CHAPTER 8

Risks and Resiliency: Trans* Students in the Rural South

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Queer Literacy Framework Principles:

1. Refrains from possible presumptions that students ascribe to a gender; and,
3. Recognizes that masculinity and femininity constructs are assigned to gender norms and are situationally performed.

Introduction

"We'd like to remind all you students that you can't bring firearms onto school property. It's hunting season, so don't forget to take your stuff outta your car before you come to campus. And, be sure to take any kills out before you leave the house, too. Don't want that sittin' there all day" [sic]. We looked at one another and silently giggled. The administrator's reminder was absurd; his ridiculous Southern drawl only made it sillier. We constantly bemoaned to one another the pains of living in a tiny Southern town, and an intercom reminder that our classmates—many of whom the

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teachers refused to trust with pens or pencils—might have ready access to rifles and deer heads was too much.

Equally painful was navigating the hallways between classes. We had to be careful of the slick red clay that streaked the school linoleum, the "Georgia mud" that everyone tracked in from outside after a heavy rain. The yellow "Caution" signs that lined the corridors did little to increase safety, only to highlight the most precarious spaces. Students seemed to be enacting intricate dance steps as we each carefully navigated the slipperiest places, our shoes squeaking and squealing through the mess.

More risky than our mud choreography, though, were our internal thoughts. Though we—Stephanie and Aryah—have known one another since fifth grade, neither of us was privy to the other's thoughts at that time. Neither of us knew how little the other felt that she belonged. We lived in a place where we had learned no vocabulary to articulate our deepest concerns and thoughts, but even if we had had the words, we were in a place where only silence was permissible.

Being "Different" in the Rural South

First, as we both still live in the Southeastern United States and have each lived significant portions of our lives in the South, we do not wish to suggest that there is a monolithic Southern identity or set of beliefs. The stereotypes that media perpetuate, as seen in shows such as *Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, are problematic and offensive to many Southerners, even as others identify with figures on the shows. However, despite the diversity and beauty present in the Southeast, the region remains highly problematic to queer populations.

Before the Supreme Court's historic ruling on marriage equality, nearly all of the states that prohibited same-sex marriages were in this region (Human Rights Campaign 2014). Since Supreme Court of the United States decision, a number of Southern states have made national news due to some state officials' refusals to recognize the federal ruling (e.g., Roosevelt 2015; Williams and Robinson 2015). Beyond marriage equality, in comparison to the rest of the USA, no state in the Southeastern region offers what *The Guardian* refers to as "maximum protection" for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) Americans, including equal employment protections and safeties from gender- and sexuality-based harassment inside state-funded schools (Guardian Interactive 2012). While there are certainly Southerners who celebrate people's rights to self-define, to self-identity, and to self-determine in relation to issues such as

sexual orientation and gender identity, the region tends to lag behind other sections of the country in relation to civil rights.

These issues matter very much when considering Southern schools. In 2012, the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conducted a nationwide survey of more than 2300 students that evaluated LGBT middle and high schoolers' experiences in specific geographic regions. Researchers determined that discriminatory school policies and bullying behaviors toward LGBT individuals seemed "to be amplified in the South" (2012a, n.p.). The study attributed the finding to Southern cultural beliefs, which contribute to a lack of public support and resources for LGBTQ populations, including fewer teacher allies and resources such as Gay-Straight Alliances. Given this environment, Southern queer students are especially vulnerable (Whitlock 2010).

However, as two queer people who grew up not just in the South, *but* the rural South, research indicates that many students' experiences today mirror ours from over 20 years ago. The GLSEN (2012c) study also determined that, in rural sections of the country in general, students consistently reported greater degrees of biased language, such as homophobic and "negative gender expression-based remarks," and a significantly diminished sense of being safe at school (p. x). Additionally, over 80% of rural students described feeling unsafe due to self-determined or perceived characteristics related to sexual orientation, gender, and gender expression. Of those students, nearly half reported being either harassed or assaulted due to those same characteristics.

As our focus is not on rural areas in general but on the rural South, it is noteworthy that even with the degree of risk associated with being a queer student in any rural region, the survey found that "rural students in the South" were "more likely to feel unsafe than rural students" in most other regions (p. x). The lack of safety translates into the determination "that places in the South … may be more hostile than [some other] areas" of the country to queer students (p. 1).

For trans* students specifically, the survey found that 15% of trans* students from rural areas included in the survey reported attending schools that had openly discriminatory policies, such as gender-segregated school facilities (e.g., gym, locker room) and consistent refusal from school personnel to use the proper pronouns when referring to students (p. 16). One trans* student living in the rural South described in an interview with GLSEN that his mother had declared that his gender nonconformity was "the work of the Devil," while classmates "shoved [me] into my locker and called [me] a redneck fag" (2013, n.p.). This chapter examines these

risks and the ways that teachers and schools in rural Southern regions might both recognize and support this population.

Trans* Students of Color

The intersection of race with gender is as important as geographic location for trans* students. While GLSEN does not specifically report by region, they found in surveys and interviews with over 2100 LGBT students of color across the nation that transphobic language was pervasive in schools, and only about one-fifth of trans* students of color reported that teachers and administrators intervened when other students made derogatory comments about gender expression or race (Diaz and Kosciw 2009, p. xi). Additionally, over 60% were harassed because of gender expression, with some racial and ethnic groups being more susceptible than others to harassment (p. 12). African Americans, for example, reported hearing negative peer remarks about gender expression "frequently" or "often" at least 62% of the time that they were in school. In addition to verbal harassment due to gender identity and expression, students' racial and ethnic identities exacerbated peers' treatment and often led to physical violence (p. xi). While over 80% of the students in the study agreed that having supportive teachers and school personnel was critical to both safety and success, only about one-third reported having access to supportive faculty. Related, very few reported finding representation in school curricula. Only one-third reported having access to LGBT resources in their school libraries, about one-fourth could access LGBT-related information via their school Internet, and only one-tenth of LGBT students of color reported having access to any positive LGBT representations in school materials, much less positive representations of trans* people and/or LGBT people of color (pp. 38–39).

Two Different Perspectives on Trans* Identity in a Rural Southern School

When we wrote earlier that we were both queer students without the vocabulary to articulate those identities, we were remarking on Aryah's identity as a trans* woman of color and Stephanie's identity as a cisgender lesbian. One aim in sharing our personal perspectives is to describe the experiences that Aryah as a trans* student in the late 1990s faced in a regional climate that has traditionally been and remains hostile to trans*

people and people of color; another is to describe Stephanie's frustrations with her struggles to support a friend in a space that made understanding and acknowledging trans* identity impossible.

Aryah's Struggle

When I was very young, I loved the color purple. Any item in any shade, whether it was a fanciful dress or a fluffy stuffed animal—if it was purple, I loved it. I learned very quickly that as a little boy, my color choice was questionable, off, *wrong*. I adjusted to others' expectations of what was acceptable, and I quietly selected yellow as my new favorite color. My second favorite color choice got far fewer reactions than purple, and so I began to learn to navigate gender norms in ways that protected me from others' evaluations of me as abnormal.

As I grew older, life became more complicated. My favorite color was no longer the only aspect of my life that was monitored to ensure that I was enough of a boy. While playing, I had been happiest when enjoying hopscotch, jumping rope, and playing house. For a time, those activities had been acceptable, had been excused because of my age. With each birthday, my world narrowed, and activities that had brought me joy were squeezed out of my life. Adults told me directly that I was "abnormal," that I should play games better suited for little boys. While there were certainly family and friends who policed my behaviors, I vividly remember my elementary school principal being one of the figures who brought my world of play crashing down.

During recess, I tended to gravitate to the girls' groups on the playground. They were the ones with the fun games, after all. With them, I was free to hop across a grid of squares and to pretend to cook gourmet meals, before I would rush off to jump rope to "Cinderella Dressed in Yellow" and other singsong rhymes. One day while enjoying time with friends, my elementary school principal pulled me to the side to inform me, "You are to cease playing with the girls on the playground. You are to play with the little boys, where you belong. That will be more fun for you anyway, won't it?" It was not. Suddenly I found myself in a foreign land where the games were far different from those I had participated in before, and the space between the "girl section" and "boy section" of the schoolyard might well have been miles rather than yards. I was forced into a social group where I did not belong and where I was not welcomed.

The first principle outlined in the Queer Literacy Framework (QLF) is that an educator or administrator "refrains from possible presumptions that students ascribe to a gender" (Miller 2015, Fig. 1)—but this was not the case. One of my most heartbreaking early school memories was because my principal not only assumed that all students fit within the gender binary of male/female, but he actively enforced that divide. Had he only considered the benefits of students, regardless of gender identity or expression, interacting in a non-gender-segregated way, I would have been allowed to continue to interact with peers who made me feel comfortable and safe, without being forced to adhere to stereotypical notions of masculinity.

When I entered middle school in 1990, a year after Stephanie and I had met, I found myself trapped. The enormous space that had separated me from the other section of the playground had been replaced by a tiny box into which I worked to cram myself every single day. I knew at that age what it meant to "act like a boy," so I could play the part outwardly, but internally I was awash in conflicting and complex thoughts that ran contrary to what everyone expected and believed me to be. I did not know the phrase "gender nonconformity" or any similar concept, but I did know that who I was outwardly was not who I knew myself to really be.

Growing up in the rural South, my home and school were heavily influenced by deeply conservative Judeo-Christian values, and I was horrified to find that in addition to my struggle with my gender identity, for which I had no words to articulate my inner turmoil, I was also attracted to boys in my class. Certainly that part of who I was had a label: I was a homosexual. Pastors, teachers, and peers consistently provided clear messages that being gay was a sin and that any relationship with another boy had to be a platonic and casual friendship. To want or to pursue anymore was a path to damnation.

Additionally, my religious upbringing—reinforced at home, in the church, and in my public school classrooms—prevented me from having even the most basic knowledge of sexual health and desire. For years, I had believed that babies were born from women's belly buttons. But even after I had better understandings of anatomy, I had no ways to describe to others or to resolve within myself the yearnings that I felt both for my male and female classmates. I was alarmed by my sexual attraction to other boys and by my continued need to be more like other girls. I felt my cage closing tighter and tighter, and I began to spiral into deep bouts of depression.

Not only did the rural setting limit my access to knowledge and support, but there were no means through which I might obtain quality counseling or other support systems. Most of my classmates and I had to drive at least a half-an-hour roundtrip just to pick up basic items from the nearest store; mental and emotional health resources were impossible. There were no teachers whom I believed would understand. Their curricula constantly focused on White cisgender experiences, through the authors we read and the historical figures we discussed. When a teacher included a person of color, the issue of the individual's race was a fleeting fact that the teacher cursorily mentioned. As we read Langston Hughes in sophomore English, for example, the teacher asked us to examine symbolism without ever examining how the imagery connected to Hughes' racial identity. The teacher never once mentioned Hughes' sexuality. In history, as I flipped through pictures of women dressed as men in the early nineteenth century, I imagined their happiness to be dressed as their true selves, even while the teacher skipped over that section and focused instead on bootleggers and the World Wars.

After a time, the issue of my identity not being recognized anywhere that I turned, including my school, was too much. However, when I finally confided in a high school psychologist (and later a college psychologist) my constant but strange struggles to understand myself, the counselor actively avoided discussing the issue of gender expression, so it never came up. What we did discuss was my diet. How my intake of various nutrients was upsetting my emotional stability. The experts insisted that my suicide attempts and my struggles to gain some form of equilibrium were caused by bipolar tendencies that were the result of my diet. My self-reproach, my social performances, and my desperate efforts to understand myself were a matter of eating too much or too little sugar, they said. Who I knew that I was, and who I struggled to articulate, did not exist beyond my heart and head. My home, my church, my school, and even my counselors and doctors provided no ways for me to exist as I knew that I should.

The third principle of the QLF, that an educator who supports (a) gender identities "recognizes that masculinity and femininity constructs are assigned to gender norms and are situationally performed," might have saved me during this time (Miller 2015, Fig. 1). I had no one who articulated that gender fluidity was possible, much less healthy. Everyone around me assumed that masculinity and femininity were not only normal but the only ways to gender-identify; additionally, the seeming normality of a gender binary prevented the adults in my life from understanding the

ways that I was trapped into unhappily performing masculinity. Just as importantly, their unawareness prevented them from noting the ways that they and my peers were also performing specific and learned versions of masculinity and femininity.

Stephanie's Perspective

I missed a lot of school for a variety of reasons, which often required that I sit in a classroom during "break" to make up work. I learned early that keeping quiet and looking busy gave me access to private teacher talk. Having just started sixth grade, I remember puzzling over something related to Moroccan geography. Something I had missed while out the week before. While I decided what colors I needed for a map activity, Mrs. Tory tried to look official thumbing through her L.L. Bean catalog. Suddenly another teacher, Mrs. Sherman, rushed in. I knew from previous experience that now was the time to look incredibly dedicated to my map, so I did not lift my head but definitely focused on her. She glanced at me, surely to confirm that I was not paying attention, and then began whispering to Mrs. Tory. Though I had always listened intently to the teacher talk that I knew I shouldn't be overhearing, I realized that on this day the topic of the conversation was one of my close friends, O'Tiss.

"I'm telling you, Ginger," Mrs. Sherman whispered, "that boy is 'funny.' Like too-much-estrogen-funny." I had long ago mastered the art of watching without looking, and I saw Mrs. Tory nod. She glanced my way, and I guarantee that from where she was sitting, I looked fully committed to Eastern African geography. "Well, Jean, I don't know what's wrong with him. His family's a good Christian family. He's got a father figure, and they go to church every week." The two then transitioned into a conversation about their daughters' Easter dresses, apparently inspired by the mention of church. But while they discussed sashes and bows, I numbly colored in Marrakech and considered how my friend was "funny," "wrong." I didn't understand the problem with O'Tiss, but I fully understood that my teachers had very clear notions of normalcy (Meyer 2009). They'd decided that he wasn't "right," and I was unsure of what to do with this information. I certainly could not tell O'Tiss—the information would only hurt his feelings. He was my friend, and I thought that he was wonderful, but I could not fathom what it meant that two teachers had described his "wrongness" at school in front of me.

As I retrospectively consider this moment through the lens of the third QLF principle, that an educator "recognizes that masculinity and femininity constructs are assigned to gender norms and are situationally performed" (Miller 2015, Fig. 1), I realize that both teachers recognized that O'Tiss was moving outside stereotypical masculine performance while their critiques of my friend worked to reinforce gender norms and stereotypical understandings of femininity and masculinity. They were clear in declaring that my friend's gender fluidity was "funny" and "wrong." Rather than examine the ways that my friend's family and church life were a part of constructing specific versions of masculinity that O'Tiss begrudgingly struggled to embody, they treated those social constructs both as reasons that my friend had failed to be a successful boy and as essential elements of properly conforming to traditional and stereotypical understandings of gender roles.

By the end of middle school, O'Tiss and I had started hanging out with one another during the school break. Most of our peers had boyfriends or girlfriends, but we had both stayed determinedly single. It was not that I had no interest. I was very much in love—as much as a preteen might be—with "Cynthia," who sat beside me in my science and English classes. Such desires were out of the question, though. When others questioned why O'Tiss and I were unattached but still constantly together, I laughingly justified our mutual singlehood and apparently odd friendship to my parents, teachers, and friends by reminding them that we were both extraordinarily nerdy. I knew, though, that O'Tiss served as a "cover" for me—I did not have to confront my sexuality because I could retreat to the social safety of having a close male friend. Retrospectively, I realize that it was a shared front: We were both trying to navigate what were socially forbidden desires and had somehow found one another in that struggle.

"What do you think about this?" I looked up from my book to see what O'Tiss was showing me. I had assumed, given our homework assignment, that it would be an algebraic equation; instead, I found that he had sketched a woman in a fur-lined dress. "O'Tiss, why do you always draw such impractical stuff? What woman is going to wear that junk for real?" He looked at me as if I was nuts. "What do you mean 'impractical'? Fashion isn't supposed to be practical! It's not like you really know what regular girls wear anyway, ya know." I rolled my eyes and went back to my book. Overhearing teachers and peers talk about any students who were "different," who were "queer"—though I did not know the word in that way yet—had taught me a great deal. I definitely did not know

terms such as "heteronormativity" and "gender conformity" at the time, but I understood the concepts. I knew, without question, that if O'Tiss and I hung out with one another in public spaces, they would assume that we were together. Boy + Girl = Couple. The end. Use the system to avoid being abused by the system. Of course, we still did not avoid controversy: O'Tiss was Black and I was White, and Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* had just been released. But having classmates sing Stevie Wonder's song lyrics under their breath was less threatening than the alternative of public conversations about topics like the one that Mrs. Tory and Ms. Sherman had discussed.

Like Aryah, I struggled to find self-representation in the many books that I read and the classes I attended. The only instance that I can recall in school of someone mentioning a queer individual was Aryah's and my senior English teacher telling us, "Oscar Wilde was gay, put on trial, and died in prison." The rampant homophobia and heteronormativity were both confusing and infuriating. However, unlike Aryah, I did have the luxury of a teacher ally who told me about her gay son and encouraged me to read Virginia Woolf, who she said was "another super smart and awesome lesbian." My cisgender identity, though I did not know the term at the time, allowed me to fit both social situations and my own body in ways that were not afforded to Aryah. And, even the teacher ally who supported me puzzled over Aryah's high school self and suggested that I help "your friend find a boyfriend after high school." There was no moment when gender identity and gender fluidity were a part of conversation, much less curriculum. I certainly struggled, but my friend was rendered invisible in ways that I had no way of understanding or supporting.

As wonderful as my support system was for me, my teacher allies and my understandings of gender ran counter to the first QLF principle. She nor I refrained "from possible presumptions that students ascribe to a gender" (Miller 2015, Fig. 1). While I loved my friend and wanted nothing more than Aryah's happiness, it never occurred to me that she should not be confined to a specific gender role. Aryah dressed and (unwillingly) behaved as a boy throughout our childhood, and both her teachers and I took the performance at face value. She looked, sounded, and acted like a boy, so she must be male. Had any person in Aryah's life allowed that students may not have a gender, or that gender performance and gender identity were not aligned, my friend might have had a very different experience. As someone who went to the same classes, had the same teachers, hung out with the same friend group as Aryah, and valued my friend-

ship with her very much, I can attest that we both grew up in a school and social structure that not only assumed that all people had only one of two genders but also actively policed gender performance to ensure that all adults and students fell into what were the assumed "proper" gender roles.

Challenges of the Rural South

We recognize that what we experienced as children—the erasure of trans* identity, the inability to articulate a queer self, and the heavily structured and oppressive social norms—are not unique to a particular region. We also recognize, however, that the South has historically and presently been more resistant to change than other areas of the country. Related to the GLSEN study discussed earlier, the political and social attitudes toward queer rights influence Southern schools' policies as well. Eight states in the nation have what GLSEN terms "no promo homo" laws, which are "local or state education laws that expressly forbid teachers from discussing gay and transgender issues (including sexual health and HIV/AIDS awareness) in a positive light—if at all" (GLSEN 2012b). Of the eight, six are in the South—including South Carolina, which adopted a marriage equality law prior to the SCOTUS ruling. One of South Carolina's laws, for example, reads that educators "may not include a discussion of alternate sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships including, but not limited to, homosexual relationships except in the context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases" (South Carolina Legislative Services Agency 2012).

However, these six states with laws that specifically prohibit positive inclusion of gender- and sexuality-queer figures and information are not exceptional in the region. Tennessee, a state without a "no promo homo" law, recently garnered media attention due to a proposed anti-bullying law change. The alteration would have permitted students to bully queer students, if the bullying was due to religious beliefs ("Tennessee anti-bullying law" 2012). Specifically, the law "would allow students to speak out against homosexuality without punishment if that's what their religious beliefs call for."

On top of the political and cultural climates that make being a queer Southerner challenging, our experiences in rural communities add another layer of complexity. Rural communities generally have diminished access to resources, to information, and to facilities. For example, rural living sometimes means driving substantial distances to access the nearest

supportive community groups. Additionally, while online communities offer support options today that did not exist when we were teenagers, many rural communities continue to have limited access to resources such as Wi-Fi (Guerin 2014). These issues with access created for both of us very isolating experiences. Even if we had had someone with whom we might have talked, which was unlikely given the circumstances, we had no words to explain. That is why Aryah had doctors examine her diet rather than discuss her efforts to articulate her struggles with gender roles and social expectations. The sociocultural and sociopolitical elements of the Southeast, coupled with the access issues of living in rural areas, make being a safe and happy nonconforming person challenging at best.

Supporting Trans* Students in Rural Schools

This book is long overdue in supporting educators, students, community members, and others in their efforts to recognize trans* experiences as being unique to each individual while considering what they might do to help. We are confident that other chapters here will support trans* populations and teacher advocates, even if the chapters are not specific to this particular section of the USA. Students in the rural South consistently report that teachers and other school members are essential to students feeling safe and empowered in school and home settings (e.g., Blackburn 2012; Mayo 2014; Miller and Gilligan 2013) and that students also report the incredible value of having resources available to teachers that bolster teacher activism and support teachers' abilities to support LGBT*IAGCQ student health.

However, because we grew up in and now work in areas of the nation where politicians, community leaders, and others actively and openly oppose permitting spaces for trans* identities, we want to consider viable teacher actions within the context of the rural South. Even without all Southern states having the "no promo homo" laws, most states restrict discussions of queer topics in school, and research shows that many teachers feel that queer topics have no place in classrooms (e.g., Blackburn 2012; DeWitt 2012; Thein 2013). Therefore, while the QLF discussed in the Introduction and elsewhere will be extremely helpful to many educators, not all actions are feasible in all contexts.

There is justifiable fear and genuine risk for educators who choose to adopt the QLF in particular settings and contexts. Stephanie, who was a high school teacher in the rural South for seven years, had an influential

local pastor complain to the school district superintendent, for example, when the pastor learned that Stephanie was incorporating queer topics and theories into her curriculum. Though not a student's parent, the pastor's concerns required that Stephanie attend multiple meetings, and she ultimately had to threaten her administration with legal intervention through her membership in a state-level educators' association. The proposed course of action had the intended effect: the school administration ultimately thanked the pastor for his concern while supporting Stephanie's curricular decisions. This experience is intended to remind those teachers working in socially and politically conservative contexts that there are numerous resources available through state-level organizations, national-level organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) LGBT Strand and Gay/Straight Educators' Alliance (GSEA), and online communities. Stephanie often had to find advice and support from Internet allies, as there were none available at the school level.

Additionally, as the most recent GLSEN research shows (2012c), sociocultural context matters very much both in terms of what students experience and what teachers may accomplish. When teachers who adopt the QLF work in contexts where administrators actively subscribe to rigid gender roles and colleagues use language and curriculum that reinforce gender stereotypes, they do important work, but often in professional and social isolation or even hostility. However, educators should be aware of school-, state-, and federal-level hate crime and bullying laws, as well as Title IX protections, that permit educators to support non-gender-conforming students without fear of reprisal (e.g., Meyer 2009).

However, to focus solely on the risks of doing this sort of work is to potentially leave teachers hesitant to act, and for students such as Aryah, left to feel unsupported and alone. We have both grown and learned too much to allow fear to trump justice, and we choose instead to focus on what can and should be done—now, tomorrow, and beyond. The first principle of the QLF asks that teachers adjust their thinking and "never presume that students have a gender" (Miller 2015, Fig. 1). Given the sociocultural contexts and realities of teaching in the rural South or other equally problematic settings, it may be impossible for teachers to ask students directly about pronoun usage, for example. However, we would recommend that teachers actively reflect on what it means to live in a society that assigns gender to everything—even pens and phone cases—when not all people accept the gender that they are assigned and not all people self-assign a gender at all, and then encourage their students to

do the same. For example, teachers might use a short story in which the author does not assign gender to a character and ask students to consider why they tend to ascribe a gender to the character anyway. One story that Stephanie has used with great success is "The Fabulous Story of X," a fictional story about an agender child who grows up to be the happiest and most well-adjusted student in the school. Discussion might then shift to the implications of assigning and assuming gender, with the teacher or students examining personal experiences when others have made gender-based assumptions about them, based on their clothing, their voice, their mannerisms, or other characteristics. Such a conversation would permit opportunities to examine gender as both a performance and a social construction. Because these conversations begin with a curriculum-relevant short story—which the teacher selects because of the likelihood of it permitting conversations about (a)gender expression and identity—and shifts to students' personal experiences, there is minimal risk to the teacher. Teachers tend to know which texts are low-risk in their particular contexts, and the lesson becomes an academically defensible one about making gender-based assumptions without textual support, which can easily shift to personal experiences that help the students connect directly with the text.

Additionally, the third QLF principle is a means of both navigating limiting school contexts and actively serving as an ally to trans* students. The principle states that an educator "recognizes that masculinity and femininity constructs are assigned to gender norms and are situationally performed" (Miller 2015, Fig. 1). One recommendation for teachers who wish to help students appreciate the social constructions and performativity of "male" and "female," which most people take for granted as "normal," is to have students list out behaviors, clothing, and other characteristics that they deem to be specifically masculine or feminine. Over the course of the semester or year, students could return to this list and, through the lenses of various assigned texts, consider the ways that particular authors reinforce or challenge these gender norms. Importantly, the teacher could use the discussions as opportunities to examine gender performance fluidity, particularly in novels, plays, or longer works during which students have extended opportunities to chart how various characters' gender performances shift. A traditional and "safe" author at the secondary level, William Shakespeare provides ample opportunities to examine issues of gender performance and fluidity. The Shakespearean standard of men-dressed-as-women and men-dressed-as-women-performing-as-men, in plays such as *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*, provide important

opportunities for students to consider multiple ways of performing gender, both within the context of the play and in their own lives. And neither the author nor the texts create significant risk for classroom teachers in most school contexts.

A final recommendation comes in relation to helping trans* students feel safe and healthy. Miller (2015) wrote, "[O]ur personhood depends on recognition, which is connected to social norms. Yes, some of these conditions make life unlivable" (p. 38). Both Aryah in this chapter and Miller in the Introduction describe suicide attempts as part of their efforts to fully actualize themselves. When students are not given spaces in which they have autonomy over their identities, they live in a state where constant "social, institutional, or political violence" is visited on their persons (Miller 2015, p. 38). Though state and school policies may prevent direct conversations about trans* identity in some spaces in this region of the country, it is reasonable to ask that teachers permit students to have writing opportunities and safe spaces in which they might recognize and be recognized by others for their in situ self-determined (a)gender and (a) sexuality identities. Teachers who adopt the QLF can permit these writing spaces with no public risk at all.

Coming Home to Our Younger Selves

This chapter started with the two of us giggling over an intercom announcement about hunting season. Though we both very much felt the confines forced upon us as we moved through school, there were certainly times of happiness that we found with one another and our peers. The friendships that allowed Aryah to fashion and model dresses from hotel sheets during a field trip gave her small moments when she could feel at peace with herself, and helped her childhood friends to love her in such a way that they readily embrace and celebrate her trans* activism as an adult. Stephanie's access to a teacher ally both made her transition to being an out lesbian possible and facilitated her identity as an educator who readily adopted a queer pedagogy that examines issues such as gender construction, fluidity, and performance. However, there were a number of ways that we both might have been better served as children, and we hope that our experiences and reflection will empower other educators and administrators to act when the ones we had access to did not. Each of us had a key moment when, had we had the knowledge and bravery that we have now, we would have spoken up to challenge ourselves and the adults in our lives.

Aryah's Response

In reflecting on my elementary school principal declaring, "You are to cease playing with the girls on the playground. You are to play with the little boys, where you belong. That will be more fun for you anyway, won't it?" I recognize that moment as one of the key turning points in my unhappy efforts to constantly maintain a convincing public performance as a male student. If there were a time machine that would allow me to go back and advocate for my younger self, I would demand of the principal, "Why do you want the playground divided so completely into a 'boys' section and girls' section anyway? Wouldn't it be better if you helped all of us to play and learn together? Wouldn't the boys benefit from the challenges of the girls' jump rope games, and wouldn't the girls enjoy the strategies required in some of the boys' sports? And, if the answer to all of those questions is an irresponsible and unbelievable 'No,' then help me to understand what the harm is in an eight-year-old choosing what games to play and which peers to befriend? What is the purpose of recess for elementary children, if not to exercise and to learn to form social relationships? I'm getting both opportunities no matter where I am on the playground, am I not?"

As I consider the QLF, and especially the two principles that we focus on in this chapter, I realize that the biggest challenge that I faced was that everyone around me "presume[d] that students have a gender" and that that gender correlated with the sex assigned at birth (Miller 2015, Fig. 1, Principle 1). Had a single administrator, teacher, counselor, psychologist, family member, or friend recognized that I did not need to change sides on the playground, I did not need to change my dietary intake of sugar, I did not need to change me at all, then my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood would have been dramatically different, I believe. No single person should ever underestimate their potential impact on a life. I certainly had family, friends, and school personnel who loved me and whom I loved, but it was a long and arduous process to be able to articulate my authentic self. One person who understood gender beyond stereotypes would have made that journey a far less rocky path.

Stephanie's Response

As Aryah and I wrote this chapter, I had ample time to reflect on our shared experiences and my position as her friend. In looking back, I real-

ize that there were significant ways in which I might have supported her, except that I did not have the vocabulary or awareness to do so. I am cisgender and so I never had a reason to push against gender constructions until much later in life. I fit into the gender system that Aryah and I were navigating, and my gender privilege prevented me from seeing the ways I did not and could not support my friend. If I could borrow the time machine that Aryah imagined, I would say the following to her: "I do not understand what it means to live as a person who is gendered against her will in ways that force you to adopt mannerisms and dress that run counter to who you know yourself to be, but I will work to understand so that I might better support and love you." My only wish would have been to keep my friend healthy and happy, and neither she nor I had the words to make that possible.

The third principle of the QLF is key to my reflections on my experiences: "Recognizes that masculinity and femininity constructs are assigned to gender norms and are situationally performed" (Miller 2015, Fig. 1). To the teachers who gossiped about my friend and who made LGBT issues in the curriculum either invisible or negative, I would say, "I understand, having been a classroom teacher myself now, that one can never have all of the knowledge and freedom to do what best serves all students. However, it is necessary to recognize that gender norms and stereotypes hurt all people, not just trans* people. All people constantly perform gender, based on societal assumptions of what it means to be female or male. But no one performs the same way all of the time; we all adopt at least a degree of gender fluidity in our performances. Recognizing these performances and fluid movements in yourselves, in the students you teach, and in the literature you assign can help all students to examine limiting social structures that keep us tied to confining notions of gender." As someone who graduated in 1997, I recognize that much of the vocabulary and awareness that is possible now was not as readily available then, but like Aryah, I recognize teachers' importance in taking the information here in this book, especially in relation to the QLF to support the mental, emotional, social, and physical well-being of trans* students like Aryah.

Closing Thoughts

We both insist that gender is only as confining and powerful as our society allows it to be, and educators are key in helping students value themselves and others without gender being a prison, as it is for many. We would

also remind educators that trans* students of color are at increased risk of harassment and bullying, given the many intersections of race and gender (Diaz and Kosciw 2009). We acknowledge that teachers who work in extremely sociopolitically conservative regions risk livelihood and even safety in advocating for, recognizing—believe it or not—understanding, and supporting all trans* and gender creative students. However, as Miller (2015) suggests, "no one personhood is of any more or less value than any other" (p. 38), and teachers' words, actions, and lessons have the power to demonstrate to trans* and gender creative students that their identities are not only valuable but validated. There are risks in this work, but the resistance and resiliency make efforts both possible and imperative. This is important work that literally has the power to save lives. It is time to shift ways of thinking to provide different ways of being in our schools.

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