmaking offers a framework for thinking through queer political possibilities.

Conclusion: Queer Pedagogy

In the conclusion, I address what we might do with our bodies in a queer classroom. I reflect on my own experiences in the classroom and connect it to queer theory, including queer pedagogy, to show how we can struggle with queerness in our own classrooms in productive ways. Queer or claiming queer/queerness does not get us out of the bind of the politics of race, class, and gender. It can, however, offer other

possibilities. Dolan (2001) wrote that lesbian/gay/queer studies engages in reform and critical politics. Thus, the goal of this dissertation project is not to examine students' stories and advocate for particular recommendations. Rather, it is to examine the possibilities. As Halberstam (2011) noted do we really want to "shore up the ragged boundaries of our shared…intellectual commitments, or might we rather take this opportunity to rethink the project of learning and thinking altogether?" (p. 7) Students' stories are important because they both reflect the discourses at work in the classroom and in the context in which the stories are told and because they offer us a way of understanding how students' stories are constructed and how we might make use of this information to be better teachers.

CHAPTER 2

THE DISCURSIVE REGULARITIES OF QUEER (AND) IDENTITY

In this chapter, I present my own narrative about students and my meaning-making about the ways that students draw on a limited identity politics in the classroom, especially when it comes to issues of queerness. This chapter presents my own stories about students, and then charts my journey through a reading of the students' narratives about queerness in the classroom. This reading troubles my simplistic interpretation of what I think students are trying to do in the classroom.

The first section reflects on the ongoing process of reclamation of "queer" as a term, both in my own story and my interaction with one of the interviewees. The next section takes up the topic of how students engage discourses of identity. The stories in this section demonstrate how some of the students did use "queer" as an identity category label and took up an identity politic in the classroom. Queer theory has critiqued identity politics and its limited ability to make structural change (Jagose, 1996). Though my own interpretation of students' uses of identity politics are more simplistic, students' stories point to the complexities. I address these complexities in the sections on the construction of identity and discourse. In the stories, many of the students explicitly noted the constructed nature of identity and used intersectionality to understand how power structures work on them and in the classroom. Their stories trouble my own oversimplified understanding of the classroom. Finally, I address the ways in which students engaged queer as an action in the classroom. Their stories show how they struggle in productive ways with the term and how they might do queerness in the classroom.

Overall, these stories establish that students have a complicated understanding of queerness that can draw on identity politics at times, but also includes a critique of intersectional power structures and the possibilities of doing queerness in the classroom. These stories offer a counterpoint to my own narrative about the students and their identity politics ideologies. Though the students do take up a limited identity politics at times, they also show that they are trying to *do* something with their bodies and voices. Their stories reflect both the constraints as well as the potentials and possibilities. There is the potential, then, to meet them where they are and move them toward queer worldmaking.

In this chapter, I present student stories that engage with meanings of queer, showing the ways that stories are constrained by discursive forces. I look at the process of reclamation of queer and how this process continues to be ongoing. I also interrogate my own narratives about how students use identity politics. My own story about the students was that they use a simplistic identity politic to understand their experiences in the classroom. "Queer" becomes used as an identity marker, and rights-based, identity politics movements have become the focus of much activism (Duggan, 2003). The students' narratives, at times, work within this discursive framework to restrain meaning-making, producing stories that draw on identity politics as a narrative reproduction of normativity (Peterson & Langellier, 2009). While some of the student stories engage in identity politics as a discursive regularity of students' narratives of queerness in the classroom, they also demonstrate the complexity of their meaning-making through their complication of identity frameworks and the use of queerness as a route to intersectional critique. Alternatively, their stories, at times, exceed the constraints of identity politics,

offering a site of resistance to structures of normativity while grappling with meanings of

queer as they shift across time and contexts in their lives. Finally, many of the students'

stories posit queerness as action and critique, showing an engagement with some of the

major ideas of queer theory. Stories are shaped by these discourses of power, even as

they work to complicate and resist them. And the students' stories ultimately offer a

counterpoint to my own narratives about my experiences of their performances of

queerness in the classroom.

Stories are produced by social and historical conditions, conditions that make

possible certain narratives. In line with Langellier and Peterson's (2011) framework on

personal narrative, I look at how the students I interviewed make meaning of queerness

through their stories about classroom experiences. I take a narrative approach to look at

how various meanings of queer and queerness are employed by LGBTQ+ students in

their narratives as discursive strategies that draw on, are constrained by, and push

against/beside discourses of power that frame our embodied experiences and

constructions of stories. In particular, I look at the ways that students draw on discourses

about queerness and what "queer" means to them. This includes an examination of the

ways in which there are discursive constraints on the stories they told as well as the ways

that students resist normative structures and work to push back against processes of

normalization through the ways that they tell stories and the stories that they choose to

tell. This examination of discursive constitution of stories and bodies draws on Langellier

and Peterson's (2011) exploration of family storytelling as well as a long tradition in

queer theory (Jagose, 1996) that turns back on itself to examine definitions and usages of

"queer." Langellier and Peterson (2011) examined family storytelling to analyze how

family culture is transmitted through the telling, re-telling, and audiencing of these stories. In a similar vein, I look at how the students' stories about queerness produce and reproduce queerness in a multitude of ways.

Through the performance of their stories (and my subsequent "performance" of them through this writing), meaning-making about queerness occurs. I explore the ways that storytelling, as meaning-making process, both offers the potential of political possibility as well as being constrained by the discourse in which we operate and tell the stories. Meaning, in other words, is sedimented (Butler, 1990)   through students' storytelling about queerness in the classroom. The student stories that I offer here are moments of sedimentation around what "queer" means, occurring through our processes of meaning-making during the process of storytelling. These students' stories are about how we do/be "queer" and how we should do/be "queer." I argue that these moments of sedimentation reflect broader theoretical discourses within queer theory and that the students both are constrained by discourses of power within their stories and are able to discover political possibilities, pushing up against and, at times, exceeding the discursive constraints within which they are operating.

This points to the need to make spaces where these complexities can emerge and that we, as educators, should continually be thinking through this process of the iteration of queer continually happening and that it can't be used in revolutionary ways if it's not *used*. That students can grasp these complexities is evident. To make these spaces gives opportunities to resist regimes of normalization (Warner, 1993). These students may be engaging in identity politics in many of their stories, but they do show a resistance to the

master narrative through their highlighting of the complexity of identity and queerness in their stories.

My Students

There's a story I like to tell about my students: That in the classroom they use simplistic notions of categorical identity to enact a limited identity politics.

In this meaning-making of the classroom, I interpret the ways in which students engage in the classroom as enacting identity politics. And, subsequently, I posit this type of politic as antithetical to queer politics.

When I was a TA for Introduction to WGSS, a guest speaker came to the lecture and did a lecture about gender and sexuality. During the lecture, the students did an activity in which they brainstormed all the labels for gender and sexuality that they knew, and the professor wrote them on the board. As a group, they came up with over 70 labels. Many of them I had never even heard before.

I usually tell this story through a lens of identity politics. Not that I was using an identity politics but that this story offered evidence that young queer students were engaging in identity politics through a proliferation of gender and sexuality labels. They were pushing "inclusion" to the very limits by naming each and every shade of gender and sexual identity that could be included. My critique of this usually involves my own frustration with this kind of politic. Creating more labels for other genders and sexualities does not dismantle heteronormativity, I might say to a colleague.

In this same semester, a student in one of my discussion sections was angry that a particular identity hadn't been included on the syllabus. I don't remember what identity it even was—but, I do remember it was some detailed, long label that described gender,

sex, and how much the person wanted to have sex. I wondered why they needed such a detailed label to describe all the minutia of their sexualities and gender. It was another instance that I read as identity politics.

A student in another section told me that she was really tied to her gender identity because it took a long time to figure out what she really was. She didn't want to think of identity as performative because it felt to her like I was taking away a piece of her, she said. I took these stories as a demonstrations of students' engagement with identity politics and counter to a queer politic of action that I was working toward in the classroom in presenting a theory of performativity to the students to demonstrate how identity categories in themselves are created by the power structures. My goal was to get the students to examine how a queer politic should also examine the granular identity categories we create under the category of queer as a working of power in itself.

This particular narrative about students' investment in identity politics is one I hear often in college courses on critical topics. In fact, it was one of the starting points of my research—wondering what was really happening in these moments. For a long time, I had told myself that students were employing "queer" as an identity category and were engaging in identity politics in the classroom. I thought that these students, who called themselves queer, meant something different than I did—queer as a politic, as an action, as resistance to heteronormativity. The answer was much more complicated. The students weaved back and forth between their uses of the word queer and reflected an understanding of how difficult it is to do queer work in a classroom setting. And, my own uses of the word weave between these, as well.

When I began this research, I sat down to write the recruitment email for my IRB approval. At my desk, hunched over my laptop, shoulders aching, I wrote down my subject group: "queer students." I wrote it casually, caught up in deadlines, rushed and intent on completing IRB paperwork that I knew would be a long process. I wrote it with the assumption that potential interviewees would read the meaning of the term as I had intended. In some ways, this was a necessity. I had to define some category—to name the group that I would study. But, despite my methodological critiques, writing "queer students" didn't give me pause in that moment. It was a task to complete, to check off my to do list. One of the students I interviewed, though, asked me about my use of the word queer, pushed back against it, questioned my assumptions about a shared experience of the word—my moment of sedimentation of meaning emerging in the banal, required paperwork process of academic research. I had drawn upon an identity-based understanding of the word, using it as a catch-all term for LGBTQ+ students, even as this research project itself is an examination of meaning-making *of* queer. Any time we claim to represent a unified category, such as, "queer," we constitute the category through this representation (Butler, 1993b). I was doing this in my IRB paperwork. And very soon within my research process, a student was questioning my usage and resisting "queer" as a reclaimed term. In these moments of using queer, we define and redefine the term, always operating within the existing discourses.

Ongoing Processes of Reclaiming Queer

The reclamation of the term "queer" is often only a brief note in the literature of queer theory, if addressed at all (Browning, 1994). Reclamation as an ongoing process emerged in one of the student interviews. "Queer" began as a negative slang term for gay

people (Jagose, 1996). The activist group, Queer Nation, is one of the first groups to

actively use the term queer as a term of reclamation (Cunningham, 1992; M. Meyer,

1994). Queer nation enacted an in-your-face politics, antithetical to the assimilationist

politics and respectability politics of some lesbian and gay activists (Cunningham, 1992).

Queer emerged in this activist setting as confrontational and as a way to explicitly

highlight homophobia (Brontsema, 2004). That queer has *been* reclaimed, though, is not

always clear (M. Meyer, 1994). In one of the first interviews I conducted, Bree, resisted

my use of queer as an all-encompassing identity term in my recruitment materials. Bree

had grown up and lived in Atlanta, Georgia. She was in Atlanta for summer break when I

interviewed her. And she pushed back against my use of "queer" as an all-encompassing

identity marker and that she, as a trans lesbian, would not be considered part of that

group.

> Bree: Can I please request that we stop saying that ["queer"]. I live in Atlanta, Georgia. And there's a thing that I've noticed very prominently, in differences between how LGBT communities talk about and organize themselves here [in Atlanta], that I've noticed very very sharply different from the way it happens in [location of the researcher[2]]. This is something I've noticed, that being in [location of the researcher], how freely people are ready to use and embrace that term. Where I'm from, that word, that's something that gets yelled at you and that's something that, people's abusive parents say, that's something that gets shouted at you every year at pride. It's not something people call themselves. It's something that's like a trigger to people, honestly. It's something that, hearing it, I physically wince, when I encountered that word, especially as it's applied to me. And I don't want to be grouped with that word. I'm not queer, and I do not like calling myself that word. I don't like having people call me that word. Like, saying it makes me feel really gross and uncomfortable. So, what I'm asking is, are you looking for the experiences of people who self identify as queer. When you say you're looking for queer students, what I see is "I'm looking for students who identify as 'Q' in LGBTQ." I see that as "I'm looking for a specific subset of students in the LGBT community." So, one thing that I was really confused about was whether or not I was even eligible to participate in the study. To me and to most other LGBT people that I know in Atlanta do not think of queer as being

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[2] The state in which researcher is located is known to be a more liberal area.

synonymous with LGBT people. And I didn't know if you were looking for people to participate who were queer as a specific, like, identity? Or, you were looking for people who are included in what is generally thought of as queer in more liberal areas.

Bree's response shows the complicated process of reclamation and the ways in which it's always an ongoing process and not something that has "already" historically happened. Bree's story is the embodiment of the process of reclamation happening, still happening, always happening within a discursive system that threatens the lives and bodies of LGBTQ people. Bree's story tells us about the ongoing nature of reclaiming a term. It shows us the violence that continues to be inflicted through this term. And that the use of the word queer continues to vary from context to context, and Bree's recounting of her experience makes clear that context in which we perform an utterance continues to shape our meaning-making processes; my own use of queer is primarily in academic spaces. Far from being a term that has already been reclaimed, we must work to always be reclaiming it. However, I don't want to deny Bree's experiences here nor advocate for using queer. Her reactions were visceral and real and should be taken into account. As reclamation is ongoing, queer is still regularly used as a term of violence and hate, and the reclaiming is never finished.

My own use of queer varies per the context I am in. I do not usually use the word queer when I am in small town central Illinois where I grew up. There, like in Bree's home town, queer is still used regularly as a pejorative term. In this research, I had used the term queer from my perspective of a researcher at a liberal university in departments where queer theory is regularly read and taught. I had begun this research from the privileged position of researcher and not as a queer kid from the conservative Midwest. Bree's pushback reminded me of my own complicated relationship to power in academia.

The fact that Bree questioned me on my use of it is, in some ways, queer in itself. I had used the term with the assumption that readers would know what I meant and agree with my meaning. It was a moment of sedimentation of meaning—of queer as an identity marker. The research process, including IRB, does not make space for a framework that will not assume preexisting identities. So, in some ways, I was "forced" to sediment meaning and ask possible participants to name themselves as a particular identity. There was really no way to complete the IRB process without doing this. In queer theory (Jagose, 1996), queer is not a fixed identity, though I was using it as one—which is not very queer of me. After Bree questioned me on my use of queer, I was uncomfortable. How would I write about doing the very thing this project was critiquing and examining—the production and reifying of categories of gender and sexuality. I was uncomfortable with the thought of returning to the interview. I waited to transcribe her interview last. This interaction reveals the ongoing tensions of how queer is used in different contexts for different purposes. This is not necessarily to advocate for one particular usage but to reflect on the point that even within one subject, either Bree or me, queer is in process. And this process is embodied in this story.

From a performance studies lens, this writing once again sediments meaning, and I hope that the reader will consider the ways in which meaning is already sedimenting in our words and actions. Sharing Bree's story in this text does something. In writing, we are complicit in reiteration of terms, whether we use it in resistant or reifying ways. The intricacies of Bree's and my interaction show the inability to get outside of the discursive power structures. The utterance of a reclaimed term exudes the danger of recreating an identity politic that privileges the western, white gay male (Duggan, 2014). We are

always wrapped up in discourse and sedimenting meaning. I thought I might side-step the issue but stepped directly in it. In some ways, I had to. As a researcher in a university, I needed to finish IRB paperwork in order to conduct interviews and complete this dissertation project. In the next chapter, I look more in-depth at this relationship with context. In terms of discursive constraints, even in this project where I intentionally shift the focus from *a priori* categories to the production of categories, my language was tied to discursive constraints of needing to define a category for my research. Despite looking at the production of said category—queer—the category was defined through the IRB paperwork and my recruitment materials. But in this text, I reflect on these discursive constraints to continue engaging in a process of defining, redefining, and doing queerness.

If we say that one of the most powerful aspects of queer is that it's always in process (M. Meyer, 1994), this conversation and this writing contends with the fact that it's not a term that has already been reclaimed but is always being reclaimed. And we are always in relation to the terminology of queer, and that relationship is a complicated one, and one that is always moving, always in process.

In our conversation about the term queer, Bree also defined the term as an identity marker, even as she declared this a marker she did not wish to be labeled as.

> Bree: It can be a little frustrating sometimes because there's a lot of people who associate that word with only good things and with a very, a very nice feeling of like inclusion and being able to, you know, shed identities and labels and things like that. And I really wish that there were a way people could do that without invoking a word that is still really hurtful and taboo in a lot of places. So, for me, like, I would consider myself a lesbian and transgender, and that's like, those are, so I know you're trying to talk about like, this, like, anti-labels perspective, but for me, I would love a non-label. I would absolutely adore having a way to describe myself, which doesn't resort to like categorizations and things like that. And I would love having a way to do that that does not involve that word.

Bree noted that she does not want to be grouped with this word that has hurt her. She

does, though, want to be grouped, saying that she would love a way to describe herself

that doesn't involve the word queer. Complexly, she wants a term that does not resort to

categories but then described a desire to have a categorical term that is not the word

"queer"—a word that she believes has not been reclaimed in all geographic spaces. Her

desire is to be "ok" with a term itself. Bree is making sense of her own subject positions

within a discourse that pushes for an understanding of gender and sexuality as

categorical. One of the important aspects of "queer" as a term and as political is that it

challenges identity categories (M. Meyer, 1994). Though she resists this through the

desire for a non-label, she ultimately draws on a discourse of queer-as-identity-marker

and interprets it as an identity term/category.

Bree's resistance to my using the word and her own recuperation of queer-as-

identity really represents the complex discursive forces at play when we use a (reclaimed)

term, such as queer. Bree was, in a way, queering my use of the term in recruitment

emails and in my research. She even specifically asked that I not identify her as queer in

the research or name the entire group of interviewees as queer when including her. Then,

she went on to utilize queer as an identity, returning to an umbrella-like categorical term.

This is not to argue that queer should be in opposition to sexual and gender identities (M.

Meyer, 1994). Rather, Bree's position and my own careless use of the word queer in the

IRB paperwork show the ways in which we are all already wrapped in the discourse and

cannot escape the power structures—structures that categorize gender and sexuality

(Butler, 1993a). Bree's resistance to the reclamation of this term stems from the reality of

queer being used to inflict violence. But the violence is associated with the term itself

rather than with the categorization of bender and sexuality. Queer is used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ people (Duggan, 2014), and this queer-as-categorical-identity was utilized in the stories of many of the other students, as well.

<u>**Identity and Discourse**</u>

Identity Politics

In the last section, Bree envisioned queer as inclusive of a wide variety of genders and sexualities. She communicated her longing for a word that feels inclusive and not triggering for her. While this shows a desire to belong, she is tied up again in the discursive constraints of queer as category of identity. In particular, her story reflects the ways in which we desire inclusion within and identity category. This points to the ways in which students define and redefine categories to feel as if they belong. The students and all of us are tied up in this system—both discursively and affectively. Even when the system works to disenfranchise us, as subjects, we are produced by that system. This emerges in the students' stories about doing queerness in the classroom in the various ways that they drew on discourses of categorical identity labels as a way of understanding queer.

In the interviews, I specifically asked students about their understandings of queerness. This section considers the ways in which students took up the word queer as an identity marker. Queer, as a term, has been taken up as an umbrella for multiple LGBTQ+ identities (Duggan, 2014). Rather than listing out the numerous identities or a long acronym, "queer" becomes shorthand for non-normative categories of gender and sexuality. The students talked about queer as an identity, queer as a spectrum and a diverse category, and the desire to be part of a label/category that held meaning for them.

This draws on the ways that queer has been discursively positioned as an identity label and takes up identity politics in the ways that they are making meaning of their classroom experiences.

I have often used queer as an identity marker of sorts, as well. I have said, in certain contexts, that I am "queer." I usually mean this to be about more than gender and sexuality—a non-normative stance on politics, and monogamy, marriage, a critique of the nuclear family as the norm. But what I often say is, "I'm queer" without further discussion. The narrative I weave about my students' uses of queer in the classroom is that they are simply engaging in identity politics. In the interviews with the students, they did, at times, do this. They also engaged the term in more complex ways, as well.

Students used queer as self identity or as a spectrum. It's an umbrella term that encompasses anyone who isn't cis and straight. Their stories often veered toward who is or is not included in the category of queer. In the interviews, I asked students what queer meant to them.

> Skyler: Queer to me is very much about self identity. And I've moved away from categorizing like bodies as gay or lesbian or bisexual, and I've moved to just, use the term queer. And, I started doing that to move away a bit from the binary and also because I define myself as queer. And that isn't necessarily like one thing or another. I add queer onto anybody in like the LGBTQ.

Skyler explicitly talked about queerness in terms of self identity and naming people who are LGBTQ. This exemplifies how the discursive constraints of queerness manifest in her own experience of making sense of identity categories. She is expanding the category to be more inclusive, but the categorization process is occurring, pointing to the production and reproduction of categories, albeit more inclusive. The process of categorization, though, doesn't come under critique.

While Skyler's use of queer as an umbrella term is on the surface a banal usage, in fact, she's working to resist the binary model of identity. But she recreates another binary of queer/not queer—which she names— and which remains obscured as the second category. In relation to queer theory, the production of categories, in itself, works to make intelligible certain bodies and subject positions, always at the expense of those excluded (Duggan, 2014). Duggan argued that the act of centering sexual identity and assuming a fixed desire will necessarily represent the view of the western, white gay male. While, Skyler's push is against binary categories of gay, straight, the act of categorization *as an act* represents that of identity politics.

Similarly, Laura addressed her own experiences by framing it as falling somewhere on a queer spectrum. She also equates queer to bisexual, another identity label/marker.

> Laura: So, it's been a little weird for me trying to figure out exactly where I fit into on the queer spectrum. I've known since high school I definitely I am in there somewhere, and I usually took on bisexual as my identifier. And I still use that for friends and family as a convenient shorthand. Then, later on, I felt more maybe asexual was what I was more feeling. And I now typically go by queer or bisexual when I feel like queer might not be the most appropriate word.

Calling queer a spectrum is another way to draw upon discourses if queer-as-identity. This connotes a more fluid understanding of how one might identify, being able to be at different points on the spectrum. However, it's another way to construct a category. Laura's usage of queer reifies categories in themselves and, at the same time, resisting the current configuration of categorization. Her use of queer as changing and fluid speaks to the ways in which our shifting contexts affect the terms that we use to describe ourselves.

In this interview, I had come out to Laura. We were talking about the ways in which queerness was present in our interview. This was one of the questions that I asked

in each interview. Laura started to respond that we were both queer and stopped herself to not make an assumption that I was also queer. "That's totally an assumption," she had said. I assured her that it was a correct assumption. When I said this, she shifted back in her seat and smiled. I read this as her exhibiting being comfortable with me—though it may be because because she made an assumption or because her assumption was correct. Regardless, this was a moment of connection with each other. However, conversations about the meaning(s) of queer did not come up in this moment, and I did not bring it up. In my own way, I had reified a definition of queer as an identity marker. In the complex discursive structures, though, we—two "queer" women—had found a way in a higher education setting to find a connection, in its own way a queer act within the power structure. Similarly, Ani, early in the interview, asked if I was… She left it vague.

I told her that, "Yes, I am."

"Cool, cool," she said.

The other students in the interviews already knew I was gay. Though there was not some "coming out" or disclosure moment with them, the opportunity to find the space to come together to talk about queerness or value it in research in the academy is a queer act. And at the risk of employing a coming out narrative, this space offers a place to connect within a heteronormative system in which we are in the margins. .

Ani had also used queer as an identity category to refer explicitly to anyone whose sexuality or gender is not cis or heterosexual.

> Ani: Personally, I consider [queer] to encompass anyone whose gender identity or sexual orientation deviates from being cisgender and heterosexual. So, I feel like if you're not any of those things, you can call yourself that.

She is approaching an understanding of normativity in the way she posits queerness as a sort of deviation. She still centers her understanding around identity. Specifically, she says "if you're not" cis or straight. This use of the verb "to be" sediments queer as an identity. It even points to an essentialized meaning of sexual and gender identity. This is not to claim that she is an essentialist but that the discourses about identity are framed with this type of essentialist language that she applies to queerness. That within our non-normative difference, we assume a type of sameness (Edelman, 1995).

The exclusionary process of category production was addressed explicitly by a story Micca told about the possibility of creating a queer classroom. We were engaging in imagining worldmaking possibilities. Envisioning a queer classroom is how I had phrased the question to the students as a way of imagining possibilities—of imagining worldmaking in the classroom. "What would a perfectly queer classroom look like?"

Micca initially went directly to who should or should not be included in this queer classroom. I pursued her train of thought.

Rachel: Is there room for cis heteros in a perfect queer class?

Micca: Depends what you call queer. Ok, you know that I'm going to try to escape this. Ok, I think I've come up with my answer to whether cis het people should technically count as queer. Ultimately, I was trying to think, is there any loopholes where there might be another aspect. You're familiar with the ace discourse? I would say look, it depends if an ace person wants to self-identify as cis and het, and ace, if, now that's a big if, because most do not, I would say if you identify as ace, then fine you're queer. Because quite frankly, there's been a lot of talk of whether being ace does it really count as being queer? Typically, being queer is something that people realize about themselves and usually a group of people wouldn't necessarily be asked to be included in another group. If I think of it that way. If then, the ace community is looking to be recognized as queer, they're not making a joke here. That means that they're for real about this. They know what potential discrimination they may face, that comes along with identifying as such. And they're aware, hopefully, of the history of that term. And so in that line of logic, if someone is ace and happens to be cis and het, self-defining as. Then, yeah. If ace people are queer, who am I to say that that's not

the case? You know? So, yeah. So, I guess there's my answer then. A perfectly queer class could have cis het people in it if they are queer. If they are queer.

The point here is not to answer whether or not "ace" people are part of the community but to highlight the fact that Micca framed the conversation about queerness as an inclusion or and exclusion and spoke directly about ace identity in terms of deciding if it should or should not be considered queer. Regardless of who she thinks should be included, the very fact that she engaged in a process of specifically and explicitly including and excluding bodies based on identity markers is telling about how she is interpreting queerness. Her phrasing of "who would even count as queer" directly says that she is thinking of the queer classroom in terms of exclusions and/or inclusion of particular identities.

Micca's story and our conversation about a queer classroom show the ways in which we both were wrapped up in the discourse. I left open-ended and vague my questions about what a queer classroom looks like—expecting answers about how the class was taught, the content of the curriculum, how many students are in the class, what the space physically looked like. Micca immediately began listing inclusions and exclusions and went on to ponder a particular identity and whether it would be included or not. This language represents assumptions about the creation of categories. It does point to the differences among people who might/could be considered in the LGBTQ identity category/spectrum and offers a way to be more inclusive and, perhaps, celebrate differences. But ultimately, Micca still operated on the assumption that there is a category. And the very production of categories necessarily includes a process of exclusion.

I am not arguing that we should pit identity politics against queerness but highlighting that these stories and conversations do something—and as reflected in Micca's story, can reify the very construction of categories that queer theory is deconstructing (Slagle, 1995). Warner (1993) noted that identity politics is a western tradition and shapes how we understand queer issues. We use a diversity model that is based on ethnic and racial identities, and this doesn't work for queerness. And yet, queer is about sexuality because queer is about heteronormativity and the ways in which heteronormativity has insinuated itself into all aspects of society (Warner, 1993). This is not a critique of the ways that the students are drawing on discourses; it's to highlight the ways in which we all are stuck within this discourse and are finding ways to operate within it. Within the context of these interviews, the students were constrained by these discourses of identity and categorization—just as I was when I filled out my IRB paperwork.

Identity as Constructed

The previous section addressed the ways in which students made meaning of queer as an identity category. In their meaning-making about queer, though, this process was often complicated by ways that their stories exceeded the discourse of identity politics. Through these stories, the students gestured to the limits of categorical identity as a framework for understanding queerness. Their stories did not engage in essentialist assumptions in a simple way about identity and queerness. In these stories about the slipperiness of identity, the students showed an awareness that identity is constructed and that there are limits to identity as a framework for understanding experience. Their stories reflect the ways in which they are at the least implicitly noting the contradictions and

complexities in the discursive constraints of using queer as an identity. Hames-Garcia

(2006) argued that we need a politic that can address the socially constructed nature of

identity politics. They demonstrate that queerness is complicated, and they make

complicated the framework of identity by pointing to/highlighting the ways in which

identity is a "doing," which gets us closer to a queer understanding of identity and

experiences that examines processes of normalization and destabilizing notions of

identity even while engaging with discourses of identity politics.

One of the ways these complexities emerged was in the way that Skyler

negotiated the contradiction of self-identity and others identifying someone as an identity.

> Skyler: I think doing queerness is not one thing. I think back to the very beginning of this interview, doing queerness, as in using queer frameworks and reading queer theory, I think in a way is doing queerness a bit. But it's different because I do that. But I am also queer in my own identities, so it's not the same, I don't know.

> Rachel: It's interesting when you're talking about my queerness it's all about my actions, and when you talk about your queerness it's about identity.

> Skyler: I think that's the case because I worry about me trying to impose what I understand your identity to be onto you. And I worry that it's not my place. And I like to leave that up to you.

Skyler encompasses the slipperiness of a term such as queer. She engages it as an identity

when talking about herself, saying that she is queer in her own identities. But, when

referring to me, she discusses my actions, both currently in the interview and my past

actions as her former teacher. Even in addressing the idea of identity, is it self identity or

is it other people? How does identity get named? These are questions that are raised by

Skyler's understanding of queer. She draws on these multiple understandings, all within

one conversation about queerness.

Laura turns to the ways in which she uses queer and the effect the word has when she uses it as an identity.

> Laura: Queer to me mostly means any sexuality that is not explicitly heterosexual. Um, if someone is questioning, if someone is only feels maybe a slight bit of attraction to me, that's still feels like they could claim the label queer if they wanted. Because that's a discussion of their sexuality that's not, not within the bounds of heterosexuality. And so, I feel like queer does come in and sort of provide a useful outlet at that point. So yeah.

> Me: What appeals to you about the word queer?
> Laura: I think it appeals to me because it's fairly broad, it's not, it doesn't really tie me to anything in particular. Like, I loved bisexual because it was a concrete thing to be like, I'm not just attracted to men, I'm also attracted to women, and that's an important part of my identity. And asexual was really important to me because it was shorthand for how I was feeling about sex. And how I could communicate that most effectively to my partners. But then over time, I've became less certain how I felt about sex in general, and so, I've sort of switched to queer because I felt like that was more, it encouraged more of a dialogue. It wasn't just like people could just be like, ok so you're bisexual and so I feel like I know how you identify your sexuality, or you're asexual so you like have no relation to sex whatsoever. But yeah, queer opens up a dialogue. It encourages people to like ask me questions about it.
> Laura is trying to *do* something here when she uses queer. She specifically says

that she's not only employing it to describe an identity category, but using it evokes an

action, opens a space for dialogue with someone about gender and sexuality. She is

drawing on a discourse of categorical identity. However, she recognizes in her story that

the use of queer is a type of discursive action. That the use of it offers the potential to

initiate a conversation about sexuality. This suggests that Laura is using queer as a

linguistic action, to intentionally initiate a conversation that opens up a space to negotiate

the meaning of the term, even while she is employing it as an identity. I would usually

interpret a student saying that queer was "fairly broad" as speaking to a categorical

understanding of queer as an identity. This complicates categorical identity and connotes

that she sees that language is performative in that it has an effect and that effect is different in different contexts.

In light of the ways that identities and systems of oppression shape experiences, I am hesitant to call students' use of identity discourse as somehow anti-queer or engaging in a normative identity politics. The students make meaning of queerness and identity in varying ways that point to both the constructed nature of identity categories. Identity politics can have their uses, such as allowing oppressed groups to resist master narratives (Alcoff & Mohanty, 2006). The complexity of their stories also exceeds a binary of identity politics vs. queerness. Their understanding of the constructedness of identities points to a *doing* and engagement and critique of the ways that identities emerge in their experiences. They are not engaging with discourse uncritically. Even in the stories from one person, one person engages both in the discourses of queer as identity but also explicitly point to the complications with that and the limitations of identity as a framework for understanding experiences. They also are, at times, getting to the ways that queer is a doing, that there are complications between identifying oneself and someone else "as" something. And that they think different things about it—sometimes wanting it for self and other times for others.

Intersectionality

This section addresses the ways in which students draw on the concept of intersectionality to understand how multiple systems of oppression operate and shape identity and experiences. Their stories are, at times, a reification of identity politics. But some of the stories reflect an understanding of how identity politics is useful as a framework for understanding experiences. Hames-Garcia (2006) argued that identity

66

politics can help us understand how oppression is structured in the world, including the

ways in which different systems intersect with each other and are inextricable from each

other. Rather than students positing identity categories as essentialist, they delve into the

ways in which their own experiences and knowledges are shaped by various systems of

oppression. Queerness and the field of queer theory pose critical questions about the

coherency of identity and, in terms of sexual and gender identity, ask how queerness

intersects with other logics of knowledge production that privilege whiteness and other

dominant identity its (Ferguson, 2005). In other words, to posit the meaning of queerness

as an analysis of structures of power reflects an understanding of the constructed nature

of identity categories, reflects that there is a process of production at work. Through an

intersectional analysis, the stability of categories is challenged—in queer theory, another

way in which the rigidity of categories can be resisted (Jagose, 1996). The students thus

engage in queer (v.) through drawing on discourses of identity.

Skyler sees her identities as inextricable from each other. This points to an

understanding of processes that are occurring. She explicitly connects what she says to

the way in which she uses a queer analysis.

> Skyler: [Queer is] using certain frameworks to analyze intersectionalities of race,
> class, gender. A power analysis. I have been moving away from just the
> framework of difference, in that binary, moving toward the matrix of domination
> framework, that holds all of these intersectionalitites, and I've been using that in
> queer analysis. I think the WGSS department specifically, and classes that I've
> taken, and what separates some classes from others, moving away from solely
> relying on a historical lens of different events through history. And not
> necessarily abandoning that but also incorporating the individual experience or
> the group collective experience too. And using those two together to expand my
> learning process. Recently I was reading an Angela Davis book. And in the
> beginning of her book, it's more of looking at certain events through a historical
> lens. And I know this was not in the WGSS department, it was in Afro Am, but
> I'm bringing it up as a queer black woman, I connect the two very much in my
> own self identity. But reading that in a more historical framework, and then the

next week bringing in the slave narrative. And not that slave narrative is not historical but actually, enslaved people recounting experiences and adding on the intensity of the emotion, which makes it all the more real.

"Queer" becomes a modifier of a type of analysis, a modified *doing*. The analysis she refers to in the classroom is a doing, rather than an essentialized identities. She makes explicit the connection between queerness and being a black woman and a slave narrative. These connections reflect the ways in which she is thinking of queerness as a politic, an analysis that one can employ. A *doing* in which queer addresses the power and the status quo (Warner, 1993) and pushes against assimilation and conforming to the norms (Cohen, 1997) through her intersectional analysis.

Skyler also uses the matrix of domination to frame her thinking on the subject. This highlights that doing queerness is about processes of subjection. These processes are about normalizing processes (Jagose, 1996). Skyler explicitly connects this to what she names a queer analysis. Though she uses identity labels, such "queer black woman," her usage of a "queer analysis" exceeds the simplistic framework of categorical social identities and an identity politics. Instead, her use of the matrix of domination is used to understand the production of these experiences. Her willingness to historicize and to bring racism to the discussion works to queer knowledge—that queerness is not just about sexuality and gender but that we must look at the multiple dimensions of power at work.

For Kara, queerness is similarly about intersections of race in the classroom. Kara explicitly connects queer to racism and racialization processes in the classroom. She told a story about a classroom discussion in which many of the students were upset about the election of Trump.

Kara: In honors classes it's typically white, upper-class, cis people. It was like the identities of the people within that classroom that sort of predicated why it wasn't considered queer. So, I think, what is queer about the how. The body that these messages are coming from, so like I said, it was a predominantly white classroom. I was having an argument with another white person, and my friend, being maybe one of two people of color in that class, as much as I thought that I was queering the space in one facet, I'm sure many of the white people in that class were like oh wow, like, she's definitely, hopefully, said bringing a solid point. Obviously, for the people of color in that class, they didn't really translate it as queer. More so, like this is just typical. White voices are dominating. I said were in a predominantly white classroom right now, and I think we really need to check our privilege within this. Yes, we can be upset that Trump is our president. But at the same time, this is not going to affect us as readily as it will for like, marginalized bodies.

She may casually use queer as a placeholder or as an identity marker, but she is also clearly engaging in thinking about how it's all a process, explaining that in these moments in the classroom something gets produced. Kara could see this as a process, as something that was occurring and resisted the normativity of whiteness in the classroom (Cohen, 1997). Her story reflects operations of power in the microcosm of the classroom. She is both using queer in multiple ways but is calling "queer" these things that speak to intersections of systems of oppression. The way in which she understands what happened in the classroom is a microcosm of the larger discursive processes that produce "normal." Even while engaging in discourses of intersectionality—a type of identity politic—the students engaged in queer understandings of the constructed and fluid nature of identity.

When Kara said that the other students "didn't really translate it as queer," she spoke to the relationship of a speaker with an audience. In this case, an audience of other students who were people of color. Her recognition that this "audience" may have interpreted her performance as something other than intended shows that her classroom performances are performative—that they are doing something in the classroom space and that the effect on the audience is complicated. Some queer theory has been criticized

for centering whiteness and cisgender men, but Kara's use of queer as intersectionality and through performance pushes against this. She, as a white queer person, struggles with this tension through her story. Ultimately, she doesn't provide a conclusion or answer but a recognition of the way that her white privilege interacts with her experiences, even when doing what she considered to be queerness in a classroom.

It's also notable that both Kara and Skyler are former students of mine. We were in a small, discussion-based class about utopia in the classroom. This is not to say that they learned this in my classroom. There are multiple factors at work. The makeup of the class, which was an elective, was predetermined by types of students that would be interested in a course entitled "performing utopia." It was clear during that semester that many of the students in the class already saw the world through a political lens that included a critique of systems of oppression. A lot of the work we did in the classroom consisted of writing autobiographies that addressed social identities and systems of oppression in various ways. This sort of writing demanded an intersectional approach, so at the least, these two students have had practice thinking and writing using this lens. During the interviews, there may have been a piece of their performance that was still caught up in the power structures of me/teacher, them/student. Regardless, though, the students brought an intersectional analysis to bear on their stories about the classroom, resisting the critique that queer theory centers whiteness.

Queer (v.) Actions

This section looks at the ways that students' stories relate to queer theory and the ways in which queer has been posed as an action, a resistance of normativity (Cohen, 1997). Queer (v.) is about resisting heteronormativity and the stability of gender, sex, and

sexuality as categories (Jagose, 1996). Cohen has argued that we should organize our

politics around our relationships to power. Duggan (2014) has similarly argued that

queerness is unified in its dissent from normative structures of sex and gender. In line

with queer theory, the students offered stories about the classroom that reflected such an

understanding of queer—as an action.

> Kara examined contexts and how they change and thus how queer changes.

> Kara: This is a question I ask myself pretty often, and I feel like the meaning of queer fluctuates depending on the situation I'm in in my life. So, I feel like queer in its most fundamental sense for me is just kind of deconstructing the social labels and moving away from looking at myself as a single unit. I question my own binaries but also just the binaries presented to me as well, and I feel like I'm always in between them or not even around them. It's a hard definition to grasp, I think. It's hard because sometimes it doesn't even come up in the guise of queerness, but it is inherently queer, the content that we're talking about. Even just talking about the US as a whole and the way in which boundaries work to isolate people and how that happens both on an intuitional and an individual level. Everything from the color of skin to language and the way in which all that works and looking at each of those facets of society. That was definitely something that really resonated with me. Because I feel like that's definitely talking about a nation—queering a nation, I guess.

Kara noted the limits of binary and the ways in which power structures are affecting her

in a multitude of ways. Her use of "moving away from looking at myself as a single unit"

implies a more complex politics that identity categories. She goes on to critique the

binary model of identity. For her, to queer is to question these categories. She goes as far

as to say she always feels between or around the categories. Through her

conceptualization of her own position, she shows the limits of identity categories. Kara's

story about the changing contexts demonstrates a critique of categories.

Queer also becomes an action in her story about how and where queerness comes

up. In her experience, she talks about queering a nation. It's not simply the content that is

covered in a course but an examination of the operations of power in a particular situation

of the class she was in. That we could queer (v.) something like the nation also highlights

the utility of queer as action. That we can apply it in other contexts than gender and

sexuality and that it can critique the dominant norms in multiple contexts. The radical

potential of queer is that it can challenge the status quo (Warner, 1993) and oppose norms

(Cohen, 1997). Similar to what Kara previously talked about in connecting race to

queerness, she again brings up the intersections of identities, in this case, as a way to

show the importance of queering something like the boundaries of a nation.

Similarly, Micca points to queer as an action/verb, that we might queer a

multitude of things.

> Micca: I mean, you could have the word queering as a verb that's been applied to
> many things. I'm sure you're familiar with situations where, you know, you could
> put it with anything. Queering woodworking or queering basket making. You
> could put it with anything. Queering gentrification. It really has a lot to do with
> the performance. Of course, there's lots to be said too of the whole, the whole
> exchange between performer and audience when it comes to those situations.
> Because you're trying to perform your own definition of queerness, and the
> audience is trying to read it through its own definition of queerness. If those don't
> line up, then, there could be something that's disjointed. So, that's something I
> would definitely take into consideration and think about it. I feel like there's a lot
> of moving parts. [She references a course on gender and conflicts that arose
> during the beginning of the course.]

> Micca: We were all in the circle in the class, and we were all looking at each other
> with the biggest eyes and the most shocked, appalled faces, and all shaking our
> heads and thinking oh we're out of here. It felt surreal because here we all came
> in with a certain expectation. It's all about expectations, you know, we expected
> this person to have a certain amount of knowledge. And I would say a mistake
> that a number of us made is that we made the assumption that based on her
> identity, she would have a certain amount of the same language to describe certain
> things [different gendered identities].

Micca also talked about queer as an action, but at times, she seemed to be criticizing it as

well. You could queer anything. But then, she returned to queering things and being wary

of assumptions. Her story about the classroom is about examining those assumptions that

we have tied to identities and disrupting identity politics by acknowledging that there were assumptions at play and that in the classroom performances, they turned out to be inaccurate.

This story about identity politics that she brought up in conjunction with thinking about what queer means explicitly shows the limits of an identity model in that we assume a shared identity means a shared politic and standpoint. She and her classmates, many of whom were trans, expected to be on the same page with an instructor who was also trans. This, though, ended up not being true. She noted that it felt "surreal"—this moment of disrupted expectations around identity took on an air of unexpected. She determines that we can't assume that we all share the same language. Though she doesn't return to queer explicitly, it's telling that this story emerged specifically when I asked about what queer means to her. Her process and story reflect an understanding of queer that demonstrates the limit of identity while also seeing queer as a verb/action/performance, with varying definitions. This suggests a more processed based understanding of queer than a simple queer-as-category.

Queer theory has long criticized the use of gay and lesbian identity politics as limiting (Duggan, 2014; Seidman, 1993; Warner, 1993) and argued for a model of resistance to multiple processes of normalization (Warner, 1993). Berlant and Warner (1998) have argued that queer is unrealizable as an identity because it necessarily includes more people than can be identities. Rather, we should look to multiple ways to queer (v.). The students' stories show that doing this in the classroom is possible. We can critique and name processes of categorization and can resist processes of normalization (Cohen, 1997). At its best, queer theory offers possibilities (Duggan, 2014).

These students' stories represent an ongoing engagement with queer, sedimenting meaning, drawing on extant discourses of power and leveraging the slippages that occur. Their stories negotiate and renegotiate queer, and that's what queer should always be in the process of doing if we are to believe that the diversity of the term is an asset (Jagose, 1996). The ways in which their stories reflect an ongoing engagement with queerness in the classroom disrupts my story about the use of identity politics in the classroom. This is not to say that the students complicated understandings of queer can be generalized to all undergrads. But my own narrative reflected biases as a teacher that were ultimately countered by the students' stories. For the students, the engagement with queerness in a classroom setting is a negotiation of power structures that are affecting them.

Queer Interviews

The interviews, themselves, also opened up a space for negotiating meaning around queer. Interview questions were about how students think of queer. The questions were composed without the assumption that queer had a predetermined meaning for the students. The interviews were semi-structured, but my own goal of doing queerness was made explicit to the students. I prefaced each interview with my explicit goal being not only to examine queerness but to do queerness within the interview. Within this broader context of neoliberalism where queerness is often not allowed, we opened a moment of connection. Several students mentioned the connection when I asked about how queerness was operating in the interview. Kara, Skyler, Sophia, Ani, and Laura all spoke about how we shared a queer identity. Though we, again, employed queer as a category of identity, we were also finding a way to connect within a system that is often hostile to

LGBTQ+ people. We queer the space of higher education even as we simultaneously linguistically reify identity politics.

This and the stories in this section all speak to how complex it is to do queerness in the classroom and in higher education. From a queer theory perspective, this type of struggling with the ever-changing nature of the term is often posed as a benefit and strength of the term (Jagose, 1996). My own narrative about the classroom had painted a simplistic picture about student performances in the classroom, and I was so immersed in my own meaning of the classroom that I didn't recognize when I was engaging in using queer as an identity myself. This reflexive turn shows that even for me as an educator, queerness is complicated, and the stories from the interviewees show how the student understanding of queer in the classroom is complex, as well. In other words, I am implicated in the near-miss pedagogy as much as the students are. The ever-changing nature of queer eschews a prescriptive politic. However, if we don't open the spaces for this in class and in other spaces, this negotiation and struggle will not be possible, pointing to the necessity to work to open up classroom spaces for conversations about queer. And in those conversations, we meet the students—in relation—where they are, make these complexities explicit, and move together toward queering the classroom.

CHAPTER 3

HIGHER EDUCATION AS CONTEXT

<u>Introduction</u>

In this chapter, I examine the ways that the broader power structures shape subject positions and who these subject positions are available to. This examination includes the various ways that power structures shape educational experiences to produce subject positions and stories. Power structures work to produce some bodies as belonging in the classroom and other bodies as excluded, and these excluded positions are made invisible in higher education.

By connecting my own stories about students' performances in the classroom to literature on neoliberalism, I look at my stories of students as neoliberal subjects and how neoliberalism in higher education produces neoliberal subjects. In other words, I examine the ways in which I interpret students' performances in the classroom as being good neoliberal subjects. I examine the ways in which neoliberalism has shaped higher education as a context that produces "student" in itself, to underline that even in interviewing "students," there are already always discursive forces that have worked on this category and that the categories are a production. By performing neoliberalism "well," our bodies are produced as belonging in the classroom. This is not to say that the belonging subjects always perform neoliberalism well or perfectly but that my own narrative about the classroom is that students are good neoliberal subjects in problematic ways. Taking a reflexive turn, I trouble this position by examining my own neoliberal subjectivity in the academy and the ways in which I perform as a good neoliberal subject. I then look at the ways that the student interviews reflect how they understand the context

of the classroom. I give particular attention to Micca's critique of operations of power in the classroom. Next, I look at the ways in which students value and perform community in the classroom and offer the performance of community as a resistance of individualistic neoliberal ideology. I offer the possibility of performing as "bad subjects" with the students as a way to do the queer work of resisting neoliberal performances in the classroom. The stories in this section how neoliberalism in higher education, as the context of our stories, shapes our subject positions in the classroom, and stories about being "bad" or "good" subjects is used to frame how, within the classroom, we are shaped as neoliberal subjects. The production of these subjectivities is a queer approach to understanding the production of subject positions and uses a performance studies approach of personal narrative to examine the inextricable link between text and context. And this link creates a space in which some bodies belong, and others are excluded. Student' stories, in particular, often offer both a critique of ideologies of the classroom that are occurring to them as well as desires for other configurations of classroom relations. These stories complicate our relationships with context while starting to look toward worldmaking in imagining and asking for something different that does not exist or does not often exist in higher education.

In the final section, I shift to look at the workings of several intersecting systems of oppression to highlight the bodies that are excluded by workings of power and show that this exclusion becomes obscured in stories about the classroom. For me to even become a researcher in the position of asking undergraduates to be interviewed, we must ask who even gets to be a college student or a graduate student doing dissertation research? Who is allowed to become an educator in a higher education setting? Thinking

through the context of higher education elucidates the ways that these categories of students and researcher are already exclusionary in themselves.

This chapter examines higher education as the context in which I and the students are telling their stories. Peterson and Langellier (1997) emphasized that stories are embodied interpellative acts produced by context. We make meaning of our experiences through these embodied narratives. We are always within our context, within the system. In centering context as an object of study in this research, I examine higher education as a social, cultural, and political space (Hantzis, 1998) that produces our subject positions and constructs the stories that are available to us within our subject positions. Examining the context of higher education as object of study offers a methodological alternative to traditional research models that focus on world-as-text models of textualism (Conquergood, 1998) and can illuminate the production of certain subject positions and stories that become available to us at a particular contextual moment (Hantzis, 1998).

Langellier (1986) has argued that text cannot be understood apart from its context. In approaching personal narrative as performance, Langellier (1999) wrote that we must take context as seriously as we do text. In this chapter, I focus on context to reflect the performative turn in theorizing personal narrative. To do this, I look at the operations of power structures in higher education. Specifically, I attend to the production of subjectivities within the power structures to connect these productions to a queer theoretical framework. In the higher education context, I ask which subjectivities get produced as belonging in the classroom and, thus, are available the student participants in this study and to me.

I focus on higher education, specifically, though context could be radically infinite—one could never examine all aspects of context. For this project, to highlight higher education as context opens up the possibility of looking as the workings of various power structures that produce our classroom experiences. Higher education as the focus of this chapter opens the door to discussing a variety of discursive forces at work in various ways, such as neoliberalism, classroom power structures, and systems of oppression. All of these work to produce particular subjectivities as belonging in the space of higher education.

The contexts in which we produce our stories have already structured the ways in which we understand our experiences and how we perform our stories. In this specific instance of education and the classroom, the ways in which power has already worked upon subjects within the system of education has produced certain subjectivities as belonging while excluding other subjects. The production (and subsequent exclusions) of subject positions is as integral to the construction of the students' stories about the classroom as the text of the stories is.

I consider subject positions that are produced as excluded—not belonging—from the space of the higher education classroom. This chapter examines and makes visible these exclusions to make apparent the ways in which my body and the undergraduates' bodies were produced as included and belonging—even as we occupy multiple minoritarian positions. This is not to say that the students' subject positions are always one of belonging but that they and I, as subjects, have negotiated the institution of education and have, at least in some ways, been produced as classroom subjects who have not been completely excluded from the higher education classroom. These excluded

subject positions are often rendered invisible in research about the classroom, but the excluded subjects are obscured by the necessity of visible "data" about the classroom. This isn't to say that the students and I are not attuned to the power structures that have affected our lives but that the thrust of research is to present the evidence of this. I use performative writing to linger on these excluded subjects, on these absences. This "lingering" opens the space in this research to spend time on the subject positions that are not/cannot be in the classroom space with me and in the interviews with me. The importance of this lingering is to reiterate the ways in which our students and/or our subjects of research are already produced into certain subject positions to even exist in a higher education classroom.

Neoliberalism

In this section, I examine the ways in which neoliberalism shapes the students' and my subject positions in the classroom. I do this through telling my own personal narratives within neoliberalism. I trouble my own story through the complexity of the students' meaning making of the classroom space, which reflects an awareness of and struggle with these power structures at work in a classroom setting. This complicates my story that students are good neoliberal subjects. I use my own personal narrative of my subject position within neoliberalism to further trouble the assumption that students are good neoliberal subjects, looking at how I perform neoliberal subject as a teacher and looking at students' performances of ruptures in the classroom as acting as "bad" neoliberal subjects. The students' stories and my own stories do not offer any straightforward evidence that neoliberalism is a deterministic ideology or economics— though neoliberalism is by no means full of the "free choices" that it purports, but neither

is it all-encompassing of our experiences. Rather, the stories and analysis in this section demonstrate the complexities of trying to do queerness in these subject positions—graduate instructor and undergraduate student—entrenched in the neoliberal classroom of a large public university. I argue that the stories reflect both the constraints of the neoliberal power structure and the resistant acts that we engage in to disrupt and dismantle the system.

Good Neoliberal Subjects

There is a story I like to tell about my students—that they're good little neoliberal subjects. I tell stories about how their behavior reflects ideologies of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism shapes how we understand ourselves as teachers and how students understand themselves as students. Neoliberalism is a way of reasoning that structures how we think, configuring everything in economic terms (Brown, 2015). In neoliberalism, education—along with everything—is configured in terms of the market (Brown, 2015). Higher education is managed like a corporate business. Colleges are equated to corporations (Giroux, 2014). The deregulation, privatization, and commodification central to neoliberalism affect the very structures of the university. College education gets framed as ensuring that students will be more "skilled" and, thus, valued in the job market (Pucci, 2015). Neoliberalism defines the value of higher education as a commodity. Non-monetary goals of higher education are devalued (Bylsma, 2015). In higher education, this is the broader system in which we work, and I often interpret students' behaviors as reflecting this ideology.

In neoliberalism, higher education is always in service of the market through a focus on job preparation for students, often at the expense of the humanities (Cruz &

81

Dorsey, 2015). When I teach writing, I often have the students read Peter Brooks, "Testing and Learning," an article about how humanities in higher education gets devalued, while the focus of college increasingly becomes job preparation. He argued the importance of the humanities to producing well-rounded, empathic citizens. Pedagogically, I use this reading as a jumping off point for discussing with students the role of higher education in their lives and in society. The students also write academic response papers to this reading, taking a stance on the topic and responding to Brooks's arguments.

Every time I have taught this reading, there have been several students—always business majors or STEM majors—who rail against this reading and argue that the humanities are not necessary and don't give them any benefits in the job market. This, I tell myself, is exactly the neoliberal thinking that Brooks is arguing against in his piece.

Neoliberalism in higher education also posits the students as consumers (Brown, 2006). Just this semester, one student insisted that Brooks was wrong because student *are* customers. He couldn't understand why Brooks had a problem with students acting like customers. They simply *are* customers. Obviously, when a student outright says that students are customers, it's pretty straightforward interpretation that they do think of themselves as consumers. This is one of the most blatant accounts of student-as-consumer that has happened to me in the classroom.

In another instance, in a course evaluation a student explicitly referenced wasting money on the course. The course was titled "Public Speaking," and in my experience teaching the class, many of the students expect a more instrumental approach where they learned the mechanics of speaking and got feedback in an objective way to make their

speeches "better." Each semester, I would have several students who would say, "Well, aren't you going to tell if I say 'ummm' too many times or note how fast I talked?" They wanted their speech evaluations quantified through a rubric that outlined these mechanics. What they got was a course on power, discourse, and audience, in which I emphasized the ways in which our own positionality affects speech (speech acts) and the audiencing of such speech.

I would say to them, "Aren't you already aware that you do these things, like saying 'ummm'? Is me grading you down going to make you stop?"

I refused to create rubrics, letting the students know that I thought that peer feedback and qualitative feedback from me—based on connections with discourse and power structures—would be better at getting at the impact of our speech acts and how we might be more effective in that impact. Students engaged in a type of peer review in which audience members gave feedback to the speaker, and the speaker had to reflect on it.

When I received my evaluations one semester, a student had written, "I wasted thousands of dollars on this [class]?! Unacceptable." I don't think any teacher wants to hear that their class is a waste, but at a systemic level, this experience shows how students think of themselves as consumers. The choice to attend college has become a return on investment and getting the "best bang for your buck" for students (Brown, 2015). And, in this student's mind, my Publix's speaking class was not a good financial investment. This story also shows the risk in deviating from the quantitative measurable evaluation methods of neoliberalism that some students want. My own quantitative course evaluations that semester were the lowest I have ever received. When students

think of themselves as consumers and their degree and classes as something they buy, and ultimately, teachers as service providers, those educators doing the uncomfortable work of questioning the power structures will be coming up against these types of ideologies in some of the students. College has become a financial investment divested from civic engagement, critical thinking, and critical consciousness-raising. These are only important if they offer another line in a resume, another skill to tout in a cover letter, or a credential that one can market when job searching. Though I believe that education should be accessible financially to all people, this financial burden on the students and framing of themselves as consumers manifests in our relations to each other. This student was upset that I didn't provide the quality of commodity that he had purchased, and I was frustrated that he didn't see the "value" of the learning process, and thought it reflected a general devaluing of schooling for social responsibility or as a public good (Giroux, 2014).

These stories, though, were in my writing and/or public speaking courses. The students I interviewed for this study had all chosen to be in a WGSS course. Students in WGSS classes and other critical education type courses are already a self-selecting group of students. Even though the introductory WGSS course that I TA'ed for was a general education course, there are a multitude of courses that fulfill this requirement, and the students in that course had chosen a WGSS course out of many other choices. This self selection is another constraint—I hesitate to name it that, as I consider it a positive aspect—on the subject positions that students occupy in the WGSS classroom. In the previous chapter looked at some of the ways that students take up discourses of queerness as identity, and I would also consider this ideology of the individual as part of

neoliberalism. But, in the interviews, the students showed more of an inclination toward

rupture in other classrooms and a desire for community in all classrooms. Though several

of them mentioned that school is expensive, they mentioned in as a critique of the

structure, not as a critique of their own, personal financial investment; several of the

students stated that education should be more affordable or even free. Not once did they

mention the need to get a better "return on investment" or reflect a blatant consumer

ideology. Rather, their stories reflected their own struggles within the power structures.

Ruptures of the Apolitical Classroom

In this section, I look at how one interviewee's stories about the classroom work

to rupture the neoliberal ideology of the apolitical classroom. Neoliberalism posits itself

as apolitical, a "common sense" way of understanding how the world works (Duggan,

2003). Traditional banking education (Freire, 2001) models of the classroom are

consistent with the individuality of a neoliberal ideology in which the classroom is

apolitical, and teachers should be neutral transmitters of information to the students.

Reflected in the previous section is my own inclination to remember the students that

exhibited blatant neoliberal performances in the classroom, but this was not true of the

students I interviewed. One of the interviewees, in particular, told several stories about

disrupting these power relations in the classroom, Micca—one of my former students—

critiqued the powers structures of the classroom. This section outlines how Micca had a

complex understanding of the context of the classroom as a working of power. In this

section, I focus on Micca, in particular, because she offered the most explicit and detailed

critique of how power functions through the classroom context.

During the interview, Micca brought up the power differences between students and teachers, referencing Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 2001).

> Micca: Ok, so, you always will still have that teacher and student dynamic, and you think of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* there's always that banking model that teachers will fall back on unless they purposefully structure the class outside of it. A lot of the time, I view my relationship to the professor as someone I need to learn from but who I also need to keep a sharp eye on because they may use outdated language, outdated terms, and for whatever reason they haven't updated their own understandings, you know. And there was a particular professor once at [this university] who I remember had extreme difficulty with the fact that pupils would want to correct her, you know. And this professor is one who, who tried to teach a course on trans studies, but would take more of a prescriptive view of gender. This is how this should be. That is how that should be.

She pointed to the ways in which these classroom roles risk refining the power structure, but she said she should keep an eye of the professor, indicating that this power differential can be problematic. She disrupts the teacher-student paradigm of banking education, positing instead that she, as a student, should keep an eye on the teacher. Her example of the trans student teacher highlights the ways that teachers of all identities run the risk of refining the dynamic. This teacher that Micca referenced offered a prescriptive view of gender that the student disagreed with. Here is an instance in which the student could offer the possibility of rupturing the power structures by resisting the teacher's understanding of gender. In this story, Micca is not adhering to a banking education model. She problematizes it and reflects on her role. This shows an understanding that power dynamics in the classroom affect our positions. She knows that "student" is the disempowered subject position, but that she should "keep an eye" on the teacher, pushing back against the model of teacher-as-authority.

This other story also speaks to the complexity of the power dynamic when a friend of hers in the class tries to push back against teacher authority.

Micca: I have a friend who, we for the biological science gen ed requirement, we both wound up in the same class, and it was just, a very very simple biology class that had to do with headline news around the world, alright. And transness didn't even come up. But, you know, good for her for just standing up to the professor and whenever the professor would say men and women. I think every single time this friend challenged the professor. Every single time. And would ask, "Does this mean assigned male at birth? Does this mean assigned female at birth? What about intersex people? Does this include AMAD and AFAB people lumped in together as men or AMAB and AFAB lumped in together with female. What about the gender queer people." God bless her. She would ask all of the questions that I wish I had the gall to ask. I'm sure that half the people in the class might not have even known what some of those words were. But could have encouraged them even to just to look up, what does that word even mean. So, even if the social justice education doesn't come into play there, at the very least, you get more awareness about words themselves.

Micca praised her friend for doing this hard work of queerness in the biology classroom. Her friend queered the space of the classroom by rupturing the assumption of a binary gender category often used in the biology texts of the classroom. She offered a different viewpoint and ruptured the discussion to question these constructions of gender. Micca also noted that the performance of queerness was not even necessarily for the professor or directed toward the discipline of biology. It was a performance for the other students who, as Micca says, may not have ever heard some of those terms. This offers the possibility of raising the awareness of student peers in the classroom—student as teacher to fellow students. This story demonstrates the complexities of how the context shapes these classrooms when we attempt to do queer work. This doesn't sound like the good neoliberal subjects of my own stories. And Micca's story about the biology classroom, like my own stories, is outside of the context of a WGSS class. Students' performances are not as straightforward as students blatantly regurgitating neoliberal ideology. Rather, their resistance is in context, and Micca reflects on these classrooms about what queer work is available to her and other students in their subject positions.

I am a Neoliberal Subject

This section takes a reflexive turn to examine my own position as a neoliberal subject. Often, when telling stories about the classroom, I like to see my position as the one troubling the normative power structures and working to queer spaces within education. This section, though, interrogates my own stories and this assumption. I look at the various ways that I actually perform as a good neoliberal subject and highlights the complicated nature of being "good enough" subjects to be included in the classroom, while performing queerness by being bad subjects.

In many ways, a traditional classroom space, in itself, seems antithetical to queerness. The classroom is structured hierarchically and students are evaluated through quantifiable methods—in line with neoliberalist individualism. Students have learned a lot about how to perform in the classroom. Classrooms often value intellect at the expense of bodies and holistic experiences of students. Students are not allowed to be whole people in the classroom (hooks, 1994). They know how to comport themselves in the space of the classroom. We sit on chairs. I stand at the front or join the circle of desks. I often jokingly ask my students what they would do if I walked in and laid in the middle of their circle. They laugh uncomfortably or scoff. And I, of course, have never done this, have never breached the decorum of the class in this particular way. They have navigated a schooling system that values normativity, tradition, and conventional knowledge (Halberstam, 2011). Many of our students in public education are products of an education system that uses high-stakes testing as the standard of quantified success. In other words, ordinary ways of thinking (Halberstam, 2011) are valued and privileged. Conformity to norms is rewarded. After all, they and I have both successfully made it in

the institution of education. Micca spoke about the possibilities of doing queerness from the complicated position of student. Here, I look at the ways that I perform neoliberalism.

I like to see myself as the hero of my own story—the teacher who fights neoliberalism within the system of neoliberalism. The rebel. The troublemaker. But exactly how much trouble am I making as a TA in a large introductory general education course at a historically white institution? The stories I told at the beginning of this chapter about students performing neoliberalism ignore my own position in the neoliberal classroom.

There is always a part of us that is disciplined into conformity to advance within the system. After all, I successfully finished college and a master's program. As a student, I, too, collude in this system as someone who has been a successful student at multiple levels. Regardless of the hardships we may have faced due to our various social identities, as instructors, we have achieved standards of "success" in academia and have power over the students in the classroom. We have earned or are earning advanced degrees. I am working in a neoliberal higher education system that necessitates that I participate in the system in order to financially survive in the institution. As a TA, I follow the agenda I am given by the professor; I give students exams if I'm asked to.

To be allowed into the neoliberal classroom, we must, to some extent, perform as neoliberal subjects. I am interested in the ways in which we might perform neoliberalism badly. Performing as a bad neoliberal subject, be clear that this is available in different ways for different bodies. Some of our bodies mark a disruption, a rupture, simply by being in the space of the classroom. My whiteness, for example, marks me as normative. There are ways that I can teach in the classroom that might not be available to other

teachers in the same way—teachers who have racialized accents or teachers of color. Different performances are available to different bodies. The next section looks at the ways that students perform neoliberalism badly or exhibit the desire to do so. I like to think that they and we can be "bad" neoliberal subjects in queer ways. And we can see these moments as locations where we can connect with students to do queer work together.

Turning Bad/Queer Trouble

In this section, I tell stories about the classroom and students (and I) being "bad" neoliberal subjects. If neoliberalism is learned and embodied, we can embody other performances. Neoliberalism as an ideology is not deterministic (Saunders & Kolek, 2017). We might look toward these performances as ways of being bad subjects and making queer trouble in the classroom.

In the previous section of this chapter, Micca's story about her friend that consistently offered moments of resistance or rupture in the biology classroom is one example of a student performing "badly." This student resisted the gender and sexuality matrix, but she also acted outside of her disempowered subject positions. This empowerment to perform in the classroom is in line with critical pedagogy's focus on empowerment of students. The framework of empowerment, though, has been critiqued in feminist literature for the possibility of further disempowering marginalized students (Lather, 1991). In this section, I use the framework of being bad neoliberal subjects to look at the ways that students offered queer performances or queer trouble in the classroom. I take as queer those performances that work to rupture the ideologies and norms of a neoliberal classroom in higher education.

Micca's story tells about the ways in which students' performances of queerness get framed as trouble making.

> Micca: But, you know, good for her for just standing up to the professor and whenever the professor would say men and women. That takes a certain amount of courage. She would ask all of the questions that I wish I had the gall to ask. Like, you know that, if you're taking that position as a student, you are becoming the problem student of the class. You know that you are creating queer trouble, trouble that the professor doesn't want happening in the class. Because everything would just be simpler if it was just men and women. It would just be easier and we could just get to the biology lesson, you know. And there are all these queer femmes coming along and raining on their parade. So, yeah, yeah. I really admire anyone who does have it in them to do that.

In Micca's story, in particular, I like the phrase of queer trouble. Her use of this shows that she understands the ways in which doing queerness gets framed as "trouble" by the power structure. In a class, the person making this trouble then gets labeled as the problem student. Micca sees this queer trouble as difficult and respectable. Where and how might we make queer trouble *with* the students? In the following two sections, I look at two ways the students offered to use the classroom as a space to disrupt neoliberalism. They spoke about the structured nature of the classroom space for holding potentialities, and they talked about building community in the classroom.

Classroom as Potential

Several of the students talked about how the classroom offers potential simply because it is a space in which we physically come together on a regular basis. In a neoliberal system that values productive work time, to use this classroom space to do queer work is, in a way, queer work. Skyler talked about the ritualistic nature of the classroom offering this time for us to come together regularly.

> Skyler: For me, I think the classroom setting offers like a specific, I don't know. Like it's a little ritualistic in a weird way, because same time, same place, same people.

This, in itself, is not necessarily queer, but it holds the potential. There are few spaces where we come into contact with the same people on a regular basis. This "ritual," as Skyler puts it, is a potentiality.

Sophia similarly talked about meeting in the same places with the same people. She addresses how this leads to building community.

> Sophia: Same time, same place, same people. And, occasionally, if it's a class I like, then I'll have kind of the feeling of like, "Alright, I can put aside some of my other shit mentally, and deal with what we're going to be talking about in class that day." And, like, that's kind of comforting. In that, in that kind of like repetitive sense. Because you do feel like you're building community since you're going back to the same place every other day, or however often the class is.

Despite neoliberalism's tendency to devalue and even destroy collectivism, students and teachers are working within this system in the classroom to make the classroom a space of possibilities. Neoliberalism might try to make us into individualistic workers, but the very structure of having the time to meet several times a week and get "credit" for it—in itself a neoliberal structure—offers an opportunity for collective action. In a wage economy, we don't have a lot of time, that the time we have is required to be productive. Classroom space and courses "count" toward this productivity. Thus, to use the space in ways that are revolutionary and work toward social justice or queer worldmaking is to do something radical in the classroom. This structured space "given" to us is being used to critique the system that gave it to us.

Community as Resistance

Neoliberalism promotes the ideology of individualism at the expense of community. This shows up in the ways in which subjects conceptualize themselves as individuals, rather than as community members who are interconnected. The students in

this study, though, did not exhibit individualistic thinking. The students in the interview often spoke to the need for community and critiqued the lack of community that they often see in the higher education classroom. They emphasized the importance of connecting to each other to build the community. Several of the students mentioned the importance of building community in the classroom. Sophia, though, offered a story that gave a sharp critique of the ways in which lack of community can have a harmful effect on students. Sophia criticized a literature professor for showing a rape scene from a movie without any context or a seeming pedagogical goal. I asked her if she was opposed to all rape scenes being viewed in a classroom context or this particular classroom setting. She clarified:

> Sophia: Another thing with that class, I feel like it was tied into the fact that his teaching practices weren't about community building. So, because, if we'd had stronger connections to each other in the classroom, maybe we would have had a more generative conversation about it [the rape scene].

She is clear that the critique is in a lack of community. She didn't resort to individualistic notions of her own experience in the classroom but, instead, made the connection to how the lack of classroom community prevented a productive and learning-focused conversation about such a topic. Though Sophia doesn't explicitly name neoliberalism as the structure shaping this experience, she is clearly centering community, which is at odds with the individualistic nature of neoliberal ideology.

The students reflect an understanding of how complicated it is to do queer work in the higher education classroom context. They see the potential of the classroom space as well as the constraints. If we were to start with community and relation, we could begin to find ways to be bad neoliberal subjects together.

Exclusions: Politics of Belonging

There is no story to tell.

Who are these bodies that are such "bad" subjects that they don't ever end up in our classrooms? This section examines how racism and classism shape who belongs in the classroom. I explore this through literature that highlights the ways that racism and classism work at a broad scale to produce belonging subjects. There were many points in writing this dissertation that I considered deleting this section. It would, at a basic level, simply be less work for me. Theoretically, though, this chapter is meaningful to me. It does not really fit anywhere. It is not quite its own chapter. It takes a queer performative writing approach to addressing the exclusions of higher education. In this section, I linger on these exclusions.

This chapter section works to remind us of the excluded bodies that are always in relation to us. I enjoy this idea of lingering. To dally or dawdle. It strikes me as particularly queer to spend this time to linger. In a neoliberal system that values only "productive' activities, to take this time and space in the text is to be a bad subject. To not value the timeliness of an activity. To queer temporality of academic writing (Halberstam, 2011). Here, I take the time to loiter in the text on the crossings of oppression that work to exclude certain bodies/subject positions and to obscure the exclusions.

Since this dissertation addresses queerness—which is not sexuality and gender but which is not *not* sexuality and gender—I start briefly with LGBTQ+ students in the classroom. Ahmed (2014) wrote about how hetero and cis- students are made to feel comfortable in the classroom space. Certain bodies are legitimated and get to be accepted

and "comfortable" in the classroom. A rights-based, identity politics of social change for LGBTQ+ students taken up in the classroom as an inclusionary strategy works to exclude others. Discourses of safety for LGBTQ+ students use similar inclusionary tactics. This is not to say that some good and necessary research hasn't been done in the name of supporting LGBTQ+ students and rooting their safety in the school system, but within a broader politics of working toward changing the power structure, discourses of safety and protection, particularly of LGBT students, mask the structural heterosexism that produces the conditions (and identities) that allow for behavior that we then name bullying. This discourse of safety is problematic in this way more broadly and begs the question of for whom has education been safe? Certain gay bodies (white, middle- and upper-class) get produced as acceptable and normative.

Racism and classism are operating to produce exclusionary positions within the context of the classroom. Based on social identities, subject positions have extremely different experiences of schooling. This is not to claim that identities are preexisting in some positivistic way. These pervasive systems of power (Hardiman & Jackson, 2007) produce categories and subjects within these categories have these different experiences. In other words, systemic oppression is operating and producing exclusionary subject positions.

Curricula and standardized testing in education works to include white students and to marginalize students of color. Standardized testing is culturally biased (Parker Deyhle, & Vellenas, 1999; Parker, Deyhle, Villegas, Crosland, & Nebeker, 1998) and leads to deficit frameworks that posit black students as less intelligent and perpetuates racism. Black children are poorly served in schools. Ladson-Billings (1998) has argued

that even when there is "representation of black historical figures, these stories are sanitized and made palatable to white people. Traditional curricula have also show to negatively affect Chicano students, as well (Yosso, 2002), who experience isolation in their educational experiences and are less likely than their white counterparts to attend college (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993). Even in more implicit ways through the "hidden curriculum," students of color are marginalized (Jay, 2003).

There are pervasive racial inequities in education (Adams, Bell, & Goodman, 2016) and racism and class inequities intersect in complex ways that oftentimes benefit white students and marginalized people students of color (Bell, Love, & Roberts, 2007). Within a system of racism, students of color are systemically disadvantaged (Tatum, 2000). Students of color are less likely to have opportunities, such as AP classes and extracurricular, both of which are important for college admissions (Bell, Love, & Roberts, 2007). These structures block possibilities for many students of color to get into higher education (Young, 2011). Kozol (2005) documented the gross inequities in educational spending between white affluent communities and black urban communities. These discrepancies begin at a very early age, including which parents can afford private preschool. From a very early age, then, white students are more likely to be affluent and are more likely to have educational opportunities. All students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to be able to afford higher education as the universities get defended. White students and middle-class students, thus, are simply more likely to be undergraduate students at a large public university. Students of color—as subject positions—is structured to not belong.

I could continue on with the various ways that power structures exclude subject positions. The point is not a comprehensive overview of excluded identities, rather, a performative lingering on these exclusions to interpolate them into this dissertation and to highlight that we are always in relation to these missing bodies.

In one class of Introduction to Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies, I attempted to get at these exclusions by asking the students about all of the bodies they were in relation to, including the ones that were invisible to them. I asked my students to think about what/who made it possible for them to be in that space in that moment.

"Take a moment to reflect on who you interacted with so far today," I said. "Whose lives have intersected with yours so far."

"My roommate," one student said.

"I talked to my mom this morning," said another.

"My partner walked me to class."

"I saw people from my hall in the bathroom."

"There were a lot of people at the dining hall."

"That's great. Let's think through the dining hall. Who was there?" I asked.

"Other students."

"Staff. Someone made the food, served it."

"Yes," I said. "It's fall right now. Were there slippery leaves all over your sidewalk? Who cleared them?"

"Right, and who cleaned our classroom?" Asked another student.

"Or who built it?" Asked another.

"Or the materials," I added. "Where were they mined, how were they transported, how did they end up here that we may sit on these chairs in this classroom?"

"This land isn't even ours," a student said. "It's Native land."

The students were able to name multiple ways in which their current existence was radically relational. They began to see and to name the invisible bodies, subjects, and labors that had occurred that they—as undergraduates—and I—as teacher—might be part of a college classroom. This short discussion showed that we were all interconnected with others in our very existence as subjects in the classroom in that moment. In this moment in the microcosm of the classroom, we made visible the relationship of bodies—our visible and belonging bodies to those whose invisible labors had paved the way for our being there. Thought it didn't make all excluded subject positions visible, it offered a moment of rupture in making visible those other bodies that we are always in relation to.

I tell this story to exemplify the complexities of context when we examine subject positions and, consequently, the stories that we tell from our particular subject politics. We are always in relation to each other and to context—even when the context and other subjects are structured to be invisible by operations of power. Context is not merely the "background" or the *a priori* system within which we operate. It is integrally part of our subject positions and, thus, the relationships and stories that are available to us. When students told the story of how they got to class that day, there was an entire web of relations and labor that were made visible. To turn the focus of analysis to context begs the question of which bodies are allowed into spaces and produced as belonging? Whose labors are structured as "seen" and valued while others are hidden and devalued, even though necessary? This complex set of embodied relationships that I call context produce our subject positions and the stories that are available to us as subjects.

Conclusion

All of these power structures have shaped which bodies are present in a higher education setting. The complexities of these power structures and my and the students' experiences navigating them show how complicated it is to do queerness in these spaces. In a research project such as this, the subjects that have been historically produced as belonging then shape who is doing the research and who is available to be a participant. This chapter should not imply that these are the only factor of context that are shaping our subject positions and our narratives. To devote an entire analysis chapter is to center it in a way that not just briefly acknowledges the contextual factors but takes them as discursive forces that allow or disallow certain bodies and, thus, certain stories. There are always a multitude of ways that we can think about these issues, but these are some of the more explicit ones that I see as shaping context and that this context is inextricable from narrative (Langellier & Peterson, 2006). To look at context specifically is to take seriously this inextricableness. Before I move on to look at the stories as a process of meaning making, this chapter lays out the ways in which the bodies and the stories available in these interviews are already produced by the power structures.

The goal of this last section is not to examine *all* aspects of context, which could perhaps be construed as infinite but to center the ways in which there are always excluded and obscured subjects that are not interpellated by the stories in this dissertation. It would be impossible to examine all contextual aspects and not the goal of centering context. I am reminded of an old Italian film, *The Bicycle Thieves* (Amato, De Sica, & De Sica, 1948). In the film, a family pawns their sheets—a luxury at the time— for a bike, so Antonio—father and husband—can take a job in the city of Rome in war-

torn Italy. As the title suggests, the bike gets stolen, and father and son travel through the city in search of the bike and the thief. I mention this film not for the main narrative but for a small moment in the beginning of the film at the pawn shop. Antoni and his wife, who we have already come to know and are invested in their story, have taken their prize sheets to the pawn shop. The shop worker stands behind an opaque partition with a small window and we/the camera are on the side of the shopkeeper. We see the faces of the husband and wife, desperate to pawn the sheets for enough money to buy a bike. Their trade is ultimately successful, and they take their money and leave the window. But the camera doesn't follow them right away. Instead, we/the camera lingers on the window as a new patron approaches—an old man with a pair of binoculars. He pushes the binoculars forward, we linger. Then the camera finally cuts away to once again follow Antonio and his wife.

I've always loved this moment. In a film in which I'm invested in the main character, the camera takes the time to linger on this other side character—an incidental extra, really—an unnamed old man who needs to sell his binoculars. How did these binoculars come into his possession? Does he have an emotional attachment to them? Why is he pawning them? What does he need the money for? The point is not to follow another story but to remind the viewer that we may be following Antonio, but every person we pass has their own story that we could be invested in, that we should remember that is affected by the circumstances of poverty and post war poverty. There is no need to be exhaustive in our telling of every story but to attend to some and remember that there are a number of other stories, bodies, subjects who exist but do not "belong" in

the classroom as it is currently structured by operations of power. For every story you

hear in this dissertation, there are so many more who will not be heard.

CHAPTER 4

QUEER WORLDMAKING

"Without a vision for tomorrow, hope is impossible." (Freire, 2001, p. 45)

In this chapter, I attend to issues of queer worldmaking that emerged in the interviews with the students and my own experiences attempting to enact queerness in the classroom. In the introductory chapter of this dissertation, I highlighted the importance of resistance to oppression and moving toward social justice as my transformational pedagogical goal. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz (2009) calls for us to dream and enact queerness. Similarly, Warner (1993) wrote that we need to imagine and desire a queer world. In this chapter, I look at queer worldmaking in the context of the classroom and examine how it might look in his classroom context. I offer my own stories and then draw on the student interviews to envision this queer classroom and to work through the challenges and barriers to worldmaking in the classroom.

This chapter offers my own personal narrative of exploring worldmaking and the limits of envisioning possibilities. In this narrative, I weave theory with my own experiences and trouble the story of resistance to queerness that I have about the classroom. I begin by reflecting on my own challenges trying to enact worldmaking in different settings and the barriers that I have encountered. My narratives about worldmaking in the classroom have often focused on resistance to and inability to envision possibilities for change. I connect these stories of resistance to the ways in which students also resisted worldmaking in the interviews. Initially, my narrative shows the ways that possibilities are limited within the power structures. Both the stories of the

students and my stories pointed to limits and impossibilities—the opposite of my goal for this chapter.

Initially, my intent was for this chapter to be exclusively about worldmaking. But I found that instead of a chapter on worldmaking, I was writing about barriers, about impossibilities. In the interviews, the students and I were sometimes discussing the impossibilities of queer worldmaking in the classroom or our own resistance to it, rather than actually engaging in envisioning change. I use Butler's (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power* to consider how these moments of resistance reflect a desire for subjection. I highlight the ways in which the psychic life of power operates to limit us in various ways, including our affect around imagining political possibilities and including limiting the vision of possibilities.

In *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler (1997) examined subordination as part of subjection. Power structures are constitutive of the subject; they produce the subject. And subordination is a part of subjection. To become a subject, then, is to experience subordination. The production of subjects is then obscured by the workings of power (Butler, 1993a). This process of subjection is likewise obscured. Subjects, thus, can be unaware of the norms that have constituted their very formation, including the norms that work to produce them into marginalized positions.

Because we are constituted by power structures and, thus, subordinated by power structures, we become attached to subordination in our desire for intelligibility because only through the power structures can we be seen and heard by another. Power, then, unconsciously influences, and, at times, we desire our own subjection. Butler's view is not deterministic, as the moment we become subjects, the power that had once

constituted us then transforms in that very moment, creating a possibility of agency and resistance. The psychic life of power drives us in our choices that we, as subjects, often interpret as free choices but are, in actuality, within the structures of power.

I use Butler's theory to look at how this manifests as our inability to imagine otherwise or our refusal or resistance to imagine otherwise. I take this theory as an extension of Butler's theory of gender performativity. In other words, this chapter uses a queer theoretical framework in that it focuses on production of subject positions. In this case, the ways in which through the very process of being formed as a subject, we are constrained and limited in some ways by the power structures. And these constraints necessarily are produced through the very process of becoming intelligible subjects.

Butler posits that one of the ways we are constrained is our desire for subjection. If power is not deterministic, though, this desire is not necessarily a desire for oppression or to be injured by the power structures. Sometimes, it is simply a desire for intelligibility within the system—literally to simply exist to others. I use this framework to understand how resistance to worldmaking arises in both feelings and behaviors. I attend to these various narratives—my own stories and the students' reflections on worldmaking that emerged in the interviews—to show the myriad challenges to queer worldmaking at play within a complex matrix of power.

The students were not always resistant to worldmaking, though. In fact, they shared with me aspects of what they saw as a queer classroom, both in their past experiences and in a classroom that I asked them to imagine for me. This chapter engages a methodological problem of examining worldmaking. If worldmaking is on the horizon, the "not yet here" (Muñoz, 2009), the "evidence" of worldmaking remains ephemeral in

some ways. Even if we were to present evidence of worldmaking, there remains the problem of how to write it into research without being prescriptive. As a project of forward-looking and forward-moving, worldmaking must always be in process. It is something we must be engaging in, an ongoing verb that we are *doing*. To address these methodological problems, I argue that we do need to envision more concrete images of queer worldmaking that can help us forge a path forward, a path toward the horizon, to do the work of dreaming (Muñoz, 2009) and imagining (Warner,1993) queerness in the classroom.

I offer an imagined narrative of a queer classroom. This narrative is composed from the ideas the students shared in the interviews. Rather than presenting each of the students' stories, I composed this imagined narrative from the point of view of a student whose only educational experiences are in this queer classroom—in a queer utopia. I present this as an imagined narrative also to defamiliarize that which we take for granted. David Lodge (1992) wrote that to defamiliarize is to make the ordinary strange. It is often used in science fiction and, in particular, by women science fiction writers to problematize structures of sex, gender, and sexuality (Russ, 1995). For example, Joanna Russ, in the short story, "When It Changed," tells the story of a space colony of only women; the men having all died in a plague 600 years prior. In the story, men—Russian astronauts—have arrived for the first time in hundreds of years. Through the first-person point of view of the narrator, one of the women living in this colony, the appearance, speech, and behaviors of the men are presented as odd—though their behavior is the kind a reader from the 1970s would be familiar with. The everyday is thus made unfamiliar to us. I create an imagined story to defamiliarize the classroom. From the point of view of a

student who is in the utopic classroom, this perspective is used to make strange the very things that are normalized by the power structures. To tell this story from a different perspective is to draw attention to the ways that the status quo is normalized. This helps us to think more complexly about power structures.

The imagined narrative addresses aspects of the broader context of the queer classroom, again to defamiliarize those contextual elements that we take for granted. I conclude by arguing for the importance of envisioning queer worldmaking in the classroom and beyond and gesturing toward a concrete path toward the queer horizon, even while acknowledging the discursive limits of the power structures when we envision and enact change. It's through the contradiction of the necessity of envisioning queerness and the inability to envision all possibilities that I present glimpses of worldmaking. These moments are queer possibilities that *could be* on the horizon in the classroom setting.

Stories of Resistance to Worldmaking

There's a story I like to tell about my students: that they are resistant to worldmaking in ways that are not queer.

I gave a lecture on gender performativity for a large introduction to WGSS class. The lecture included, toward the end, a meditation on a genderless world. I wrote this meditation to get the students to envision in concrete ways what a world without the matrix of gender/sexuality might look like. I began the lecture with a short presentation on Butler's theory of gender performativity. This section looks at the ways that the students responded to the lecture and reflects my own meaning-making through the telling of the stories.

During this lecture on performativity, one of my goals was also to enact queer worldmaking. Butler offered drag as a potential way to disrupt the power structures of the sex/gender matrix. As a teacher, a lecturer, I thought through what it would mean to get 150 students to worldmake. In such a large classroom, it couldn't occur through small group discussion or community building in the same way as it could in a small discussion section. But I wanted them to embody an experience. I created the mediation as a thought experiment, not necessarily to advocate for a world without gender but as a way to envision that which does not yet exist. To get better at the practice of imagining change and to imagine and begin to embody the queer alternatives to the power structures in which we are all operating.

Meditation on a Genderless World

I'd like to invite you to do a guided meditation with me in which you envision a world without genders.

Often, when we talk about gender or gender identity, we think of those who are gender non-conforming. I want to emphasize that cisgender is a gender. Really consider this as we take this journey through a genderless world.

Get as comfortable as you can wherever you are sitting.

If you're physically able to, uncross your arms and legs.

Take a few deep breaths.

Breathe in deeply and slowly, allowing your stomach to expand as you breathe in.

Notice your breath as you breathe in and out. Allow it to bring you into the present moment.

Notice your body.

Feel where your feet connect with the floor.

Feel your body in your seat. Notice where your body connects to the seat. Notice how the seat supports your body.

Take a few more deep breaths.

I'm going to describe a scene. Allow your mind to visualize the scene. Let your mind be free to travel.

Don't worry about becoming attached to one particular visualization. Simply notice what you see in your mind.

Don't judge your thoughts and feelings. Simply experience them.

Visualize yourself standing on campus in a familiar location among other people.

Now, imagine that in this world, there is no gender.

In this world with no gender, look around you. As you observe this genderless world, note what you see.

Allow the images to come to you.

In this world with no genders:
Who are the people around you?
What do they look like?
How do people dress?
How do people talk?
How do people move their bodies?

In this world with no genders
How do people interact with each other?
How do people interact with you?

Standing in this world with no genders, How do you feel?
Take a moment to notice how you are feeling.

Now, imagine you are by yourself, standing in front of a full-length mirror.

In a world with no gender, look at your reflection in the mirror.

What do you see?
How do you feel?
Notice the sensations in your body while looking at your reflection.

Imagine a split screen;
On one side is your genderless self
On the other side is the gender you perform on most days

Notice the similarities between the two images of the split screen.
Notice the differences between the two images.

Notice which image you are drawn to.

Taking the images and feelings of this experience with you, I invite you to start noticing your physical body again.

Notice your breathing.

Notice your feet on the floor.

Your body in your seat.

Your hands at rest
You can give your fingers and toes a wiggle, and once again be present in this moment.

After leading the students through this guided meditation, I asked them to write about how they were feeling. I asked them to use the structure: "I felt

_____, because in my experience

_____." I also asked students to share what they had imagined. Several students imagined people wearing colorless, shapeless clothing; they imagined a world where everyone is exactly the same. Some students said they were unable to imagine the world, or they saw cookie cutter type figures—again, sameness. Another student said that it made them sad because when the meditation stopped, they realized that the world they envisioned would never actually come true. The discussion felt engaging, even if the visions of the world seemed limited to a picture of sameness.

A few days later, though, during one of my section meetings, one student shared that they were troubled by the meditation because they had a hard time "letting go" of their gender identity. They said, "It was really hard for me to imaging not having my

gender because my gender is really important to me, and it was really hard for me to figure out what it is. And I don't want to let it go."

My gut reaction was to roll my eyes. I was reading this as holding on to limited identity politics that were contrary to the queer worldmaking goal of my lecture. I read it as a moment of reentrenchment of the system through the refining of categorical identity. This story could have very well fit into the chapter on context, the student's words reflecting neoliberal thinking about individuality and identity. But I place this story in this chapter on worldmaking because, in the moment, I read this as an affective attachment to the power structure. At the moment it happened, I saw it as her resistance to worldmaking, specifically. And, though her remark is clearly tied up in individual identity, at least on the surface, I take this moment to reflect back on my stated goal for that lecture and the discussion—worldmaking. I had intended the meditation as a place to envision the world in a different configuration. What I didn't factor in was that the affect associated with this might be negative and that the work of worldmaking might be difficult and painful, at times. This isn't to say that there wasn't resistance happening, but that as a teacher, I should question how I work with these moments that I name "resistance."

This student dropped the course the following week. And, I think back, is this another missed moment of connection. My initial read on the situation is that it stemmed from their resistance. But, as the teacher, the position with more power, I did not interrogate that moment. I thought that resistance to it was a way to dig in her heels and entrench even further the power structures of the status quo. When worldmaking, there is

110

always this risk, and we should question how we might navigate these unintended consequences if our goal truly is to worldmake.

There is a tension in these sort of moments. Those marginalized identities that serve to benefit the most from worldmaking practices that dismantle power structures are also affectively tied to those very power structures. In other words, this student is tied to the identity produced by the power structures, the production itself a working of power that the student is affectively tied to. The "logic" that worldmaking would make the world a better place for them does not override the negative feelings that worldmaking threatens to stoke. For me, this arises as a tension in class when the very students that I expect to be on board with worldmaking practices, instead, offer challenges and resistance. Though I interpreted the student as resisting me, it shows how complexly the power structures operate within our relations with the student.

Similarly, I had another contentious interaction with a student about this meditation. Micca, one of the participants of this study, had been in the lecture hall and had participated in the meditation, too. The following semester, she was also in my small discussion course on utopia. I mentioned to this class that I had been invited back to the introductory course to perform the lecture again. After class was over, Micca pulled me aside and asked if I could stay to talk with her for a while. She wanted to give me feedback on my lecture.

We sat down in two desks facing each other. Micca said, "You said you were going to do that lecture again. Are you going to do the no gender world thing again?"

"I plan to," I replied.

"Well, I just wanted to tell you that for me and some of the other trans folks in the room, that was really traumatizing."

"What was traumatizing?" I asked.

"Well, imagining no genders."

"Ok," I said. I wanted to push about the trauma. "What about it injured you."

"Well, I'm not sure. It's like it was really hard to imagine it. And then I felt really uncomfortable. And sad when it ended. "

"Was it sad and uncomfortable? Or traumatizing. Because I'm ok with making my students uncomfortable or even sad. But I don't want to injure them."

"I don't know how to explain. It felt traumatic."

I thought I had pushed her far enough on the trauma. And she ultimately gave me feedback about the lecture that I did use. She noticed that it was more difficult for the trans folks in the room, even during the debriefing discussion when a lot of people had stated that they imagined a world of sameness. This felt, to her, like the onus for change was put on the trans people. A fair critique, I thought. I subsequently reworded the introduction to the mediation based on this feedback, reminding students that cisgender is a gender too. I wanted to get the fact that gender is both sameness and difference. If we see gender as difference, the imagined genderless world would manifest as sameness. But, if reminded that gender is also sameness, what happens to cisgender identities during this worldmaking exercise. This conversation with Micca stuck with me for a long time. And when I interviewed Micca for this project, I asked her about it. Well, I asked her if she had experienced any conflict with any WGSS instructors.

"No," she said.

"Never?" I asked.

"No, not that I can think of." She said.

"You've never, like, had a problem with something an instructor did and talked to them about it?"

"Not that I remember."

"Micca," I said, "what about our conversation? The one where you sat down with me after class to give me feedback?"

"Oh my god, I forgot about that," she said.

This story that I had told to myself as a contentious interaction between us and that had a big impact on me, Micca had forgotten. This interaction with her made me rethink my initial "conflict" with her. This contentious conversation that I saw as a missed connection turned out to be a moment of connection, both for me and for her. For me, as difficult as it is to hear a student say that I had a negative impact on them, I found some of her feedback to be useful to me. And for her, during the interview, she told me that what she remembers is not the content of the conversation. In fact, she said, "I can't even remember what it was about." Instead, she remembers that she *could* sit down and give me feedback and know that I would listen.

Resistance and the Psychic Life of Power

This section presents the ways in which the study participants were resistant to imagining possibilities in the interviews. I explore the ways in which we desire subjection through the theory of Butler's (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power*. In the interviews, students offered visions of a queer classroom but nearly as often spoke to the ways that

they thought these visions to be impossible or even undesirable for themselves. I present the stories and make connections to the ways in which our investments in the status quo are reflecting in such positions.

What practices/habits might we need to engage to enact agency? How do we desire a new world despite a current situation that renders such desiring impossible (Duggan and Muñoz, 2009)? The power of subjection is not deterministic or complete. In the moment of subjection, power that had once constituted us then transforms in that very moment, creating a possibility of agency and resistance. So, though we can never be truly "free" from the power structures, we can operate in ways that offer the possibility of agency within the structures. This agency may, at times, reinforce the status-quo of normative power and at times may resist normative power structures.

In the interviews with the participants, the students also resisted worldmaking in some ways. I asked them what a perfectly queer classroom would be like. During the interviews, I had not used the terminology of worldmaking. Instead, we were using queerness as a transformative goal for the classroom. The question, What would a perfectly queer classroom be like? was intended to get the students to worldmake through imagining possibilities for the classroom space.

When I asked the question initially, I was often met with long pauses. And the students and I mentioned the difficulties of worldmaking in every interview. In these interviews, it's made apparent that to discuss worldmaking and imagine possibilities inevitably brings up the complications of how power limits us. Bree, a trans woman who had told me she was emotionally tied to her identity as a trans lesbian, explicitly noted that she did not even like to think of possibilities.

Bree: It's not really, I don't really think of what, I don't devote a lot of my energy to imagining a better world, or what that would look like because for the most part, I've found when I do that, it makes me really sad. So, I don't really know what, like, I don't really know what the ideal world would look like for me and trans people.

Bree's sadness also harkens back to the experiences of the students in my genderless world lecture saying that it made them sad to worldmake. What Bree is saying really is twofold. She's saying that she doesn't know what a queer world would look like and that she can't even imagine it. This is similar to what she said about trans cultures, though, too. She had said that trans lesbians have a particular culture and that she likes it. And she's demonstrating a desire to avoid imagining it. This is more complicated than an affective resistance to envisioning worldmaking possibilities. It's not just that the impossibility makes her sad, but it's also that she can't imagine alternatives. In terms of Butler's (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power*, this inability to imagine alternatives is one of the manifestations of the psychic life of power.

And, even when the students shared examples of what a queer classroom would be, it wasn't clear that this is something that they desired. Laura had offered a classroom space of connecting theory to personal experiences and a class that was more freeform, where students' experiences and emotions were part of the classroom. She was saying this, though, with a stiffness that made me think that it was not preferable to her. I asked her what she thought about that classroom and if she would want to be in it.

Laura: I wouldn't want to be in that classroom. I like structure.

Laura's story shows the difficulty of convincing students that worldmaking is even desirable. In a classroom setting, I make it clear to my students that this worldmaking work is desirable. However, in these interviews, I was not explicit about this. That I

asked the question implies that I find it important, but I left it for the interpretations of the students. What Laura's response reminds us is that students are often emotionally tied to the current status quo structure of the classroom. But this also reflects assumptions about what a queer classroom would be like—that it wouldn't have a structure. What this misses is that we could create the type of structure we wanted/needed to worldmake in the classroom. It reflects an unconscious limiting of a vision of possibility. I'm not advocating for one particular structure here but noting that she made an assumption that a queer classroom would somehow be antithetical to the structure that she desired as a student.

Skyler had offered a lot of possibilities for a queer classroom, but she also explicitly addressed the limits of academia.

> Skyler: I recognize that's not the reality of academia at all. And that's why I appreciate it much more when professors do make that space [for community building]. My ideal queer environment would make room for that self care. But I understand that that's not always plausible.

This is more complex than just simple resistance to worldmaking. She's talking about professors who do and do not make the space for worldmaking in their courses. She notes that academia, in general, is not conducive to the worldmaking, and it's not always plausible to do. I found myself wonder if she's letting us teachers off the hook. As an educator, at times, it may not be possible to work in the self care or community building. However, what is a learning community without self care and community building? Either way, it speaks to the complexities of trying to do worldmaking in a context of higher education that is shaped by the power structures. We are all working within the power structures while doing this work, and Skyler's story might ask us to think about what the "reality" of academia really is.

These stories show the ways in which students reflect on the complicated power structures at work in the classroom. Bree was the only student who did not work with me to envision possibilities. However, I had told myself a story that the students were, in general, resistant to worldmaking, when my own journey of doing worldmaking reflects a similar stance and struggle as the students.

Challenges in Imagining Utopia

In line with the importance on worldmaking in the classroom, I decided to craft an imagined narrative from the students' interviews. Rather than exploring each student's ideas and stories about worldmaking and the queer classroom, I would craft a narrative from these, shift the viewpoint to normalize the envisioned possibilities and to defamiliarize our own status quo. I would simply create an imagined world for the reader, I thought. Of course, it wasn't so simple. This section reflects on the difficulties I encountered when crafting the imagined queer classroom from the students' interviews and tells the story of my own journey through understanding worldmaking and the challenges that I faced. I place this story next to those of the students to show that what I read as resistance to envision queerness on their part, in my own stories, I read complexity of working within a power structure. But this story is about my process trying to figure out how to write this imagined world.

Initially, I expected to bring together their stories in a concrete way. But, their ideas of queerness were interwoven with their comments about the impossibilities and challenges of creating a queer classroom. As a straightforward way to address this, I thought I would compile the worldmaking imaginings as one narrative. But I also aimed

to make it more concrete in an embodied way. I wanted it to feel like real-world examples of queer worldmaking in the classroom to look toward the horizon.

One of the first things I did was go looking for where and how queer worldmaking—or some similar concept—got operationalized and concretized in other writing. The genre of science fiction literature is where I found a good deal of writing about utopias, many about feminist utopia. Women science fiction authors have defamiliarized gender in their stories, working to problematize sex, gender, and sexuality. Their stories challenge compulsory heterosexuality and offer utopian petition of queer imaginative constructions. These stories can undermine notions of heterosexuality as natural and universal (Hollinger, 1999). I, too, use defamiliarization in the imagined narrative.

But the reason I didn't simply look at science fiction utopias—though it seems like a fun way to explore the topic—is the goal is not to create text within a fantasy genre. I'm looking for concrete paths forward, both to make us rethink commonsense understandings of such things as the classroom, sexuality, and gender—which I think science fiction can do—but to also look at the ways that we can take action to make change right now and directly. Science fiction may do this, but its goal is not to do this.

The students in the interviews offered many ways we can move toward utopia that are feasible right now, tomorrow, next week when we return to our classrooms. And to weave throughout the story the challenges of the broader work that needs to be done, I also address these broader constructs. These must also change for us to keep moving toward utopia.

Envisioning Queerness

Queer Worldmaking

In this section, I compile the students' ideas about a queer classroom into an imagined narrative. I write the story from the point of view of a fictionalized student. I use this point of view to defamiliarize our current status quo as a way to queer our current positions in the power structures. This narrative takes a student who has a completely different experience from ours and looks at us as if we are strange. This changes the reader's perspective and offers a performative way to write this story to defamiliarize our own. The ideas in the story all come from interviews with students. But when the students mentioned impossibilities or challenges to utopia, I've written them from the imagined student's point of view, to give us a new viewpoint on these things to which the students and I said were barriers.

Imagined Queer Classroom

I'm glad you came here to talk to me. Whenever we have new people, it's interesting to hear about their experiences. They're just so different from mine. We had a transfer student once. That was wild. She had come from a society of capitalism. Well, economic structure, I guess. Not society? Either way, we were friends, but we didn't see eye to eye on so many things. I just don't understand how people can work so many hours so that someone else makes money. What makes them go to work? I know, I know. She told me everything costs money, so everyone needs money. I guess what I can't understand is that food and shelter and healthcare cost money. Can you even call it a society if the people aren't taken care of?

But, you're here to talk about school. Well, I guess the capitalism stuff relates because school doesn't cost money for me. Sometimes it costs money in Capitalism? I'm not really clear about that. But here, there is no "school" per se. Everything is a learning opportunity. But we do have teachers that teach us. And classes. There are usually like six students in a room. Or outside, sometimes. Wherever we've decided to meet. We sit wherever we're comfortable. But we always can make eye contact. That's important. My friend—the transfer student—told me she was in a class with hundreds of other people, hundreds. I just can't imagine. That's an audience, not a class. Our classes, they're sort of self-organized. If some of us need to talk about one particular topic, we can get into a group and talk about it. We're free to discuss issues most pertinent to themselves, but then we come back together. We talk about our days. We talk about what's going on in our lives. It always correlates with something we've read or something we're learning about. It's about how things affect us personally. Trying to understand how our personal experiences map onto these broader things. Like how our experiences correlate with a theory that we were talking about at that point. We put stories and emotions in relation to the theories. Lived experiences are brought into the space, so people are contextualizing theory. It's tangible in someone's narrative. And everyone can participate in discussion at their own pace. People discuss issues that are most pertinent to themselves still have a way to come back together and share what they learned about. We really take care of ourselves and each other here. We can be who we are. We put our minds and our bodies in the room.

I didn't think so much about these things until I met my friend, and we would talk about school. She would ask, you know, how do we know if we're right. Well, how do you know, I asked.

Examinations. Tests. The teacher always gets to say whether or not you know something correctly or not. How do they determine that? How does creativity, in any field, grow if "examinations" are how you are evaluated? It just asks students to think the same as everyone before them. Where's the innovation?

For me, it's more the question of, How do we find knowledge? Well, we make it together. And we read books. But you never take them at face value, you know. We read them and discuss where they came from. Who wrote it. Things like that.

We talk a lot about teaching and learning. Like, how you learn. There's transparency around how we learn and how we teach. There may be a teacher, but they're still a student, you know. And the students are teachers. We all have agency in the classroom toward each other and with the topics we're discussing. It makes the teacher-student relationship more equal. We aren't looking to the teacher for the answer. Sometimes they have more answers, but not always. After all, it's our lives we're looking at.

You know, I once was asked if I was happy all of the time. Of course not. I feel the whole range of emotions. But I don't have to worry about strange stuff like my friend. Like not having enough money to get food.

It's not like we don't have conflicts. Of course, we do. Sometimes, personalities just don't click. But we can learn from it, learn from our interactions. Like, I'm shaping you, and you're shaping me right now. That's how it is in the classroom.

Do I like school? Yeah. Well, it's not really the same for me. It's like another home to me. Oh. Yeah, sometimes it's a big mess. A lot of emotion. Learning isn't always easy. It's difficult because we have to challenge each other and ourselves. That's hard work.

Conclusion

I conclude this chapter by examining the possibilities in the students' stories that we might draw on to make concrete queer worldmaking in our classrooms and taking the barriers as suggestions for what also needs to be changed. I consider this to be charting a path to worldmaking. I highlight the ways that the challenges of worldmaking point to broader political work that we are compelled to do if we want to worldmake in the classroom. The students' stories and my own story also reflect the difficulty of envisioning possibilities. But it is important to continue to do this and discover how and when this work can be done in the classroom. I also offer an accounting of the imagined narrative and examining how this kind of work is important to political transformation. I begin by addressing the importance of queer worldmaking, when it is such a difficult task.

I've often found myself disappointed when I'm reading critical theory and there is no section on envisioning change. Every time I read Duggan's (2003) *Twilight of Equality*, I get to the end, and there are a good number of pages left, and I expect to turn the page to another chapter that will give me the answer. Or at least some answers. Or some musings on the possibilities of answers. But, it's always just the bibliography. What are these next steps? Which way do we go? How do we move toward the horizon? In this section, I argue that envisioning the possibilities of queer worldmaking is, in some ways,

impossible and tied to our own subjection in the power structures. But to honor the importance of worldmaking, I offered an imagined narrative to show us a path forward. Why work for change if we believe that change is not possible?

It is also important for us to chart our paths, even when we fall short or fail. As a student, in a master's education course, a professor once asked us to complete a particular task one day. On the board, she drew a picture of dots: three rows of three dots equidistant apart. She told us that these dots could be connected with four lines. The only rules of the game were that we were to: 1. Connect the dots with four lines and 2. Never lift our writing utensil off of the paper.

Now, I had done this puzzle before, and I quickly completed it. I watched at other students tried different ways to connect their dots. After five minutes or so, she stopped us and asked who had completed it. Then, we debriefed the process. She hadn't told us to not work together, and yet we had all worked individually. And, many people had used pencils, erasing their previous attempts at completing the puzzle successfully. Her larger point was that in the classroom, we tend to think that we must work alone—even though no one told us we had to. Her other point was that we often erase our mistakes. How can we learn from them if we erase them and don't show them to others? We could have tried a lot of things as a group and ruled them out and found the solution together. I think of this story as a representation of the importance of actually worldmaking of attempting to envision and enact the queer classroom. The imagined narrative that I present in this chapter is one such attempt—that other readers and educator might learn from what I did while also acknowledging the limitations.

The imagined story turned out much less detailed than I had intended. I thought the classroom that I would create would be vivid and feel tangible to the reader. Instead, it was a monologue from a students' point of view. This imagined story still contains many of the broader political structures that I and the students had been struggling with— for example, the riff on capitalism and questioning it as a status quo. However, I was left wondering what the student's life was like every day. But this would also require re-imagining all aspects of this fictitious, imagined society, to describe the ways in which the possibilities would be embodied by subjects. This demonstrates the complexity of worldmaking in the classroom that is intimately connected to broader contexts.

These complexities are also evident in the students' and my stories about worldmaking. My own stories are about the challenges of worldmaking as much as the students' are. In placing the students' stories beside my own, it lays bare the similarities in how we struggle with envisioning a queerness in the classroom. My initial interpretation was that their process was one of resisting and mine one of learning. This indicates that these moments that feel to me like resistance from the students may have more to do with the learning process than I previously thought. And, as an educator, I am the one facilitating their learning processes. This isn't to be naively optimistic about the students but to concede that my stories about students in the classroom are most likely more complicated than I thought. We can see from the students' interviews that many of the students, at least, do understand the classroom as a complex space for doing this work.

Students stories about worldmaking in the classroom show that they understood the complexities of actually doing and embodying the work of worldmaking that they

were envisioning. These barriers are not deterministic but are political points where we might exert pressure to make changes at other. In other words, these barriers are places that we can do other queer work as part of the path forward toward the horizon. In other words, what else do we need to be committed to changing in order for our classrooms to be the spaces that we want them to be?

"Utopia" means "no-place." And this is an important concept for worldmaking. Utopia is not a place. Queer worldmaking is an action, a process. Even if we describe a place, this place will not exist *as a place.* The implication of this is that we must constantly envision and re-envision so that we have a path toward the horizon, which is always ahead of us and never here.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: QUEER RELATION IN THE CLASSROOM

My grandmother—Grandma Chris—was a fifth-grade teacher for 35 years, 30 of them in the same school. I used to stop by her house, and we'd drink wine and talk well into the evening about teaching.

For a few years, I taught 3rd and 4th grade special education in a charter school. One night, I was complaining to Grandma Chris about the new computer program that the administration thought was going to just revolutionize teaching math to the kids in my special education classroom. No need for teachers anymore, this program was the way of the future. I had already spent hours in the computer lab with my third graders that week and watched them interact with this computer game. They learned how to game the game and move forward without actually learning the math concepts—like multiplication tables. I watched Zee, one of my students who struggled the most to memorize multiplication tables and to conceptualize mathematics, "winning" the computer game. "Zee," I said, "you know your three times tables?" I was excited. We'd been working on these together.

"No, miss," she said. "I just click on the little clouds and remember which ones were wrong." She was simply playing the game as a game. She wasn't computing the numbers in the "clouds" of the game. She spent an hour clicking on this game—an hour that the administration claimed was more important than our classroom work together, in embodied relation to each other in classroom.

I told my grandma this story. She scoffed. "They're always saying some technology is going to revolutionize education. When your uncle was little, it was ticker

tapes. Oh, ticker tapes. It's going to change how we teach mathematics. We won't even need teachers. The ticker tapes will do it. Well, you know what your uncle did? He spent about five minutes with the ticker tape and then was off to play. He would never learn math from standing at a ticker tape. They always think some new technology is going to change teaching. But it won't."

"Teaching is about relationships with students."

"Exactly."

Grandma Chris knew, from her 35 years of teaching, that relation was central to teaching. This story parallels my relationship with the students. My stories about students also make clear that relationship is central to my pedagogy. In what ways I'm connected to the student or not becomes important to how I make meaning of the classroom and work to effect change. That several of my students were willing to give their time to be interviewed for this project, that Micca felt comfortable giving me negative feedback about my lecture on a genderless world and gave me permission to write about it, that students want community, these are moments of connection through relationship.

In this final chapter, I am interested in examining how we might use the stories of the students I interviewed to better understand this relation, what we might do with our bodies to queer the classroom, and what responsibility we have to do this. What are the practices we should engage in?

I want to return to the story I told in the introduction about the student who said that we should never use the binary. In class discussion, I had moved on quickly, my mind on the goal of getting through the agenda. My impulse was to shut down the conversation. I was working within the restrictions of my own subject position. But I

imagine, like my impulse to shy away from this moment of messiness, that we often have more opportunities than what we take advantage of. In this conclusion, I don't offer prescriptive answers but through a reflection on my own experiences connect to queer theory to perform possibilities for the queer classroom.

Sedgwick (2003) tells another story about her cat bringing her a half-dead rodent—a gift, we often interpret. But this is actually how cats teach their young to hunt. They bring a half-dead animal to their kittens for them to emulate the mama cat. When the cat brings us a half-dead or dead animal, they see us as the inept kittens that they need to teach. We think we've received a gift. We have misidentified a pedagogical moment as a moment of gift-giving. A moment of mismatched pedagogy. After all, it takes two parties to create a mismatched moment. In our classrooms, how can we recognize the moments of the students' queerness as pedagogical, *as* a queer moment that we might support or participate in? Just because I have the willingness to disrupt the banking education (Freire, 2001) paradigm of teaching doesn't mean I know how. The onus is on us to recognize pedagogical moments in which we can be students-as-teachers that we don't continue with these "near-miss" moments of pedagogy and, instead, work collectively toward worldmaking in the classroom.

Responsibility for Change

My stories and the students' stories show how queerness in the classroom is intimately linked to the broader power structures. In Chapter 3, I addressed the ways in which the structures of neoliberal higher education produce us into certain subject positions. In that chapter, I argued that we should work together to be certain types of bad neoliberal subjects. To highlight text and context as inextricable also points to the need to

128

do political work at multiple levels. To do queerness is to see these connections and do this work at multiple levels. Working to see these connections and, ultimately, working too make change in the broader power structures is also a way to do queerness.

Iris Marion Young (2011) wrote about the complicated relationship between social structure and personal responsibility, arguing that to do social justice work, we must examine how we directly treat others and how our actions contribute to structural processes that are unjust. When people act, they reproduce the power structures, sometimes unintentionally. The outcomes of our actions, even if unintended, must be examined—according to Young, we have a responsibility to examine them. Similar to Young's philosophy about responsibility, the inextricable relationship between queerness in the classroom and the broader context points to the necessity of identifying, analyzing, and acting within the broader context in the name of queerness in the classroom.

I have many tasks and obligations in my life—paying rent, keeping my job, buying groceries—but none of these is devoted to ending injustice. These immediate personal interactions often feel all-consuming to us (Young, 2011). This is true of the classroom as well. As a teacher, I have a supervisor to answer to, the structure that demands grades and evaluation, an agenda to get through. The immediate concerns are in tension with the structural concerns (Young, 2011). It's hard to look past or beyond or make those connections to the social relations and to consider the social injustices we might be participating in. We have shared responsibility for transformation at all levels. And this transformation at the broader level is still doing queer work in the classroom.

<u>Worldmaking as Classroom Process</u>

One of the challenges of the kind of critical work that research engages is that there are not prescriptive solutions to offer. However, I do want to think about what we can apply to our own practices. To make this the most lesbian conclusion ever, I'll use yet another cat metaphor—my own this time, not Sedgwick's. I love to rub the soft little tummy of cats. And they generally do not like this. I inevitably get bitten. However, I most likely will never learn not to rub the kitty's soft little tummy. It seems it might be a lesson that cat people are generally incapable of learning. Our pedagogy in the classroom, I'd like to think, is more malleable than my relationship to petting cute cats. So, where are these places where we can make changes, do worldmaking?

Worldmaking is not a destination. It's on the horizon, always moving as we move toward it. The greatest implication of this is that we must always be engaging in worldmaking. The ideas that the students provided about worldmaking may even seem outdated soon or even by the time someone reads this dissertation. The goal, though, is not to provide prescriptive answers but to keep charting a map toward, toward, toward. For the students, this path was about process and connection. Higher education is so often focused on content, but this wasn't a theme for the students. So many times, I've heard instructors say that they have to "get through" some topic in their class.

In the interviews, students' stories reflected complex thinking about queerness in the classroom. This often ran counter to my own interpretations of how they were doing or not doing queerness in the classroom. This points to the need to open up spaces to struggle with queerness in the classroom. In the introduction, I argued that the student bodies are doing something. This "doing" offers the potential of connection through

relation and the potential to be productive toward worldmaking. Let's make these spaces to struggle with and through queerness and to worldmake together.

The stories about the students that I offer in this dissertation reflect my own understanding of the world and not necessarily the complexity of the students' positions in the classroom. In placing my stories beside the stories of the students, it demonstrates that though we are sharing experiences in the classroom, they have a more complex understanding of the work they are doing when they do queerness in the classroom. I have been telling stories about their behaviors and intentions, simplifying their subject positions. This isn't to say that student don't sometimes use ideologies of neoliberalism or do things that reflect a neoliberal ideology. But thatthe stories I tell are my stories that I tell. How many times have I positioned myself as expert on neoliberal ideology and group process when telling stories about the students? And that might be a part of what is happening. However, it isn't that simple, as evidenced by the nuances in the students' stories.

In Chapter 4, I looked at how the students focused on building community as a way to break from neoliberal ideology. Community pushes back against the individualism of neoliberalism. Building community with the students is a way for us to queer the classroom space. If and when we recognize the pedagogical moments in which we are the student and the students are the teachers.

If we want to queer worldmake in the classroom, we must work to open up these queer spaces for/about queerness. We don't want to silence these conversations, even if they are, at times, difficult. That when queerness comes up, it both offers opportunities to refit or to take advantage of slippages. We should work with the students, be in

131

connection to them, in relation to them, to create these pedagogical moments where we can engage queerness and worldmake in the classroom. Together, we can create something altogether different, can produce queerness, can come together for a moment of community and connection.

<u>Queer Feeling in the Classroom</u>

While I argue that we should use our relation to students to queer worldmake in the classroom, I also think about how these moments might feel for instructors. In Chapter 3, I wrote about students acting as "bad" subjects to disrupt normative structures of the classroom. However, I wonder about how this might feel to instructors. I ask this question because I see it as an impediment to doing queer work. As a teacher with many years of experience who has worked with many other teachers over the years, I think about the ways that we often get frustrated by ruptures in our classroom, or, on the other side, enjoy when our classes go smoothly. In this section, I highlight one story in my experiences working with other teachers that shows the potential for good/bad feelings in the classroom and explore how our own feelings and reactions may act as an impediment to doing queer work in the classroom.

A few years ago, I was a participant in a mandatory, bi-weekly pedagogy meeting for first-year teachers in which we discussed our classroom experiences. During one meeting, we were sharing some of these experiences with each other. A colleague told the story of a day in class that went "really well."

His description of the class was that of students doing what he asked, moving from one activity to another smoothly, raising their hands to answer his questions and

participate in activities and discussions. He got through his own agenda smoothly and easily.

As teachers, we often think of these types of class periods as those that "go well." Days— when students are, as I like to say, being "friends of the agenda." Transitions are smooth, participation is easy, students talk easily. It seems to be wrapped up in a nice bow. These days feel good.

But these aren't always the days that students remember. Nor do we have any evidence that the students learned from the agenda going well. Many teachers know the frustrations of, at the end of the semester, referring to a previous lesson or assignment and the students not being able to remember it. "But I thought it went so well," I say to myself.

What about the difficult days? These are the days that we do not necessarily claim as successes. What might be happening in these more difficult moments? Our good (or bad) feelings are not necessarily a good indicator of what is happening in the classroom. This is not to necessarily argue that we *must* feel bad but to ask us to consider that our good feelings might drive our pedagogical decisions, even if the decisions don't work toward queer worldmaking.

Relation is/as Pedagogy

Recently, I had dinner with three former students from a small discussion-based WGSS course that I had taught the previous semester. We were catching up. They were talking about their semesters, their plans for after graduation. I often do a lot of listening with them. One of the students—Kara, who I interviewed for this research—was telling

the story of a recent date she went on—to Taco Bell. This was not a worst date story. No, this was the story of a date gone well, a good time had, at Taco Bell.

One of the other students—Skyler, who was also interviewed for this research—turned to me and said, "I see your grin. I always see your grins when we're talking about things, and you're just listening."   I said, "I was just thinking what my story would be like if a date took me to Taco Bell. It wouldn't be a story of a good date." Skyler replied, "You know, when I was young, I never understood why my parents would always say that certain things were bourgie."   We all laughed.

"But, it's relatable, right?" She asked. "Our stories?"

And I wonder if they are. What do I know about the world they've grown up in? These young queer students. Later, they asked me about my school, my work. They wanted to know what my dissertation was about. I told them. One of them asked, "So, like, you're doing it on us?"

The actual "subjects" of my research. Students I care about. Students I love.

"Yes, it's about you," I said.

This story reflects the complicated ways in which I am both connected to and disconnected from my students. This disconnection that I felt was initially one impetus for this research project. I was often feeling like I didn't quite have access to their experience. Yet, I am queer, like them. And, not like them.

In the interviews in this study, this so-called disconnect turned out to be more about my own stories of the classroom and my relationship to queer students than about the students' understanding of the classroom. Turns out, there is not the disconnect that I thought there was or, more aptly, that I spin stories around when I talk about the

classroom. Stories that say students use limited identity politics. Stories that students are good neoliberal subjects.

The stories in this study show that these young students are engaging with the complex ideas of queerness within the broader power structures, in many ways aware of how the power structures are shaping their experiences. In Chapter 2, the students' stories were constrained by the power structures, and at the same time, the students resisted power structures. They drew on discourses of identity politics at times, while engaging identity as a construction. In Chapter 3, Micca offered stories about the ways that students could disrupt classroom norms in queer ways. The students saw the classroom as holding potential to perform against neoliberalism and build community. In many cases, they are doing what they can in their positions as students in the classroom. Is that not what we ask of ourselves as educators, too? To do what we can within the system in which we work, in the university, in the classroom, with our students? That we, too, should struggle with practicing our own theories of queer and queerness in the classroom?

When I interviewed Skyler, we reminisced about the Taco Bell story. I told her that the story had ended up in my prospectus defense. She and I laughed about the story and about the fact that I had told it in my prospectus defense.

Skyler said, "I love this. This is great. Why didn't you tell me. I would have loved this. I remember Kara was telling us about Taco Bell, and like she went on that date earlier that night. She has the craziest adventures. And she's like, you're going to have to split this with me, and it was like days after."

"I had forgotten about that," I said. "She wanted her money for it."

"When we were at dinner. And she did it at the table and sent a message, like can you pay me for the Taco Bell. Two dollar tacos."

We laughed together.

Skyler said, "I found also, it felt like a weird goodbye, also, just because we were meeting three days a week and that class became our lives. And it was so weird scheduling a time we were all free and available because we had so much availability for each other during the semester because you had to, as a class. I remember it was raining really hard that night too, and we parted ways.

"The goodbye scene," I said.

"It bummed me out. Definitely."

"I miss you all."

"I miss you. So much. It felt like a mutual break up. We're parting ways now."

"We have to."

"We have to. I'm not mad at you. I have to go on, take other classes."

In what ways do we and can we relate to our students? I still don't want a Taco Bell date, even if it is bourgie to say so. But I don't think their understandings of queerness and their experiences in the classroom are so different from my own. Telling this story brought me another moment of connection, of reconnection, to Skyler. When we make these spaces in the classroom, we can create potential. We create possibilities.

Toward the end of the interview, Skyler and I got talking about a video of a dance performance that I had showed at the beginning of the semester of our class and how much we had enjoyed it. This had been not long after the mass shooting in a gay club in

Orlando, and the dance performance was a tribute to those who had died. After the

interview, I pulled up the video on my laptop, and together we watched the drag queens

dance.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- You identified as queer to be part of this research. What does "queer" mean to you?
- What does it mean to be queer in the classroom or to do queer work in the classroom?
- In which of your classes do queer issues most often come up in explicit ways (i.e., discussed explicitly with teacher or in course content)? Can you give an example of a time when this happened?
- Tell me about a time when you advocated for queerness in a class?
    - What did you do? / What did the instructor do? / What did other students do? (Follow up questions will focus on both what students and instructors did)
    - What did you want to accomplish?
    - What do you think it accomplished?
    - Did anything happen that you didn't intend
- Tell me about a time when you advocated for queerness in a class and it brought you in conflict with the instructor.
    - What did you do? / What did the instructor do? / What did other students do?
    - What did you want to accomplish?
    - What do you think it accomplished?
    - Did anything happen that you didn't intend
- Why bring up queer issues in the classroom? What does the particular space offer?
- If a class were perfectly queer, what would that mean to you?
    - What would queer people do? / What would cis-gender, heterosexual people do? / What would instructors do?
    - Course content?
    - How would the course be taught?
- In what ways do you think queerness is operating in this interview right now? How do you understand your own queerness? How do you understand my (the researcher's queerness)?
- Is there anything you would like to tell me about being queer in the classroom or that you think I should know about being a queer student in the classroom?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me about this project?

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