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## On Becoming What the Story Needs

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### Abstract

In this article, I use Derrida's (1978) conceptualizing of *différance* to inform hermeneutic readings of my queer archive of deferrals. These readings show some of the complex ways remembered and forgotten experiences of learning, teaching, and schooling are inevitably shaped by heteronormativity. My interest in *différance* is informed and maintained by my active resistance to how the subjects needed by those stories can lose track of their deferrals in ways that can reposition the normative within the counternormative and vice versa. I conclude by discussing how creative re-storying can support acts of remembering, forgetting, and fictionalizing that can lead to hermeneutic insight.

### Keywords

queer, archive, subjectivity, story, difference, normative, hermeneutics, writing, teaching, reading

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The story of what happened, or what did not happen but should have—that story can become a curtain drawn shut, a piece of insulation, a disguise, a razor, a tool that changes every time it is used and sometimes becomes other than we intended. The story becomes the thing needed. (Allison, 1995, p. 3)

It was in 1991, as a doctoral student reading and writing about hermeneutics, poststructuralism, and deconstruction that I happened upon an unsettling idea I needed then and still need now. In 1968, Jacques Derrida used the French word *différance* to highlight the dual acts of differentiating and deferring in all acts of representation. The differences become the markers separating this from that, normal from not normal, ugly from beautiful, in from out, right from wrong, fact from fiction. The deferrals necessary for those differentiations, however, become obscured, erased, silenced absences that remain as felt but unrepresented traces. Since then, I have been curious about how acts of fictionalizing and imagining can create the conditions for the complete meaning of *différance* (differentiating and deferring) to be written and read in ways that change the subjects of learning and the subjects that learn.

### **Remembering to Forget**

I am not able to watch violent scenes on television. I cover my eyes and ears or leave the room when I can see they are about to happen. I avoid arguments and don't like to be in the presence of angry people. I realize this is influenced by growing up as an only child with working-class immigrant parents in a small 1950s bungalow that was permeated with the smells of beer, cigarettes, disappointment, and sadness. Sometimes I noticed those smells on some of my students when I taught grades 7, 8, and 9 in the 1980s.

In my tiny basement bedroom during the late sixties and early seventies, I read novels and watched television, not realizing I was lonely and that it was probably my fatness preventing anyone from noticing I liked boys and preferred novels with strong women characters. I read my favourite ones over and over, becoming a powerful character in my own fictional future, planning the ways I would enact revenge on the bullies who made my one-mile walk home from school a misery. Those imaginative engagements with novels and television shows became half my world. I believe now it was my fear of being both invisible and exposed in my small room, in our small house, in our small city on the vast open-skied Canadian prairies that drew me to novels and television shows situated in big cities. Indeed, I had pictured myself living in New York City so vividly that on my first visit there it felt like coming home.

In *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995), Dorothy Allison tells stories about what it was like for the Gibson women to grow up poor in South Carolina with men they loved and feared. I have read it at least a dozen times since buying it twenty-five years ago—each time noticing something different in the text and in the reader. Because I know it is a memoir, not a novel or an ethnography, I believe the stories being told are based on things that are true because they happened. A novel can look and sound like a memoir, but because I know that the characters are made up, I read it as fiction. If the text is an ethnography, I read it as reliable exposition. All three of these are stories cast in and through different genres we have used to neatly separate the

truth from a lie, fact from fiction, normal from not normal. Genre, formatting, publishing, and marketing produce the identity of the text and the reader. Writers produce the texts that produce the readers that produce the reading. It's not hard to discern why and how the story becomes the thing needed. It is not so easy to understand why and how even the most astute, critical reader becomes what the story needs.

### Forgetting to Remember

Poststructuralism and deconstruction as ideas more than practices have been able to show the limits of structuralism. Whereas structural linguistics showed how meanings derive from assemblages of words, with the use of *différance*, Derrida showed how those assemblages emerged from hierarchical, patriarchal, colonial, imperialist, capitalist, neoliberal, normative processes where decisions are made about what and who counts by naming what and who *doesn't* count. As someone whose queer sensibilities are oriented by what Berlant (2011) describes as “practices that feel out alternative routes for living without requiring personhood to be expressive of an internal orientation or a part of a political program for how to live” (p. 18), I have had plenty of experience with how deferring requires social processes of traumatic shaming from homophobia, femphobia, and fatphobia. I resist identity categories, preferring to discuss how my queer sensibilities are oriented by my ever-expanding archive of deferrals.

Deferrals are never benign. My interest in *différance* is informed and maintained by my active resistance to how both the stories and the subjectivities needed by those stories can lose track of their deferrals in ways that can reposition the normative within the counternormative. For example, in July I received an email reminding me about the upcoming Pride Parade that is held in my home city every year in early September. I know I should be proud that this event now has become so popular. But I am not proud. I am sad and disappointed that what had its genesis as a march of protest intended to tell a story of outrage by being outrageous has become a parade intended to prove that homophobia has been solved.

Public displays of outrage require the outraged to make spectacles of themselves, not only to be noticed, but to interrupt the usual ways of noticing. The Pride *marches* I attended in the 80s and 90s included entries like dykes on bikes, lip syncing drag queens, scantily clad muscle men on floats, leather, plumes, loud dance music, protest signs, chanting, laughing. The streets were lined by uneasy, cautious spectators some of whom helped write the story of outrage, some who were trying to understand the story, and some who were trying to silence the story with homophobic displays that usually exist insidiously in more muted ways. It was the juxtaposing of the *outrageous* with the *outrage* that produced a march that was a *parody* of a parade, not a parade.

However, parody only has disrupting power if those who are performing and watching it understand what *that* story needs them to become. Over the past decade, the minor shift from the word march to parade was accompanied by major regressive move—the requirement that the stories of LGBTQ histories and cultures be presented within normative structures and meanings. Yes, it is true that there are now many more people in the Pride Parade representing non-queer sensibilities; however, most of the outrage and outrageous have been edited out and, as a

consequence, histories of queer resistance have been mostly erased, lost, forgotten, *deferred*. The Pride Parade in my home city now reads like a story with a happy ending, needing little more from spectators/readers than the most superficial forms of tolerance. I would argue that normalizing a march of protest into a parade of pride is not unlike reading a novel in school—a regression to the normal—changing in profound ways what that story needs the reader to become.

### **Pedagogies From and For Patriarchy**

When I was in Grade one at St Paul's School, my teacher Sister Mary Louise (who wrote to me after I started teaching to let me know she had eventually left the convent to get married and have children) was required to use the *Dick and Jane* basal reading series. I remember being confused and worried when I realized Dick and Jane's mother did not go to work every day and their father carried a briefcase not a toolbox; and even more worried when I noticed there were no ashtrays or beer bottles on their kitchen table and the adults were always smiling. To me, Dick and Jane's family was another species.

One day I arrived at school to find a coloured chalkboard mural drawing depicting human-like figures falling into flames that Sister Mary Louise had artfully drawn, which during our Catholic Studies class she warned us happens to unrepentant sinners. As the school years passed, the queer me emerged despite the fact there was nothing in the school curriculum to suggest I should exist. Not only was I a different species, I was an alien from another planet—and probably a sinner who would fall from the sky into the fires of hell.

My queer sensibilities had to read through racist, homophobic, classist, sexist, dogmatic texts in the complete absence of any queer historical or cultural knowledge to support my own responses to those texts. Like other readers who felt like an alien, for my classmates and teachers I mostly had to make up responses that were expected rather than reveal publicly how I read them through the emerging queer story of me. Luckily, in the Language Arts classes in the 60s and 70s my teachers were not interested in whether I identified with the curriculum. The *explicit* purpose of those texts was aligned with the purposes and functions of schooling, which in some ways made it easy to become what the story needed: a student who read the words accurately, learned how to write grammatically correct sentences, and who knew the difference between a simile and a metaphor. I didn't have to put my mostly hidden story on the curriculum table. The worst thing (I was invisible) also was the best thing (I was invisible).

Those acts of reading (books and television) and writing (planning my revenge and escape) was the genesis of a private queer archive of resistance made from the deferrals I still depend on to fashion my queer subjectivity. As Cvetkovich (2003) argues, those who experience their identities from and in the elusive queer archive do not have access to (or even feel entitled to) reliable historical, intergenerational, contextual, cultural knowledge to orient their counternormativity. Like human consciousness, the queer archive of deferrals is everywhere and nowhere. Complicating these gaps and absences are that the words and images and genres we use to think about, read and/or write about our experiences are produced by densely normative structures and cultures.

In the early 1980s when I realized there were more than just a few wounded and wary students in grade 7, 8, and 9 Language Arts classes, I abandoned textbooks and learned reader response and process writing pedagogies. I could get away with doing that back then, a short-lived period in education history in the Canadian province of Alberta where progressive education and rugged individualism informed programs of study that trusted teachers to embrace an inquiry-based approach to teaching. Like me, some of my students needed the chance to learn the uses of fiction in a world of hard truth—not to escape their experiences, but to learn to understand them and, through imaginative engagements with reading and writing, plan their escape.

However, even in inquiry-based classrooms with teachers knowledgeable about and committed to a critical pedagogies approach, the evidence from my and others' research has shown the insidious ways homophobia and sexism handed down through patriarchal systemic structures limits not only what one can *be*, but also what one can *know* (Sumara & Davis, 1999). Indeed, gender and sexuality normalization extend not only to the content of curriculum and processes of teaching, but also to the theories of learning that inform teaching practices—often becoming amplified through debates of the optimal ways to ensure the kind of learning most valued. I cut my teeth on the highly politicized contestations between inquiry- and skills-based approaches to teaching reading, realizing years later that both approaches emerged from normalizing discourses that continued to enable systemic forms of exclusion. Ironically, schools continue to produce conformity even in the context of personalized, student centred, inquiry-based pedagogies.

It doesn't end there. Despite my early career research hopes that university teacher education might avoid the most severe pedagogical normalizing, the results of my research into the uses of literary genres in university-based teacher education were clear—neither the conventions of the text nor the intentions of the teacher can usually prevent literary engagements from being schooled. The imaginative functions of literary engagement are hijacked by the normalizing social and cultural practices that shape what it means to be a teacher or a student in school—a place explicitly oriented by all valences and variations of the word normal: neutral, right, generic, silent, deferred (Sumara et al., 2008).

### **The Remembered Present**

I continue to hold a somewhat pessimistic critique of schools and schooling—but at the same time I am deeply committed to the institution of public schooling. It was the experience of being schooled by adults who were not my parents in a place that was not my family home that provided me with refuge and an imagined future. I am not the first to insist that imaginative work be given more respect in school. For me, this begins by acknowledging that what we imagine contributes to our consciousness—what Edelman (2004, p. 8) describes as “the remembered present.”

The intellectual, emotional, and psychic responses we have through our engagements with fictional characters are included in our embodied archive that supports our knowing, being, and doing. Because these fictional engagements are personal, and the texts public and fixed (rarely are novels or poems ever changed), we are given the opportunity to notice how we both mark and are marked by and through those re-readable texts. It is quite challenging to study the

situation of the reader if we include the biological body of the reader as that situation. The biological body is not only in a situation; as de Beauvoir (1989) noted, the body is a situation—the complexities of which cannot be captured by the words used to describe it directly. That's the hard part because it means trying to use how we have learned to see what we have learned not to see: that which has been deferred and declared not worthy of notice. The absence may be felt yet ironically not known. Perception needs to be tricked into finding its way into the known but not perceived.

In my research, teaching and, indeed, in my daily personal life, I use the reading and re-reading of novels to help with this trick of perception. I first happened upon this practice at the same time I was reading about *différance*. As part of my doctoral research, I read and re-read Michael Ondaatje's (1991) novel *The English Patient* with a small group of high school English teachers as part of my doctoral research. For the unnamed pilot who is only known as the English patient, the story of identity is told indirectly during times the nurse reads aloud to him from his commonplace book that he has kept for 30 years:

And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus's *Histories*, are other fragments—maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing is his own name. (Ondaatje, 1991, p. 96)

Like the English patient, I annotate books, including novels. Those annotations are particularly interesting when I am re-reading the same printed version of a book over many years. The marks become not only a record of the reader on the text, but also during re-reading they are evidence that the re-reading is conducted with a different consciousness, a different remembered present, a different reader. It is the temporal period between the marking and the remarking that is interesting to me and has over the years become productive for my students and research participants. It is not only a history of the experiences of reading and re-reading, it is a fascinating window into the reading subject, including what the reading subject became over the course of repeated readings over time.

This all sounds so tidy and simple; however, there are limits to what can be known through intentional processes of marking. As Cvekovich (2003) has discussed, the remembered and imagined self can only be fashioned from what is available to perception and conditioned by the stories in which we are situated and the ways in which we are storied by others. This is not so much of a problem with those whose experience and story of self-identity is closely aligned with normative conceptions, images, and practices. It is a problem for those who have been storied as outside the normative (outliers, outsiders) and named with pejorative language that has no place in polite conversation or this writing.

### **The Fear of Being Ordinary and the Desire to Belong**

In retrospect, I realize that since completing my doctoral dissertation up to the present time my work has been trying to work out the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the fear of being ordinary and the desire to belong—an ironic paradox that the situation of schooling amplifies. I have tried to understand this productive ironic tension by studying the readerly and

writerly dynamics of literary engagement. I have learned how and why the situation of reading and the subjectivity of the reader influences where on the continuum from fearing ordinary and desiring to belong can land. How much queer can extraordinary include? How much ordinary must be maintained? What are the different consequences of becoming what is needed for one story or the other? Some of this I worked out in *Private Readings in Public* (1996) by examining the differential functions of the literary imagination in school and non-school settings. Fifteen years later I wrote *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters* (2002) to offer a more hopeful account emerging from research I had conducted in both schools with teachers and their students and in community settings with adults. In that book, I also began to experiment with form, juxtaposing literary, and academic expository text with data that included my own and others' written memoirs. In chapters with titles like "Learning How to Be a Subject" and "Learning How to Fall in Love," I offer essays (from the French *essayeur: to try*) that present hermeneutic interpretations of what I learn by juxtaposing the actions and thinking of characters in novels alongside memoir-like narrative episodes, discussing these using theories and concepts from my academic reading. In those texts, I attempt to find ways to draw attention to my archive of deferrals by using conventions and practices I learn from poets, novelists, and songwriters.

I assign these reading and writing practices to students in all my classes (both graduate and undergraduate) which means that no matter what the course I include a novel as one of the required readings. I do not include a novel for the purposes of expanding the content of the curriculum. I do not ask the students to reveal their personal responses to the novel in the assignments or in class discussions. Instead, I ask them to do a close critical theorized reading of what they can now know or see when they merge three stories: an episode from a novel; a vignette from their remembered experience; a slice of theory. What can they now think about after completing a writing assignment that asks them to work out a relationship among these three different stories? And then the most interesting part: who did they have to become to write that story? What did that story need them to be?

For example, how does applying a queer theoretical lens to my reading of *The English Patient* alongside my remembered experience of sorting through my mother's photographs and immigration papers create knowledge that changes how I remember and read and write and, ultimately, who I become (Sumara, 2002)? That becomes a very important story to study—the one that has been created using that process initiated and completed by the one who becomes implicated in the outcome and eventually in the analysis of that outcome. In other words, I am not only interested in what story of learning that can be told about what is produced from those reading and writing practices, I also am interested in hearing about who the writer needed to *become* and *became* through and as a result of that process.

The question arises, then, what did the story of this article I am writing need from me? Did I conduct the story or did the story conduct me? What deferrals occurred in order for me to get this published? I wonder. Becoming what this article's story needed was far more difficult than I anticipated when I sat down to write. The hard part was realizing how seductive it is to attach to stories that seem to need me more than I need them. Or maybe it's the other way around.

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