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"A SENSE OF SAFE CONNECTION": AN AFFECTIVE NARRATIVE EXPLORATION WITH QUEER TEENAGE WRITERS IN AN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores three adolescent writers' and one adult writing instructor's development of and visceral relationship to writer identity and LGBTQ+ identity through the development of an out-of-school time community of writers, Write It Out, on Zoom over the course of three months. Making critical use of affect theory (Dutro, 2019a & 2019b; Ahmed, 2002; Ehret, 2018), the study asks the following research questions: 1) How do LGBTQ+ teenagers' experiences and identities manifest in a queer virtual OST community of writers?; 2) How did these LGBTQ+ teenagers' affective experiences meet those of their instructor, a queer writer and educator, in this community of writers?; and 3) What does it mean for a teacher-researcher to capture these experiences affectively in writing?

Using narrative inquiry methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Kim, 2015) and practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Thomson & Gunter, 2011; Mockler, 2013) to engage with such data sources as audio and video class recordings, semi-structured interviews, student writing, field notes, memos, and planning artifacts, the study documents and explores the ways that the instructor and the students in the program understand writing and their experiences and practices as queer writers. Specifically, it engages with the ways the Write It Out community experiences generation gaps in their understandings and presentation of queer identities, how the group relates to queer histories both personal and public, and what it means to become a queer community of writers. In addition, it presents data in dialogue with poetry,

considering the affective dimensions of writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2003) when exploring writing education.

Keywords: affect theory, LGBTQ+, queer theory in education, communities of practice, communities of writers, narrative inquiry, writing as inquiry, poetry

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by

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Narrative Inquiry Lament
Telling new stories isn't quite enough,
because it's something that I've done before.
I fear my research isn't up to snuff.

The task I've taken on is just too tough.
Maybe I shouldn't do it anymore.
Telling new stories isn't quite enough,

and although every day I'm writing stuff
I'm not quite certain what I'm writing for.

I fear my research isn't up to snuff,

and my committee might just call my bluff,
say that my work required something more
—telling new stories isn't quite enough.

And look, I get that rough drafts should be rough,
but all this roughness leaves me pummeled, sore.
I fear my research isn't up to snuff.

The methods that I'm using all rebuff
a positivist frame, but I'm still sure
telling new stories isn't quite enough.
I fear my research isn't up to snuff.
-GCN, 2022

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CHAPTER 1

"It's Honestly Just So Complicated": Introduction

At the first Write It Out meeting of the spring session[1], a rare day when all the faces of the students are visible in their Zoom squares, Quinn reads the piece she's written in response to the quickwrite prompt, "What does it mean to connect?"

"This is called, 'Puzzle Problem,'" she tells us, her screen tilted up slightly so that we can see, above her head, the broad blue, purple, and pink stripes of the bisexual pride flag and the string of twinkling lights above it.

Puzzle Problem
I've been working on this crazy 1000-piece puzzle for like 15 years
but this box doesn't even have a picture of the finished product,
and sometimes when I come back the pieces that fit perfectly
suddenly repel each other.
At school, I met some friends who had the same puzzle problem,
and it turns out their puzzle pieces fill the spot that mine needed
and now we have this monumental puzzle that never ends.
Sometimes it gets smaller,
because some people can't help but break the puzzle just to see the world burn,
and then the pieces slowly fade out,
but are quickly replaced with new puzzle pieces
that fit way better,
and it's honestly just so complicated.
I never really liked puzzles.
It's too much thinking.
-Quinn, 2021[2]

Immediately, Vincent raises a hand. "I liked how you brought other people into it as well," Vincent says, electric-blue T-shirt contrasting with the bright orange doorframe in the background.

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[1] All names of students, colleagues, and groups are pseudonyms.
[2] Poems and other pieces of writing by Quinn, Kaia, Lys, and myself appear throughout this dissertation. All of them are dated, with occasional explanations relating to Write It Out assignments. Pieces by Quinn are labelled "Q"; those by Kaia labelled "K"; those by Lys labelled "L"; and those by me labelled "GCN."

> Vincent: [I]t's such an accurate description of how sometimes things get together, sometimes they grow apart, sometimes they fit once but they don't fit again. And it's like the—the chaos of life and like how things aren't always gonna fit the way you want them to.

Kaia's comment follows close behind; she's clearly on a computer rather than a phone and in an indoor space, both rare for her during our meetings. A large window glows white behind her, illuminating a large pile of objects to her left, and one of her arms is wrapped around her jean-clad knees as she holds the mic of her headphones to her mouth. "I liked how you—when you talked about people burning down, you know, burning part of your puzzle and then just the pieces disappearing. That. I liked that."

I wait for a moment before responding. I'm wearing a printed orange shirt with a woven strip of orange kente cloth wrapped as a headband around my forehead, dark, messy curls visible behind it.

> Gemma: I think it extends the metaphor really nicely, because at the beginning it's a thousand-piece puzzle and that's very structured and limited and concise even as, like, it's still incredibly difficult. But the idea that the puzzle stops being a thousand pieces when it's connected to others, and it genuinely becomes infinite—there's something else there and something that's very exciting.

I wait for a moment after I speak to see if any students want to respond or participate. Watching the recording, I see what I wasn't aware of at the moment, my intense awkwardness on Zoom—my facial expressions and the direction of my visual focus continues to shift, as if I'm self-conscious about putting on an open look or a look of anticipation. "All right," I finally say, "so let's talk business a little bit, and then let's write some more stuff." (Class recording, 4.17.21)

Like many teachers and students, I have paid a great deal of attention over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic to what is missing in virtual educational environments, from the lack of physical hold and connection to my own distractions

when I place myself in front of a screen rather than in the physical presence of students. But somehow even in this Zoom room there is a shared sense of trust, the inherent belief that each of us is working on a piece of writing that matters to us, and even in the face of my awkwardness, my students' digital squares still seem to vibrate with anticipation, with eagerness to connect to each other and to each other's work.

A writing community that knows that learning and knowledge are never fixed, but products of a world under ever-changing and multidirectional pressure (Stewart, 2017, p. 197), is a writing community that can attend both to the experiences of its students and to the fact that to write is to change experience. Writing is forceful; writing is painful; writing is joyful; writing is necessary; writing is dangerous. "[A]ffects have specific effects … different affects make us feel, write, think, and act in different ways." (Probyn, 2010, p. 74) The experience of writing is rooted deep in the moment and goes beyond the moment, often beyond any conventional definition. Writing education, so often neglected in the field of literacy education, needs to attend critically to the live wire of writing classrooms and out-of-school spaces (both in-person and virtual) where writing as skill, writing as practice, writing as desire, and writing as identity may all meet.

Ars Poetica – II
As knuckles and knees jabbing our sleep
As the way, the truth, and the light
As the ball of string and the Minotaur
As torches
As archaeological excavation, complete with picks and endless potsherds
As five sunrise minutes inhaling petrichor and dew
As sticking our feet in the sand for hours and watching the tide come in
As a train of three-year-olds clinging to a tow line, pointing at every pigeon
As the monster under our bed and at the end of this book
As haunt, as haint, as poltergeist
As bleeding ulcer, as antacid, as an ulcer in another organ
As every weather system passing through in a day
As intimacy

As car bomb
As fingers in the earth, the vastness of what we'll never touch
As lizard skin that stays on the lizard, not the boot
As mistaking Rover images from cell samples from the lung
As mistaking cell samples from the lung for Rover images
As places we'll never go and places we've always been
-GCN, 2022

Rationale for the Study

As a queer writer who considers each of those two words to name equally essential components of her identity, I'm drawn to the ways that young people who write and who know themselves to be queer understand the relationship between the two. Per Moje, Giroux, & Mouling (2017), adolescents are moving into a space where they consider their literacies to be "for life"—taking agency beyond "college and career readiness" and into "managing their personal lives; serving others in the community; making reasoned familial, social, and political decisions; or taking action to end injustices in the world." (Moje, Giroux, & Mouling, 2017, p. 5) In addition, adolescent writers "engage in an internal dialogue that leads them on a journey of self-reflection" (Fisher & Frey, 2004, p. 152)—a notion twice as salient when considering the ways that marginalized adolescents, in particular, might need that internal dialogue and self-reflection to learn to navigate a world often hostile to their identities and needs.

In my own adolescence, writing allowed me to feel I could (someday) manage my own personal life, serve others, make well-reasoned decisions, take action against injustice, and engage in a thorough and reasoned dialogue with myself. I was slowly cracking the profound mystery of my own queer identity, and was often able to give space to it in writing that I wasn't in my immediate interactions. Writing was, in many ways, the first way I knew that I was queer, and my first tool for exploring and understanding the meanings of that identity. My queerness is shaped by writing, and my

writing equally shaped by my queerness. As such, I knew that any academic study I engaged in with queer adolescent writers would have profound autoethnographic resonance (e.g. Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Holman Jones, 2005 & 2016; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). However, I also knew that I was likely to discover a different understanding of my role as an educator, using a lens of practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Thomson & Gunter, 2011; Mockler, 2013). Such is the case with this narrative study of my students' and my own teaching and learning in an out-of-school time (OST) program for LGBTQ+ adolescent writers, Write It Out.

I have long been a writing teacher in numerous adolescent writing spaces, most recently at the Center for Young Writers (CYW; all names are pseudonyms), an established weekly writing program in a small US Rust Belt city that has been offering workshops to middle and high school students for the past ten years. Between 2019 and 2021, I worked with the CYW's directors, Helene and Ross, to develop a writing program, Write It Out, focused on adolescents writing gender, sexuality, and identity. It piloted in the winter of 2021 and, like the CYW's other programming, runs seasonally. This dissertation explores the stories in Write It Out's Spring 2021 session. I see deep value in studying the shared practices and modes of engagement that develop in such a space—not simply looking at the "results" delivered by writing curricula but rather "fracturing simplified narratives of pure self-expression or improvement of test scores" (Cooper-Novack & Jones, 2022) and instead telling some of the stories in the spaces that such a fractured narrative reveals. I use an affective lens, driven primarily by the work of Christian Ehret (2018) and Elizabeth Dutro (2019a & 2019b) to attend to the immediate, the visceral, and the minor (Manning, 2016; Ehret, 2018) in the students' and my interactions, responses, and relationships. I lean towards felt focal moments (Hollett &

Ehret, 2015; Ehret et al., 2016) in telling stories using narrative inquiry methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Kim, 2015), stories that illuminate not only the individual experiences of queer writers, but the shared, affective experience of *writing* and *being queer writers* in a writing space constructed around our relationship to our marginalized identities, and the affects that pass among us as we become a community of writing practice.

Yagelski (2011) frames writing as a way of being. It's in this nebulous ontology that I find the intersection of writer identity, queer identity, and affect. A writer's identity does not only exist when they are writing. This is when it can be most easily identified and delineated, but my own experience as a writer proves Yagelski correct: I attempt to make stories, poems, hypotheses, research foci of what I encounter and wonder about and desire in the everyday world, when I am engaging with others and with the social systems around me even without a pen in my hand or a keyboard at my fingertips. Like affect per Ahmed (2004), writer-ness moves among people, amplified and exchanged: as a writer in a community of writers, I find new ideas, new connections, new ways of understanding, and the slippery notion of inspiration (Smith, 2017) that hits me upon hearing someone else's work before I can articulate or feel it. Nonetheless, I am a writer everywhere, not only in writing community. In addition, writing makes me an outsider to the everyday goings-on of the societies I live in. I am consistently insider-outsider, having access (particularly as a White cisgender woman raised with class privilege[3]) to myriad worlds and encounters but always a step away

[3] Ewing (2020) capitalizes White as well as Black in her writing when referring to people's racial identities because, she explains, "[Whiteness] is a specific social category that confers identifiable and measurable social benefits" and keeping it lowercase often contributes to its hegemony. In this dissertation, I will capitalize White as well as Black that I might not perpetuate Whiteness's "power to maintain its invisibility" (Ewing, 2020).

from them because what is most important to me is writing them. I see something similar in my own queer identity. Queer theory (e.g. Butler, 2005; Muñoz et al., 2009; Cvetkovich, 2003; Sedgwick & Frank, 2003) posits that heteronormativity as a power structure assumes the monogamous straightness of the world at large. Queerness in such a social context is not simply a matter of sexual desire or sexual behavior, but of knowing oneself and one's community and connections to run counter to this structure. Queer identity, then, may be affective in the same way that writing identity is affective: it's present when not engaging in the behavior that ostensibly defines it, it's shared and amplified and mobile in community, and it constitutes a way of being in the world. In addition, it moves—in the development of queer communities, in the reshaping of queer interactions and engagements through time, in divergent responses to homophobia. I experience queer intensities when in spaces and situations that could be named explicitly as queer and spaces and situations that could not; I experience writerly intensities when writing and when not writing. Affect is a commonality between queer and writer identity; isn't it possible, then, that the two identities are intertwined through affective means?

Catalog
There was a family of wolves obsessed
with buying each other gifts. I stapled it together, dedicated
it to my mom's best friend. I don't know when
I learned the word *obsession*. One night the tour bus
rolled along the Potomac and she could have been there
beside me, could have wanted to kiss me
by a river, alone. I had a notebook
in my backpack, squinted through streetlight
at my words. There was a snake who ate apples,
to the other snakes' chagrin. There was a newspaper
for mice, years later another one for cows. Once
she walked down the hill and I needed
the words for it, for someone else to imagine her
in a hundred years. Maybe I was too nostalgic, so I made
a girl so consumed by her memories she couldn't live. Maybe

I longed so sharply I transgressed, so I made something beyond
a friendship between girls I wished I was and girls
I feared I'd been. Rhapsodic ode to the girl who touched
my shoulder backstage, wrenched my stomach when
I watched her onstage. Plea for a friend I didn't have to
come back from the brink, for my father to climb
out of depths he lived in, for someone
to see me without calling me my name.
-GCN, 2022

At a time when LGBTQ+ youth, and particularly transgender youth, in the United States move through an atmosphere of overt threat as well as experiencing ongoing marginalization, this study opens the writing lives of three queer teenagers living adjacent to a small Rust Belt city during the second year of a global pandemic. How they understand themselves as writers, as queer people, and as a community; how they experience the movements of the worlds around them (both virtual and analog); and the responsibilities and vulnerabilities of their queer writing instructor in dialogue with them are all resonant fragments of queer experience in this place and time. While queer teaching and learning are specifically under threat in American schools (CBC Radio, 2022), there's a unique power in turning to the affective dimensions of an out-of-school time space, one where queer youth might have greater power and agency, and a stronger sense of ownership (Blackburn & Schey, 2018; Johnson, 2017). This study aims to support and amplify the voices of queer students at a time when the society they live in often shouts over their voices.

Overview and Research Questions

This dissertation explores three adolescent writers' and one adult writing instructor's development of and visceral relationship to (Dutro, 2019a) writer identity and LGBTQ+ identity through the development of a community of writers (Belanoff & Elbow, 1989; Wenger, 1998; Johnson & Eubanks, 2015) in Write It Out under the

umbrella of the Center for Young Writers (CYW), using Zoom. I, the author, am the writing instructor. The program has been advertised as "writing gender, sexuality, and identity"; we have written in response to a number of mentor texts, from poetry to fiction to journalistic articles to creative nonfiction to visual art. Analyzing the data through narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Kim, 2015), the study makes critical use of affect theory (Dutro, 2019a; Ahmed, 2002; Ehret, 2018) and practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Thomson & Gunter, 2011; Mockler, 2013) to document and explore the ways that I and the students in the program understand writing and our roles as writers. The field texts, or data—that is, the raw documentation—include audio and video recordings of our class, interviews with two participants (Kaia and Quinn), writing by the students and myself, field notes and memos, and curricular material. I explore the role of writing in identity, along with community development and understanding, in a changing and multidirectional world (Stewart, 2017).

Part of the manner in which I do so is to write my research in different modalities, including the poetry that appears throughout the dissertation, as it has already appeared in this chapter. Richardson (1997) demonstrates the complex need for poetry in "constructing an academic life"; as a longtime practicing creative writer, much of what I learn comes through writing as a method of inquiry, as a way of knowing (Richardson, 2003; Yagelski, 2011), and often I am able to express certain elements of the ineffable—and, as I have come to understand, the affective—best through poetry. I consider this one of several ways to "attend to the minor" (Ehret, 2018) in literacy education, and particularly writing education. I address his question "What would it mean for our understanding of literacy events, and literacy research, were we to take

seriously that they are both partially unconscious, felt activities with and around texts?" (2018, p. 563) in analyzing my data via theory, narrative, and poetry in a complex and sometimes messy dialogue. In addition, much of the way I connected to Kaia, Lys, and Quinn was through poetry—their own, my own, and that of other LGBTQ+ writers. Many of those poems appear in the stories of this dissertation as well; sometimes the clearest conversation to have with and about poetry is with and through poetry. While I would not go so far as to consider this dissertation a work of poetic inquiry (Faulkner, 2020), I have found that this "messing around" (Rolling, 2004) combination of poetry, theory, and storytelling also gives me room to approach each of these multiple ways of knowing with a critical lens, and thus able to attend to Dutro's (2019b) call for critical witness in the literacy classroom.

"[A]ffect's critical potential," says Dutro (2019a), "can only be realized if the systematic and systemic oppressions of social and institutional structures are always in view." (p. 90) As such, I consider it essential to keep those oppressions in view through multiple and complex lenses. For instance, the CYW has long been a majority-White space that does not cater explicitly to queer teenage writers and/or teenage writers of color (though it aims both explicitly and implicitly to be welcoming to students of all identities and backgrounds); Write It Out explicitly caters to queer teenage writers, or at least teenage writers interested in using writing to explore sexuality and gender, but in drawing from the same outreach pool as CYW overall, it has maintained many of CYW's other student demographics, particularly in relationship to race and class. In a group of White students led by a White teacher, a critical lens with affect theory is particularly crucial to engage with the sociocultural dimensions of writing education and writing practice (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008; Probyn, 2010; Leander & Boldt, 2013). I take on

Dutro's (2019a) call to "turn to a critical-affective practice of conceptualizing and actualizing process *as* the goal of striving toward justice in the day-to-day of classrooms" and OST spaces like the Center for Young Writers and Write It Out (p. 75). This narrative looks at the intensities of individual and community experiences, very much including my own, in the processes of writing, sharing writing, talking about writing, and naming the experiences of the writing process, attending to the aspects of each that writers find visible but difficult to articulate (Lammers & Marsh, 2018; Smith, 2017). It aims to answer the following research questions:

1) How do LGBTQ+ teenagers' experiences and identities manifest in a queer virtual OST community of writers?
2) How did these LGBTQ+ teenagers' affective experiences meet those of their instructor, a queer writer and educator, in this community of writers?
3) What does it mean for me, a teacher-researcher, to capture these experiences affectively in writing?

In this dissertation, I define *affective* as relating to *shared or collectively visceral intensities*; *community* as a space of joint activity, mutual support, and learning from each other in relationship; and *writing* as the creation and expression of thoughts and ideas in which words are the primary unit of composition. All of these constructs will be explored and explained further in Chapter 2.

I recognize the third research question in particular as unusual in spaces of education research in particular. Since I will never know in their entirety the affective experiences of my students, the portions that are intimately embodied and internal, even in a narrative inquiry I cannot ethically make a claim to know them. There were certainly shared affects and affective responses that were exchanged and, sometimes,

amplified (Ahmed, 2004) through the group. However, my aim is to convey the multifaceted affective experiences of *being* in the Zoom room that belonged to Write It Out during the spring and early summer of 2021, through written media, from the poetic to the story-based to the analytical, all within the space of a narrative inquiry. Too often, in my experience, we confine the study of affect—the studies of visceral potential and potency—to an entirely academic lexicon, to a writing style that can, in fact, be challenging to access affectively. In this dissertation, I am telling stories about us in the ways that I best know how to tell stories: through the relationships between different people, different moments, and different forms of writing and understanding.

Every waltz is a contradiction, precision
of every step interrupting
the chaos at our feet. we could be oozing
down narrow paths, everyone with something
to tell everyone else, but instead we
are regimented and graceful, regimented
and limited, regimented and like all regiments
over. first finger on cheekbone, face cupped in palm.
we don't know when we're together and when apart until
we've been through both.
-GCN, Write It Out response to Tchaikovsky, 5.29.2021

Description of Chapters

Chapter 2 reviews the literature that drives this dissertation—particularly, the bodies of literature relating to literacy education and affect theory; multiliteracies and new literacies; and queer theory. Chapter 3 contains an overview of my methods, with a focus on teacher research and affect in narrative inquiry. Chapter 4 explores the significance of the queer generation gaps between myself and the students, with particular attention to technologies, advocacies, and creating landmarks of significant historical events or traumas. Chapter 5 looks at the significance of queer histories, both

cultural and personal, for the student writers and myself. Chapter 6 explains the meaning and practice of becoming a queer community of writers. Chapter 7 offers a brief, summative discussion of my findings in the context of the literature and of education research. Chapter 8, the conclusion, elaborates on the significance of this work.

This dissertation portrays and explores the words and experiences of four White queer writers, one of whom is myself, three of whom were teenagers, meeting in community in a virtual space once a week over the course of a season, during the second stage of a global pandemic. We were of urban, suburban, and rural extraction; we had different desires and priorities as writers; we had different relationships to our queer identities; we found in that space something we connected to and needed. We knew each other from working together in the prior season; some of us would come to know each other more in the months after these stories. This is an attempt to capture the immediate and visceral experiences, as well as some possible meanings, of being part of that space as a teacher, a writer, a person desperate to create, maintain, be part of, retain creative community.

CHAPTER 2

"Twisting with Purpose to Be Found": Review of the Literature

staircases that lead to the sky and back
twisting with purpose to be found
in rallies of need and truth
running slippers of silk
to unthought endings
-K, written response to Tchaikovsky, 5.29.2021

This dissertation forms at the intersection of affect theory in literacy studies, new literacy studies, and queer theory in education. Blackburn & Clark (2011) link queer theory to new literacy studies as follows: "[B]oth queer theorists and new literacy studies scholars name and interrogate the fact that there are socially, culturally, and politically constructed 'hegemonic regimes of … power' … that marginalize some people and privilege others." (p. 224) Using a critical lens while engaging in affect theory-based research (Rice, 2008; Dutro, 2019a) allows affect theory to situate itself in this same framework, opening the potential for affective experiences and analyses to impact these regimes of power. "Affect's *critical potential*," says Dutro, "can only be realized if the systemic and systematic oppressions of social and institutional structures are always in view" (2019a, p. 90, emphasis mine). Writing, and the study of writing, open up avenues for making these structures visible, and for bringing into view the links between the self and the structural realities—of education, of injustice, of community. Writing itself is underresearched in literacy education (Gardner, 2018), its intersections with student identity and agency in a sociopolitical context all the more so, and its relationships with affect and affect theory in their research nascence. I hope to offer context to all of them. I use this literature review to define and expand on the key concepts fundamental to my

research questions—*affect* and *affective experiences*; *writing* and *communities of writers* in the context of *communities of practice*; *queer* and *LGBTQ+* in educational spaces and in the present moment. I will explain how affect theory intersects with the field of literacy education; how writer identity and communities of writers can be viewed through new literacy and affective lenses; and how the scholarship on individual and shared experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescent writers, both affective and otherwise, can meet the new body of critical affect theory in literacy education.

Affect Theory in Writing and Literacies

The concept of *affect* has historically been defined in different ways in education and in other fields in the social sciences. When the term first began to appear in educational analysis and in many of the subsequent years—up to and including, in part, the present day—*affect* has been used as a synonym for *feelings*. McLeod (1987), for instance, searches for an organizing theory for the emotional aspects of the writing process—be they writing anxiety, emotional engagement, or motivation—and advocates for metacognition, claiming that if students understand the "affective domain" of their own writing processes, they will be able to increase their agency via better self-management. In a later article (1991), she alters her framework slightly to distinguish *affect* from *emotion*:

> I suggest that we use "affect" as a generic term to describe such phenomena as emotions, attitudes, beliefs, moods, and conation ([Simon] 335). With such a definition, affect is not a synonym for emotion; an emotion is an affective state, but not all affective states are emotions. (McLeod, 1991, p. 97)

For McLeod, the dichotomy of the affective and the cognitive is not the dichotomy of the irrational and the rational, since "[a]n affective state … can be a very rational … response

to a situation" (p. 97). She distinguishes *feelings* from *emotions*, calling feelings "bodily sensations that are part of the affective experience" (p. 98)—almost, but not quite, an inverse of the definition used by later affect theory scholars. McLeod aims to map affect and cognition on to a grid of "intensity and stability" in order to understand the ways that students engage in the writing process. She seeks clean definitions to help writing instructors to work towards a better process orientation (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Brand (1987) also argues for the inclusion of affect in our understanding of cognition, but for her, again, the word is synonymous with emotion: "in major psychosocial and human development theories, like those of Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget, affect is repeatedly implicated. I am referring to the emotions of apathy, anxiety, disequilibrium, alienation, despair, and commitment." (p. 438)

Elsewhere in literacy education, *affect* has been used interchangeably with *emotion* to argue for the importance of considering said emotion, whether in teaching library research (Schroeder & Cahoy, 2010); intrinsic reading motivation in a social-constructivist framework (Oldfeather & Dahl, 1994); holistic measurements of motivation and engagement in reading (Bottomley et al., 1998), or school-based writing (Smagorinsky & Daigle, 2012). "The affective domain" (e.g. Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993) is used to mean "the domain of emotions," meant to imply that teachers should consider emotional factors in addition to, on top of, or as motivators of the cognitive. In their chapter centering affective lenses on literacy, Tracey & Morrow (2017) use *affect* and *emotion* interchangeably, answering the section-header question "What Are Emotions, Feelings, and Affects?" without alerting readers to any potential distinctions between the words: "…the emotions drive feelings such as intellectual curiosity and compassion in the neo-cortex. Here, the deep inter-relationship between the affective system and

cognition is emphasized." (Tracey & Morrow, 2017, p. 139) Much of their work on affective lenses is focused on the work of educational neuroscientist Immordino-Yang (2011; 2011a; 2016; 2016a; & Damasio, 2007), who researches the domain of "affective neuroscience" as essential to cognitive development. Her research demonstrates

> the intriguing possibility that emotional processes are required for the skills and knowledge acquired in school to transfer to novel situation and to real life. … [I]t may be via an emotional route that the social influences of culture come to shape learning, thought, and behavior." (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007, p. 5)

In Immordino-Yang's research, the cognitive is dependent on the affective—although her definition of affective deviates from that in the social sciences, this connection is, in fact, essential when reconsidering the futures of writing education.

Over the last twenty years, *affect* has developed a notably different definition elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences, to which a substantive and diffuse body of literature is linked. Silvan Tomkins (1984) first brought the term to psychology, but it has since expanded across many fields of study. Two scholars who have set parameters for the field of affect theory are Brian Massumi (2002) and Sara Ahmed (2004; 2013). In *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi (2002) describes *affect* as frequently synonymous with *intensity* (an interesting link to McLeod's [1991] definition above): bodily, autonomic, noncognitive and preverbal, something like passion (Massumi, 2002, p. 28). Interestingly, though Ahmed also uses emotion as nearly synonymous with affect, given that she calls her foundational book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2013), her definitions of emotion in that book align with her definition of affect in her contemporaneous article "Affective Economies" (2004). She opens "Affective Economies" by asking "How do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against other others? How do emotions move between bodies?" (2004, p. 117), but

goes on to consider how "[h]ate … circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement. In such affective economies, emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments." (2004, p. 119) Thus Ahmed provides a bridge from frameworks like McLeod's to the development, over the next decade, of the body of *affect theory*. Seigworth & Gregg (2010), in the introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, define affect as

> visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us … across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. Indeed, affect is persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms … (p. 1)

These affects as framed by Seigworth and Gregg do not simply remain within an individual human body or mind—Massumi claims, for example, that the influence of a politician such as Ronald Reagan on the body politic, a collective, was affective (2002, p. 40), and the very foundation of Ahmed's affective economies is the circulation of emotion and manipulation of the surplus generated by collective responses (2004). Combining these theorists, affect exists separately from cognition, though it might have an impact on cognition; it can have a visible, though not always measurable, impact on both individual experience and social experience. Niccolini (2016) explains that affect is "intensely relational, working as a connector or conduit between bodies, their histories, and their emergent possibilities." (p. 7) Affect is thus *collectively visceral*, intensities linked to different states, desires, and emotions shared, held, and moved within individuals and among members of a group or participants in an interaction.

The established definition of "affect" and "affective" in literacy research gives us a strong opening for understanding how the affect-theory definition of the term has come to play a role in literacy education in general, and writing education in particular. Probyn (2010) explores the affective in the individual writing process when she discusses "writing shame." She speaks specifically of the experience of the writer, examining the role that shame plays in the processes and products of a wide range of writers and researchers. Ahmed (2013) says:

> In shame, I feel myself to be bad, and hence to expel the badness, I have to expel myself from myself … In shame, the subject's movement back into itself is simultaneously a turning away from itself. In shame, the subject may have nowhere to turn. (p. 104)

Probyn addresses this notion specifically to writers and writing:

> The risk of writing is always that you will fail to interest or engage readers. Disappointment in yourself looms large when you can't quite get the words right or get the argument across. Simply put, it's the challenge of making the writing equal to the subject being written about. The gulf between the two may bring on a feeling of being a sham or, as I'll argue here, a deeper shame. … The crucial element that turns sham into shame is the level of interest and desire involved. … To care intensely about what you are writing places the body within the ambit of the shameful: sheer disappointment in the self amplifies to a painful level. (2010, pp. 72-73)

No reader can doubt writing has the power to change, and no writing instructor can doubt the potential impact, both positive and negative, of writing on writers. McLeod's work (1987; 1991) considers that the act of writing generates intense emotion in writers, from anxiety to disproportionate joy. I have been a practicing writer for most of my life: the possibilities of writing are expansive, explosive, and terrifying. I might *need* to write, with an intensity out of all proportion to the potential impact of the work I will ultimately produce; I might be driven to a kind of desperation by what I'm writing and my perceived inability to do it justice, such that a surplus of emotion (Ahmed, 2004)

that I generate in considering the work spills over into other domains of my life, impacting my teaching or my friendships. In reading what others have written, I might have a response so intense that the physical sensation is akin to a gut punch; I might be so passionately moved by narratives and ideas that they become integrated into my perception of my life's trajectory. Writing has, unquestionably, a power that extends beyond the individual body or experience of the writer or even the singular reader. According to Stewart (2018), "Words touch bodies and things, light on what might unfold, nudge a line of composition for good or bad. It's prolific, multimodal, a matter of timing or tone, consequential and laboring." (p. 188) A cognitive-process approach to writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981), while substantive and influential, cannot account completely for that, but nor, precisely, can a purely sociocultural approach consistently attend to the scope of the affective's impact on the individual writer, or the visceral importance of writing itself.

It is to these potent contradictions that Ehret (2018) turns in his call for literacy education, and writing education specifically, to attend to the affective, or the "minor" as opposed to the major (Manning, 2016). Ehret emphasizes that the indescribable is always a part of a writer's intimate connection to writing, the part on which neither the cognitive-process model (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1981) nor sociocultural and sociocritical models (e.g. Gutiérrez, 2008) is designed to focus. He analyzes the role that the unconscious has played in the composing processes of prominent novelists, and asks, "What would it mean for our understanding of literacy events, and literacy research, were we to take seriously that they are both partially unconscious, felt activities with and around texts?" (Ehret, 2018, p. 563) He goes on to directly challenge the conflation of affect and emotion in the body of literacy research:

> Emotion has been analyzed primarily as a mediator or a mediational means, turning feeling into a representation that can be analyzed outside of immediate, emotional experience. Feeling, emotions, and bodies become representations, mere resemblances of their living movements. Although these are the primary theoretic tools literacy researchers have developed thus far to describe events, they certainly are not all events are. You can feel it. (p. 565)

The affective exists at the contradictory hinge of two bodies of writing research, the cognitive-process and the sociocultural-epistemic; it exists between cognitive and critical sociocultural theories in literacy research. Individuals *feel*; collections of individual feelings *do*. This intersection of feeling, experiencing, needing, and doing—not necessarily in that order—is an affective analysis of writing. Ehret offers four non-representational tools for "feeling literacy through the event" among students, between students and teachers, and across students, instructors, and writing itself. These tools will be key in constructing narratives of Write It Out.

1) *Relational transformations*—"differences that make a difference" (p. 566). In a "major" analysis of classroom learning, such transformations wouldn't necessarily register; in attending to the minor, we are able to attune ourselves to and examine closely the shifts in the "ways that students and instructors engage, understand, and connect" (Cooper-Novack & Jones, 2022). How do we know when members of a class have become close, when one person's writing or description has started to influence another's? These aren't always of curricular significance in the major sense, but they are key to "feeling literacy through the event."
2) *Affective tonality*—how the interactions of two (or more) people involved in a moment generate a shared or collective affective experience. In an affinity-based group like Write It Out, for instance, we experience a shift in affective

tonality when the topic turns to straight people's perceptions of queer people as "predatory." All of the members of the group have been impacted by this perception, but to articulate it and to know it as shared constitutes a distinct change in our affective tonality.

3) *Event-time*—the significance of these affective moments and transformations changes our sense of time and timing. This is a dissertation focused on a cumulative sixteen-odd hours of interaction between and among students and instructor; however, affective experiences can expand, contract, or defy conventional ideas of linear time. Event-time looks not at "instructional hours," but the subjective and affective feelings of time.
4) *Desire*—in studying out-of-school spaces and student-motivated writing in particular, it is essential to center desire as a motivating factor. Research in writing pedagogy rarely accounts for the ways students write because they *want* to write, and experiencing and exploring that desire is essential to understanding students' affective connections to writing.

An affective analysis—Ehret's attention to the minor—also understands that "these singularities [are] the events of a sociocultural world." (Stewart, 2017, p. 193) Dutro (2019a) thrusts affective analysis deeper into this contrast and contradiction:

> As a theoretical term, a lens, affect is a wonder in its both/and: not at all meaning what it means in everyday usage and still very much evocative of that everyday meaning. Realizing affect's critical potential … requires detangling affect from feeling, while acknowledging that part of the analytic power of affect is that affect and feeling are entwined. Indeed, affect … asks us to reckon with emotion and what that word means (too much) and can hold (not enough). (p. 74)

Affect is entwined with emotion, but is not emotion. Affect as used in this passage is not the same as affect as used in McLeod's work (1991); nor is it entirely divorced from it.

But Dutro also touches on something essential to the use of affect in literacy education: its *critical potential.*

The difference between the "affective domain" and the engagement with affect theory in a critical fashion is in large part housed in Ahmed's notion of affective economies (2004) and the cultural politics of emotion (2013), the acknowledgement of and engagement with the fact that the affective is not located purely within the individual body of "the marginalized student" or "the racist student," "the victimized trans learner" or even "the homophobic instructor." The potential impacts of marginalization are often in the minor, ephemeral in their practice but long-lasting, excessive, amplified, and exchanged in their duration in the shared classroom space *and* in the individual experience of writing. Frequently, the marginalized student's (or teacher's) experience of microaggressions is described as bodily—we freeze, our voices are arrested in our throats, the sensation of being *stopped* streaks across us, both psychological and physiological (Rankine, 2014; Williams et al., 2020). It is perhaps this need to convey the experience as collective that gives rise to composite counterstory in critical race theory, particularly LatCrit (e.g. Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Martinez, 2014). A research-based composite figure could be considered an attempt to capture the resonance of the experience of racism, that each racist act generates a surplus that is then amplified and traded upon, creating the depth of experience of being othered and the depth of threat that comes from othering by the dominant culture (Ahmed, 2004). The increased stress and hostility measured in America's schools in the Trump era (Rogers et al., 2017) were *collective* experiences, experiences that impact not just the individual student—although certainly also the individual student—but a school's, a racial group's, a population's experience of education. Even as of this writing two years

after Trump was in office, these collective experiences continue to resonate, amplified, emphasized, and distorted by the experience of living in a global pandemic. Here, too, returns Immordino-Yang's research on the relationship between the affective and the cognitive. She uses the conventional notion of the affective domain, sited in the individual student, to connect cognitive and affective:

> To learn, students empathically recognize the teacher's actions, thoughts, and goals, a process that reflects each student's own social and cognitive experiences. … Using their own experience as a platform, the students struggle to discern and reconstruct the teacher's oftentimes invisible mental actions in their own mind. This process is subjective, emotional, and grounded in each student's predispositions and personal history. (Immordino-Yang, 2011, p. 101)

This is, as her research demonstrates, true of every individual student, whatever their social location in relationship to teacher, school, structures of power. But integrating Ahmed's affective economies and Ehret's conception of the affective in literacy education takes it a step further. It accounts for the visceral experiences of attempting to maneuver in oppressive educational environments and, when taking into account Dutro's "pause to reframe, to unknow and re-know, to understand more by drenching in the impossibility of understanding" (Dutro, 2019a, p. 78), even the possibility of moving them towards the liberatory.

Dutro goes further in her book *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy* (2019b) to expand on the meeting of the individually visceral and the sociocultural and sociocritical with her concept of *bearing critical witness*, a construct that has proven central to telling the stories of Write It Out. Her notion of affective trauma is driven by the ongoing movement of trauma between the private, embodied individual experience, as it is so often defined, and the sociocultural forces and experiences that might perpetuate and amplify it, and what classroom spaces in particular can do to witness and alleviate

it. The practice that encompasses these is *critical witness*. Dutro offers three guiding tenets:

1) Testimony and witness are reciprocal—that is, commitment a pedagogy of critical witness mandates that the instructor take up practices of vulnerability, giving their own testimony alongside students', and inviting students to bear witness for them. In a space like Write It Out, where all of us share the experience of being queer in a heteronormative society, this reciprocal witness also takes on characteristics of engaging with memory.
2) Critical witness requires action and advocacy—the practice of critical witnessing means going beyond "hearing" a child's story to understanding the sociocultural forces that surrounded, precipitated, or compounded the trauma. That is, a critical witness is not simply acting on a student's individual expression of trauma in the moment but becoming an advocate for a just change in those conditions. I hope this dissertation can become part of serving that purpose.
3) Testimony and critical witness to trauma are woven into the fabric of school literacies—all notions of teaching content and curricular goals contain and are contained by the practices of critical witness. There is no classroom where "pure" content can be taught out of relationship with the individuals teaching and learning it, their experiences, and the social contexts that gave rise to and exacerbated those experiences. (2019b, pp. 22-37)

To Dutro's third tenet, I add out-of-school time literacies as well. No classroom space, no learning space, is a space of nominally pure content learning—practices of critical witness, when taken up, are woven into the teaching and learning experience in all its

glory, regardless of the particular tenets, rules, and structures, or lack thereof, in the learning space. This shared movement of emotional experience is profoundly affective: Dutro posits not only the significance of the traumatic experience itself for a particular child, but also the fact that in a learning space of critical witness, that experience cannot nor should not be isolated to the particular child. Responses to trauma circulate, and it is incumbent upon teachers and the dynamics of their classrooms to consciously take up that circulation, to inhabit its gravity and interweave with its potentials for transformation, even for joy. Ehret & Rowsell (2020) explore the notion of affect as the uncontrollable—they assert that attending to the affective "helps us to be less certain" (p. 201). A classroom determined by certainty is a classroom prioritizing and making itself about the teacher's control; a classroom attuned to the affective is attuned to the uncertainties of its students and its teacher. These shared uncertainties can be seen as a condition of critical witness—how we see what we don't know viscerally ourselves, how we come to connect to it. "Part of what should animate the affective moment," says Dutro, "is absorbing the stakes of those bigger structures in which it is inevitably enmeshed." (2019a, p. 76)

Garcia-Rojas (2017) challenges writers and researchers to understand the genesis of affect as linked to women of color feminism(s): looking at the work stemming from Deleuze & Guattari (1987), among others, as "White affect studies," she argues that much of what we consider affective has its roots in feminist work by WOC scholars, including Audre Lorde and her conception of the *erotic* (1984). hooks (1994) follows up on Lorde's ideas of the erotic specifically in education—teaching and learning, for hooks, are always practiced in both mind and body, and engaging with the bodily, the instinctive, the pre-emotional, the visceral, is imperative if teachers and students are to

"enter the classroom 'whole'" (hooks, 1994, p. 193). When Lorde and hooks speak of the erotic, they speak not only of the sexual, but also of the visceral, "a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that … can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know" (hooks, 1994, p. 195). Garcia-Rojas names this framework as one of the progenitors of affect, "contest[ing] a structure of White affects and social emotions instituted through White affect studies … serv[ing] as a disruptive to White affect studies" (2017, p. 267). (Further questions of Whiteness in my own affective analyses are discussed in Chapter 6.)

For purposes of this dissertation, I define the affective as the *shared or collectively visceral*. In asking how my own affective experiences and those of my teenage students meet, I am asking *what we* share that is not necessarily "major," but rather embodied, exchanged, felt. In asking what it means to capture these experiences affectively, I am asking what it means to write *to* and *within* these moments, rather than simply *about* them. Affect theory research in literacy education asks that educators genuinely nurture the visceral vulnerabilities of their students, and treat the experience of having vulnerabilities and passions (joy in writing, for instance, is an affective experience) as shared, building in the collective as well as the individual. To push this framework for understanding literacy and writing education forward, says Ehret, "*Let literacy inquiry grow through neither the major nor the minor, but through both and-, through an ecology of practice attuned to the ethics the event demands of us.*" (Ehret, 2018, p. 579, emphasis in original) He goes on to add that "desire moves through the life of literacy" (p. 579)—returning again to Immordino-Yang, which is to say that to learn, we have to *want* to learn, and that desire can't be overcome by another visceral need to

self-protect. How, though, do we understand—through affective lenses and otherwise—

what that self is that we are protecting?

Why keep secrets?
I'm not sure
I ever did,

not sure I
even know how.

Tell me and
I'll tell someone

far away who's
never met you,

maybe never will.
That's secret, maybe.

Sometimes it's about
you and you

never know. Sometimes
you die before

you find out, sometimes
you never would

have learned even
if you were

still somewhere, bound
to body. Does

that matter? Are
secrets only locked?

And when my
hand brushes your

cheek and I
know you won't

remember? I doubt
I'll tell anyone

else. It's too
hard to describe,

skin blurred

the second that

we meet it.
-GCN, Write It Out quickwrite response, 2021

Writing and Writer Identity in Communities of Writers

Many scholars, launching from the work of the New London Group in creating the theory of multiliteracies (1996), look at multimodal composition as a site for the development of writer identity and agency. Black (2009), for instance, sees fanfiction writing among her participants as inherently an exercise of imagination and agency (p. 421), themselves focused "habits of mind that embody learning more generally" per Wakeford (2004, p. 83). Further work on online composition, such as Botzakis & DeHart's (2016) examination of an adolescent webcomics writer, Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz's (2012) research with urban youth and their experiences of digital literacies, and Rogers & Winters' (2016) zine project with street youth, demonstrates the ways that the creation of the written artifact online in itself becomes a way of knowing, per Yagelski (2011). In Jocson's (2005) description of teenage performance poet Antonio, we see his work in Youth Speaks *becoming* who he is, how he perceives himself. He is a poet; poetry becomes the way he knows, the way he understands. A similar construct appears in Lammers & Marsh's (2018) case study of an adolescent writer: their focal student, Laura, "invents her identities through literate practices within and across contexts, illuminating vivid examples of how youth literacy and agency work together to produce identities that are both flexible and stable, fluid and enduring, over time and across spaces" (p. 92). In some cases, acts of multimodal composition specifically illuminate and strengthen aspects of queer youth identity in context (e.g. Wargo, 2017 & 2018). "Through selfies, artifactual literacies, and video, LGBTQ youth are creating new spaces

not only to express their thoughts and identities but also to be known differently." (Wargo, 2017, p. 575.)

Multiliteracies are of course not limited to digital literacies, though they are an important part of the framework; rather, multiliteracies portrays students as agentive designers (Smith, 2017), including in their choices of form and genre to support function. The eighth graders in Schultz, Buck, & Niesz's (2005) focal after-school program decided that creating a "fictional play" was the most compelling way for the group to address issues of in-school racism. The group began anchored in conversations about race and racism in their school spaces, and eventually concluded that the most effective *tool* for portraying their conversations to a public was through a play. Here they display sophisticated social literacies alongside other perhaps more "traditional" literacies, connecting their understanding of written genre with their understanding of their own community. Multiliteracies theory shows students as agentive; new literacies shows them as agentive within, albeit often pushing the boundaries of, complex, confining, and unjust power structures. Each of these is equally significant when portraying the roles of out-of-school time writing spaces in students' lives, particularly when considering those spaces as *communities of writers*.

The literature exploring communities of writers in educational spaces spans all ages and disciplines, from first grade (Dobson & Stephenson, 2017) to university (Chin, 2014), and all spaces, from virtual (Dean & Warren, 2012) to immediate and interpersonal (Blythe & Sweet, 2008). The term "community of writers" is linked to to Belanoff & Elbow's (1989) use of the term to title their book discussing the writing workshop and Zemelman & Daniels's (1988) use of the title for their book on the application of the process model particularly to students in secondary classrooms.

However, the concept long predates this work and has particular ties to marginalized communities who were barred from formal education—for example, Black literacy circles in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Black people had long been denied the right to read or equal education (Logan, 2008). Communities of writers are communities of change. Such histories are overlooked in much of the literature—Blythe & Sweet (2008), for example, call the notion of a writing community a "new model for the creative writing classroom," ignoring the many creative writing classrooms documented through history or oral tradition rather than academic educational research—but communities of writers are tied to histories of support and engagement in literacy and education, particularly outside of the dominant structures of societies. I look at them as connected to *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998; Johnson & Eubanks, 2015).

Examining *communities* of *writers* in educational spaces, particularly OST educational spaces, requires definitions of both terms. To Dean & Warren (2012), "community requires meaningful interaction and deepened understanding, two things that can occur as a result of writing and sharing" (p. 50); for Street (2005), a writing classroom becomes a community when students have greater agency and the teacher has emerged from behind the desk to become a fellow writer working in parallel—seeing themselves as members of a writing community shared with the teacher motivates students to write. To call a space a community of writers or artists means that the community is in some form based on a shared experience of creation or composition, sometimes on shared projects and sometimes on individual projects with shared or similar goals. This is true even when a community is situated in a virtual space—by choice, because a global pandemic mandates it, or some combination of the two. Per

Wenger (1998), the essential components of a community of practice, which we see at play in Write It Out, are as follows:

1) A shared *domain* of interest—in our case, writing as a discipline and a passion, and the relationship between writing and our queer identities.
2) A shared *community*, which Wenger (1998) says signifies joint activity, mutual support, and learning from each other through the relationships built around the domain within the shared space.
3) Shared *practice*, meaning action within the domain and the community is ongoing and dedicated to learning and improvement—in our case, a class in which students give ongoing feedback to each other and challenge themselves, and in which the instructor also very much considers herself a learner.

Dobson & Stephenson (2017) link communities of primary-school writers working on creative writing to writer identity, which they in turn link to movement towards justice. "[A] focus on identity in literacy is a means of teacher resistance." (p. 162) Teacher resistance cultivates an ethos of resistance among their students, and community in turn cultivates resilience. And indeed, to integrate the definitions of identity delineated in the previous section into this notion is to make even deeper connections between identity, resistance, and community.

Writing is perhaps the most difficult term to define in this dissertation. Often studies of writing allow it to go undefined even as they name its components; Brown (2020), for instance, tells us that writing is "[d]emonstrative of higher orders of comprehensive thought and meaning making," (p. 1) but takes for granted the essence of writing itself. Yagelski (2012) says that we need to challenge the narrow notion of "writing as procedure" in order to engage with its transformational potential, explaining

that "[t]he transformative power of writing lies in its capacity to shape ourselves as beings in the world, to foster a deeper awareness of ourselves in relation to the world around us" (p. 193). Hacker, Keener, & Kircher (2009) consider writing to be "applied metacognition" and note as I do that it's rare to find a clear definition of writing itself in the literature. This is particularly true as writing expands with the expansion of technology and modality. Clearly *writing* goes beyond words on paper, and even beyond "a process of textual production or a means of communication or even a means of communication that can support learning" (Yagelski, 2012, p. 190). Through the lens of some multiliteracies scholars and advocates of digital literacies—for instance, Haddix, Garcia, & Price-Dennis (2017)—all composition can comfortably go under the umbrella of "writing."

My own arts practice makes me hesitant to call all composition "writing," even as I very much understand and in many ways support the theory behind such a choice. To my mind, such a sweeping definition of writing can easily become a disservice to the multiple literacies required to create in distinct form. This is to say, through a multiliteracies lens, the fact that writing is but one potent form of composition, and that contemporary youth literacies in other forms and media deserve classroom and pedagogical support as ways of knowing, doesn't inherently mean that all potent forms of composition are writing. By my definition, for instance, digital storytelling (e.g. Saunders, 2014; Balaman, 2018; Özüdogru & Çakir, 2020), which involves storytelling through multimodal technological means, is a form of composition that includes writing and goes beyond writing, but is not writing in and of itself. By the same token, however, I cannot deny that digital composition is essential to the writing process of many contemporary students, particularly students based in the United States, and have no

desire to return to a mechanical or kinetic definition of writing. For purposes of this dissertation, I define writing as creation or expression of thoughts, stories, and ideas in which words are the primary/focal unit of composition. In asking how my teenage students' identities and experiences manifest in a queer community of writers, I am asking both what makes us function as a community and how writing links those identities and experiences to that functioning.

However, it is essential to consider this definition of writing, like any other, in a sociocultural context, and for this I turn to new literacy studies. New literacy studies (Gee, 1991; Street, 1985, 1996, 2003, 2013) looks at literacy as a social practice that contains literacy events, and acknowledges that multiple literacies are not simply forms of knowledge, but exist in relationship to each other in a context of power. The framing of writing in this dissertation accounts for the multiple and complex forces that impact youth writers even as the writers also impact those forces. Both Smith (2017) and Leander & Boldt (2013) challenge the New London Group's (1996) multiliteracies framework because, in the level of agency and strategy it potently assigns to the individual writer as designer, it may overlook the aspects of the writing process that are affective—not necessarily cognitive, strategic, or deliberate. Thus limiting analysis to multiliteracies can inadvertently lead to a dismissal of the systemic context and environment in which writing takes place. Aspects of writing are emergent, unfolding in the moment-to-moment (Leander & Boldt, 2013; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987); Burnett et al. (2014) build affective analysis into new literacies research when they say "we … need to recognize the significance of felt connections in our research into new literacies." (p. 101) Note that we are not talking simply about feelings, but felt *connections*—between writers, between writers and their own writing, between writers and the writings of

others, and even between texts through the lenses of their creators—texts in a multiliteracies sense, works composed by agentive creators.

Although I do not reach Smith's (2017) precise conclusions—that is, that it's imperative to decenter human participants in the writing process when using the lens of nonrepresentational theory—I ask with Smith how we can understand the parts of writing that are not agentive, not conscious, not deliberate, without discounting the choices and desires of the individual in the social context. Combining new literacies with an affective lens may allow us to do this.

Learning
Maybe this morning we're gnawing on the edges of wrecks, trying to fill
ourselves and prepare for construction
at the same time. I want to sand the landings
down for you, keep you from everything from
splinter to crash. I tell myself it started long before I even
met you and that anyway it's inevitable. I want to be
as expansive as the wreck itself. Instead I pick long-dead pine
from my teeth and try to teach you to, mark out edges
where you can begin. You don't ask me why I call it
a wreck and I swallow when I see a shape
I almost recognize, might if it were mine.
-GCN, 2022

Queer Theory, Writing Pedagogy and Identity, and Affect

Queer theory as a body challenges presumed normativities and binaries, though scholars like Cvetkovich (2003) warn that normative and antinormative run the risk of constituting a new binary, and that thus queer theory and social images of queerness, even while firmly rooted in their own histories, are ever-changing. Quinlivan & Town (1999) argue that queer theory has "at its core an activist approach to creating change" (p. 510). They thus see queer theory analysis in educational spaces as having at its core activist goals that would change both the structures of schooling and the experiences

within those structures. Applying queer theory lenses to qualitative studies of queer adolescents in and out of school, particularly relating to writing and literacies, requires working with the balance of identities and acknowledging uneasy dialogues between individual sense of identity and identity in context, as Vetter (2010) does when studying the Discourse that June, an African American lesbian high school student, uses to make sense of her reading and writing assignments in a heteronormative school context.

Blackburn & Schey (2017), in dialogue with Lovaas, Elia, & Yep (2006), explain the overlaps and distinctions between the fields of LGBT studies (frequently used in education) and queer theory, in that "[s]cholars in LGBT studies tend to understand sexuality and gender as stable," while scholars in queer theory challenge and destabilize all notions of fixed sexual and gender identities and experiences (p. 40). Although my lens is anchored more in queer theory, I acknowledge a fluidity between the two bodies of thought particularly in educational scholarship

Lammers & Marsh (2018) offer an overview of the history of views of identity in literacy research, following Lewis & del Valle (2009). The "first wave" links identity to cultural positionality, which leads to a more fixed understanding of identity. This view remains relevant in considering the writer identities of adolescents, particularly for students who are marginalized within social systems of power. However, it combines with the "second wave," which names identity as situated, as socially constructed. Researchers from Blackburn (2002) to Haddix (2011) propose writing—and particularly the sharing or performance of writing—as a way to support young people's marginalized identities and positionalities, demonstrating that becoming a powerful writer does not mean losing oneself to an education system formed by and for those who are members of the dominant culture. Kinloch's (2005) students underwent, in Kinloch's

interpretation, a significant change when they felt that they could write poetry and still be, fundamentally, themselves, expressing their perspectives, ideas, and values. They had previously viewed poetry as something formal, rhyming and scanning, and about subjects they felt little connection to; students like Kinloch's focal student Marquis altered fundamentally when they were able to bring themselves—their selves in the situated manner they understood them—to their writing. This was also true for the African American boys Haddix (2011) supported during her summer program, who were also able to assess their own growth and change using Star Wars and superhero metrics. Their Black cultural identities (perhaps falling under Lammers & Marsh's [2018] "first wave") had been situated (Lammers & Marsh's "second wave") in a particular, deficit-based manner by their schools; although aspects of their self-identification remained fixed, Haddix's programming helped them to re-situate.

Supporting identity is the pedagogical goal for a number of writing instructors and other practitioners, and undergirds such constructs as teaching writing "like you mean it" (Baines & Kunkel, 2010). Certainly, as such scholars as Delpit (2012) and Vetter (2010) assert, the affirmation of a student's identity, cultural background, and interests as valid and educationally relevant can have a tremendous impact on a student's performance. However, while neither Delpit nor Vetter limits the implication of their work to grades and test scores, nor do they precisely name the writing that students create as inherently a way of knowing—the work devoted to focus on identities does not inherently *embody* the "competencies and habits of mind" that Wakeford (2004) values when discussing arts education, a key framework for engaging with the teaching of creative writing both in and out of school.

Many studies of out-of-school time programming (e.g. Johnson, 2017; Newfield & D'Abdon, 2015) assert that schools need to create curricula that understand and value the worlds from which their students come and where they are. "Having their own semiotic practices validated, participating in activities that appeal to and are meaningful to them, they are more likely to take responsibility for their learning and to participate actively in it." (Newfield & D'Abdon, 2015, p. 529) Winn (2011) asserts with a number of other scholars that the idea of a writing instructor or writing program "giving students voice" is deeply misguided: students already have voices, and what they require are venues and pathways through which to share these voices and have them heard. This is true and potent, and the act of supporting the growth of these preexisting voices is essential to understanding the relationship between writing education and identity. Educators and scholars such as Gutzmer & Wilder (2012) refer to a student's growth in "the intentional use of literary devices to strengthen voice" in a poetry unit (p. 41); Emert's "transpoemations project" (2013) gives a great deal of attention to the voices of the refugee youth who participate in the OST summer program. Reyes (2006) does not clarify what he means when he says that a student poet performing her work in a slam "releases her soul" (p. 10). All of these seem to offer takes on identity that fit somewhere between Lammers & Marsh's (2018) first and second waves of identity, or connect the two, but also have the potential to go beyond them.

Lammers & Marsh (2018) continue to describe the "third wave" of research on identity and literacy, which involves "a more hybrid, metadiscursive, and spatial perspective" and a greater focus on mobility and connectivity (p. 91). It is in this sense that research on writer identity can become affective—again, using the lens of Ahmed's (2004) affective economies. This does not make either the first or second wave of

identities irrelevant; rather, it shows that movement, sensation, and space have an impact on the different ways that an identity might be held or understood over time, or account for evolutions within a society that amplifies some changes through affective encounters and exchanges.

For purposes of this dissertation, then, I will use *identity* to mean felt and held understanding of self in a hybrid, connected, mobile sense that includes, but is not limited to, both fixed and situated components. When I ask how my students' identities manifest in our community of writers, I am taking all of these elements into account. Writer identity's value is in its linking writing to students' sense of ownership of process and product, a sense of agency and self-efficacy (Jang et al., 2015), naming writing as a component of self and self-definition rather than simply an assignment, a task that must be completed for extrinsic reasons. However, continuing to understand writer identity as belonging to all of these waves—inherent, situated, and mobile—means understanding the literacy contexts to which these identities belong.

Writer identity among LGBTQ+ teens often challenges constructs of in-school writing. Johnson (2017), in her study of Black queer young people in an after-school poetry program, emphasizes the notion of *writing the self*.

> I use the phrase *writing the self* in order to describe the experience of writing and not the extent to which the content or form of writing conforms to convention or what is 'acceptable' in school spaces. Writing the self focuses on the writer writing. (Johnson, 2017, p. 14, emphasis in original)

Johnson cites Yagelski's (2011) notion of *writing as a way of being*—refusing, in analyzing the specific relevance of writing to Black queer youth, to limit her frame to the outcomes as manifested either in school-based writing practices or in results with an audience. This is an imperative component of studies like mine, focused on students'

work in an OST program not linked to or claiming to have any direct impact on academic "performance." Yagelski (2012), naming writing as praxis, says, "we simply don't teach writing in a way that gives students access to its transformative power; we don't allow them to experience writing as a way of making sense of themselves and the world around them." (p. 189) For precisely these reasons, Johnson eschews a focus on product to understand focal students, something that the strictures of American schooling makes almost impossible in a school context. I will follow this model: in this narrative inquiry, I study the "products" of student writing primarily in the context of the students' own articulations of their queer writer identities, rather than as a measure of some form of "results" of the program. However, through an affective lens, what Johnson calls "writing the self" is not limited to the self—or at least, the self is not the only author of the self. No literate self, no authored self, exists in isolation; instead, through an affective lens, that self is part of movement, one of many bodies in a writing space with the capacity to "affect and be affected" (Niccolini, 2016).

Blackburn's (2002) work with a youth-led LGBTQ organization she calls the Loft, along with her further work on queer students and literacies, is particularly salient to this project. The Loft, where in her early work Blackburn volunteers and conducts research, is explicitly and forcefully a youth-led space. Although Write It Out is not—as in other CYW classes, its top-down and teacher-driven structure is inherent to its curriculum and pedagogy—the program centers youth-propelled conversation and interactions, and Blackburn's insights into the structures that impact queer youth in OST spaces are salient to Write It Out. Blackburn says of her participant, Justine's, multifaceted literacy performances that "[a]s literacy educators, it is our responsibility to … be willing to create space or respect space that students create where they can read

and write for social change in ways that matter most to them" (2002, p. 323), a sentiment echoed in Haddix's (e.g. 2012, 2018) work with adolescent writers and in other spaces, like the CYW and specifically Write It Out within it, that don't articulate specific hierarchical or developmental writing "goals" or formal benchmarks. Blackburn's body of work on queer youth and literacies (e.g. 2007; 2010; & McCready 2009; & Clark 2011) emphasizes the multiple subject positions and multiple forms of agency that queer youth take in an intersectional context; her work was also some of the earliest in education literature to acknowledge gender as shifting and partially agentive (2010), significant in my work with contemporary adolescents, in particular Lys, one of the students in Write It Out.

Halverson's (2005, 2007, 2010) work with About Face Youth Theatre, a theater company serving LGBTQ youth, is also salient to understanding how queer young people can engage with writing in community. Halverson's body of work with About Face focuses primarily on the dramaturgical process, through which a young storyteller shares an experience, the ensemble members (ages 12-23) adapt this experience into a theater piece, and the full ensemble ultimately performs this adapted piece for a public. Halverson sees this process as key to the development of queer identity among the group's adolescent members:

> In telling stories, youth describe the specific circumstances of their lives and in the process highlight broader struggles of the LGBTQ youth community. In adapting stories, adaptors work to maintain the reportable events of the original storyteller while trying to convey a broader message to a future audience about the LGBTQ youth community. And in performing stories, youth have the opportunity to try on and empathize with others' experiences and to see their experiences rerepresented for public consumption. (Halverson, 2007, p. 158)

Although the process of developing individual writing in community and sharing it with said community diverges from Halverson's dramaturgical process, this "reportability

paradox in identity exploration" is tremendously significant to all studies of youth writer identities. I cannot assume a direct correspondence between young people's written work and their understanding of their own identities; to move into a genre, even a genre with fewer "steps" and less of a communal focus than theatrical ensemble adaptation, is to translate, and to move from what Labov (1997) calls "reportability" to what Halverson (2005; 2007) calls "credibility" in performance. That is, in being received by a public, the story may lose some of its immediate connection to autobiographical specifics, for better and/or for worse. While performance to a community outside of the program is only a small part of Write It Out's story, this question of context and credibility within the group returns to Dutro's critical witness (2019b). A class's witness to one's personal story refracts the story into social context, that which the witnesses—classmates, community members—have an obligation to see, engage with, advocate and act within. Critical witness per Dutro is, after all, reciprocal—the burden of vulnerability cannot be on only one. When the shared vulnerability is rooted in a shared identity, such as being a member of the queer community, your fellow students' and instructor's gloss on the text may find "credibility" in its concepts rather than its intimate details. Bringing critical witness together with writing and credibility may reveal the heart of Ahmed's idea of "giv[ing] flesh to feelings that cannot be felt by others." (2004, p. 39)

Finally, this dissertation will examine the intersections of queer theory and affect theory, and when and why the two come together. "I propose," says Niccolini (2016), "that affect is inherently queer in ways that point to key intersections of queer theory and education: through attachments, transmissions, and pedagogies." Indeed, I struggle to approach affect any other way. My own writer identity is often found in the hinge of the vertex of "queer" and "writer"; I find the relationship between affect and writing to

exist at this precise hinge. Cvetkovich (2003) finds the relationship between queer trauma (to her among many, trauma is inherent to queer experience) and affect in the possibility of transformation and a multifaceted view of struggle. “Affects that serve as an index of how social life is felt become the raw material for cultural formations that are unpredictable and varied.” (p. 48) For queer people, Cvetkovich claims, trauma includes a wide range of affects, allowing us to “appreciate the creative ways in which people respond to it.” (p. 48) If living queer in a heteronormative society is inherently traumatic, then this wide range of affects, and of connection to the affective, is fundamental to queer experience.

Muñoz and colleagues, in *Cruising Utopia* (2009), explain a “futurity” strongly related to Ehret’s (2018) notion of “event-time”—queerness is always in the future, outside the bounds set by a straight present or a heterosexual hegemony (Butler, 1990; Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Blackburn & Schey, 2017). Our very experience as queer people distorts the time and place we live in, since they are sites of heterosexual hegemony and therefore not built to acknowledge us. However, we know our own existence and perpetuate it, thus distorting linear social normativity. We are always insider-outsiders, here and not here, rarely named on our own terms. We can’t expect to fit into straight time—or straight place. For time or place to become a place where we can stop, rest, breathe means that it has somehow distorted from the norm, from the linearity of event-time or event-place. Seidel (2012), responding to playwright and director Moises Kaufman’s description of his formative artistic experiences (watching gay writer-performer Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy*), explains the paradox of event-time in terms of the exclusion and inclusion of queer students in school spaces:

> [T]he paradox of the creation of safe spaces in most schools is that what makes them safe may well be their subversive qualities, the ways in which their existence serves as a proof of the possibility of other ways of being. (p. 162)

This possibility both is and isn't reality—Muñoz's queer futurity. Where there is any kind of safety or anchor to be found, it is to be found on the margins, and in remaining attuned to the experiences and ecosystems of the margins—that is to say, to the minor rather than the major (Ehret, 2018). In examining the affective experiences of LGBTQ+ teenage writers, I am examining what it means to move through time in a manner that is not always linear, because linearity limits us to straightness. In living honestly as queer people, they and I are creating the event-time that is ours at the peripheries of a straight, linear sense of past, present, and future. The affective is queer *because* affect, like queerness, cannot be writ large, made central. But it's going on. I say with Ehret (2018): you can feel it.

CHAPTER 3

"Knowing Ourselves in Our Words": Methods

All I ever think in is writing. I'm not queer unless I'm a queer writer, not White unless I'm a White writer. I've seen what it means to so many people, people who love it and people who hate it. I care about people as writers. Sometimes I think I know myself in my words better than I do in my body or my surroundings. I've never written my way out, always my way in. When I write my way into something I can't get out of I have to solve it in an unwritten reality.
-GCN, first quickwrite response for Write It Out, 2.20.21

On the first day of the spring session, we're reviewing the syllabus, including a planned session on trans visibilities, when I see a hand up on the Zoom square of a student I have known since the winter as Vincent.

"Okay, this is completely random, but since we're talking about trans visibilities—this doesn't have to be a discussion, it has to do with my own personal life."

"Okay," I say.

"Um, I would prefer from now on … if I primarily went by they/them pronouns actually. … but he/him's fine, I'm okay with that, like, not gonna mess me up in any way …" They go on to give the name they want to go by in our group: Lys, like fleur-de-lis, the classical French royal symbol. This name is linked to their longtime identity as a history buff.

I repeat the name, watch as they change the name labelling their Zoom square. "Okay."

"So. Yeah." They give a double thumbs-up. "I didn't mean to interrupt you, just talking about that and I was like 'oh, I was gonna say that!' and I completely forgot."

"Nope! I am glad to know that!" I say. "So welcome, Lys, and we will be using that for you." (Class recording, 4.17.21)

While I hope this scene is also revealing of Lys's comfort and our classroom dynamics, it is an exemplar of the complexities that come with conducting research with queer youth at the present moment, particularly the processes of naming and renaming. Certainly, in my recent experience of spaces that self-define as queer, from student LGBTQ+ organizations at universities to queer-centered theater projects, there's always a sharing of pronouns and often transitions to adjust to, and anecdotally many writers have observed a rise in younger students identifying as nonbinary and/or requesting to use they/them pronouns in class (Wood, 2020). However, Lys's transition here comes to exemplify one of the thornier moments in my process of narrative inquiry, seen through the frameworks of practitioner research, affect theory, and communities of practice, in developing the narrative. Names are important to many; naming is essential to transitioning queer teenagers. While Lys's transition in names in our space is a part of my research, naming them within this dissertation is complex. Add to the complexity that the name "Lys" (a pseudonym) is a "stealth name"—that is, Lys wants it used among us, but when we later have a public performance, they say that they need to use their given name, Vincent (also a pseudonym) in public announcements, as they haven't shared their name change with family or with many friends. It's an ethical quagmire whether I am deadnaming them—that is, using the name assigned to an individual when they were born in a manner that goes (intentionally or unintentionally) against the current name, wish, and identity of the individual in question—by using the pseudonym of what they might come to consider (or might have come to consider since then) their name assigned at birth. However, since research pseudonyms preclude my revealing the true identity of either stealth name or given name/possible deadname—that is to say, I stand in no danger of outing the individual in question in their actual daily life—I've

chosen to represent both names through pseudonym while referring to Lys with the (type of) name and the pronouns they use to reflect their own identity.

I share the above story as an example for several reasons: first, it is a *felt focal moment* (Hollett & Ehret, 2015), something that immediately drew my attention both in the moment and in reviewing my transcripts and field notes as central to the meaning of our work in Write It Out and that thus becomes the basis for my analysis. Second, it exemplifies one of the complex dilemmas at the heart of writing with the stories and experiences of queer adolescents in the present day—the shifts in name and gender that take place particularly in spaces defined as queer, and how to portray them ethically as a researcher. Third, it shows my role as a participant in this work of practitioner research. As a narrative inquirer focused particularly on the elements of creative writing, I name scenes of data like this as *stories*, and will be using them throughout this dissertation, as I explain in the sections below.

This chapter delineates the research design of this study—including its setting and participants, myself among them—and the modalities of data analysis that I use throughout the work. I note, too, that as all of this text is written as a hybridized narrative inquiry, so is this chapter in and of itself. Seeing writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2003) means that every element of this dissertation is in and of itself part of the hybrid narrative. I retain the same writing approach even throughout the chapters that frame the more technical elements of the work.

Research Design

Practitioner Research

This study is designed as a work of affective narrative teacher/practitioner research. My primary identification as an educator is, and has always been, as an arts teacher or teaching artist, a population and modality of teaching that I feel is significantly overlooked in education research. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993), in describing the significance of teacher research, point out that too often what we consider "teaching knowledge" has its anchors more in the academy than in the everyday practice of teaching. As someone whose everyday teaching practice is and ever has been linked to OST spaces, I feel my positionality as a teacher-researcher gives me a compelling window to support and expand on the concept. Kincheloe (1991/2012) encourages teacher-researchers to move away from neat, Cartesian, Western dualities of teaching and research; this requires not assuming uniform backgrounds, experiences, and identities of teachers, and equally challenging what is considered teaching and teaching practice. Instead, the roles of teacher and researcher might be dialectic—"the ethics of research and the ethics of practice both hold the potential to shape and be shaped by each other" (Mockler, 2013, p. 146). Equally, Thomson & Gunter (2011) encourage us to trouble the outside/inside binary of teacher-researcher—that is, of considering either teacher or researcher a fixed identity. My identity, too, exists under the umbrella of Lammers & Marsh's (2018) three forms of identity—fixed, situated, and mobile—each of them adding to a different facet of both teacher and researcher. My identity as a White person in Write It Out and elsewhere, for instance, is fixed; my situated identity as an educator manifests differently in a space like Write It Out than it does among my undergraduates when I act as a teacher educator; my identity as a writer might be

considered mobile, manifesting as it does in dramatically different forms across contexts but nonetheless in its element conceptually consistent.

This teacher research was, of course, also mediated through and by its manifestation in a digital context. While some studies of digital media in teacher-student relationships focus on teachers' digital availability outside of classroom hours (e.g. Nowell, 2012), our views inherently shift when the "classroom" itself is a digital space, and all the more so when the digital space was not necessarily designed to encourage participation (Gleason & von Gillern, 2018). Savin-Baden & Tombs (2017) question the distinction of digital research even when elaborating on methodologies therefor: "going online is not a discrete experience; it is part of us and complements (and challenges, we suggest) other embodied ways of being." (p. 26) As Chapter 4 will show, the concept of "going online" is all but dead as a discrete experience for my student participants: their technological engagement is entirely integrated with their coming-out processes, their interests and passions, their queer identities, and the publication and engagement with their written work (Haddix, Garcia, & Price-Dennis, 2017). Savin-Baden & Tombs's assertion is perhaps even more true in a country and a moment that is the epicenter of a global pandemic, where almost all of our experiences are mediated through "going online." The authors enumerate many elements to consider in conducting digital education research, from what we name as data (or field texts, in the language of narrative inquiry) to the question of "digital tethering" (again, all the more relevant in the present moment); the fact remains that what we have considered "digital research methodologies" do not always align with research in spaces that by preference would not be digital. There is no doubt that the affective experiences I document would have been different by many standards in an in-person class meeting,

although, as a counterpoint, my participants were of a wide enough geographic distribution within our region that it's unlikely they all could have met in an in-person space on a weekly basis.

Data and Methodological Approach

During that first winter session of Write It Out, I explained the study during our fourth class meeting, and sent recruitment letters to my students and their families, which made clear that I wanted to explore the relationship between gender identity, sexual orientation, and writer identity. Two weeks later, I brought the subject up again; all four students—Quinn, Hart, Kaia, and Lys—expressed verbal interest in participating, and I sent consent and assent documents to them and to their families. These signed documents were returned to me by the beginning of the spring session.

The classes that are my focus met on Saturday afternoons on Zoom from early April to late June 2021, which constituted the spring session of Write It Out. The program had begun two months before, and all of the participants had been involved in some capacity in the winter session, though Lys had started coming to winter meetings later than the others and Hart, a voracious participant in the winter, left the spring sessions due to a family conflict. Quinn, Kaia, and Lys all attended our group regularly during the spring. My original intention was to build field texts from both the spring and the summer session, but since Quinn's summer job often kept her occupied on Saturdays, Lys stopped participating in the program, and a new student chose not to participate in the study, I've centered this dissertation exclusively on the rich field texts (Kim, 2015) from the spring.

I used the following forms of field texts:

1) *Audio and video recordings and transcripts:* With student consent, I recorded each of our classes using Zoom's recording mechanism, as well as the rehearsal for our public Pride reading in late June. I transcribed each of these meetings over the next several months.
2) *Field notes*. I was taking field notes by hand throughout our classes, and I typed them up in greater detail immediately following the class meetings. I endeavored to note my own affective states and moments of affective intensity in our Zoom room.
3) *Student writing and my own writing*. Students generally wrote two or three pieces in the course of a Write It Out meeting, and more often than not I did the assignments along with them. Most of this writing appears in the transcripts, but on many occasions, students chose not to read their work aloud during class and would share it with me separately.
4) *Memos*. I wrote frequent reflective memos throughout the spring and summer. In most cases, I began the memos with my research questions, particularly the first two. What was I seeing that illuminated my students' identities and experiences? What surprised me about the shared affective moments we experienced in the group? As time passed, I also focused on making connections across different class meetings—for instance, how was I understanding my students' identities and experiences differently, and how had our connection changed? I noted *felt focal moments* (Hollett & Ehret, 2015 & 2019)—that is, occurrences and conversations that took up greater event-time (Ehret, 2018) than linear time, those that both my conversations with the students and my own mind kept returning to.

5) *Interviews*. In early August of 2021, I conducted interviews with both Kaia and Quinn. (Lys, preparing for their senior year, stopped attending and communicating during the summer, a common occurrence in OST programs.) I audio-recorded both interviews, which took place outdoors at cafés in the girls' respective towns of residence, and transcribed them in the subsequent weeks.

In addition, to consider my dimensionality as a character in the narrative, I spent time reviewing my own journals from my adolescence as a not-yet-out queer writer, evaluating how the experiences I remembered and carried related to both the experiences my students shared with me and my own experience as a teacher of queer students.

Setting and Participants

Clandinin and Connelly (2006) note three "commonplaces" of narrative inquiry that define the "dimensions of an inquiry space" (p. 479): *temporality*, or the fact that "people, places, and events [are] … in process … always in transition" (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23); *sociality,* or the consistent push and pull between personal and social/contextual conditions, and the ongoing and ever-shifting relationships between participants and narrative inquirer; and *place*, or the physical locus or loci of the inquiry and "the impact of place on experience" (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23). I attempt below to set out these three commonplaces in describing the setting and participants for this particular inquiry.

Our *temporality* comes through the Center for Young Writers (CYW), of which Write It Out is a satellite program. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CYW, a weekly writing program for students in grades 6-12 within a local branch of a large national

nonprofit organization, has been meeting on Zoom since June 2020. Although of diverse and divergent backgrounds, overall the students in the CYW are predominantly White, and come to the program more from suburbs than from city schools. During the two-hour weekly meetings of CYW, students share an opening community conversation (casually talking about books, film, TV, or other media; introducing ourselves to new students, faculty members, or guests and articulating the "core values" of the space; sharing "good news" with the group) before moving into workshops broken down by genre (fiction, poetry, digital storytelling) or assigning an exercise to a mixed-genre group. A vast majority of students use paper and pen for writing, although several compose on their phones and a few others on laptops; the digital storytelling group also uses such media as phones, cameras, and audio recording equipment while creating digital products. Generally, CYW serves students between the ages of 11 and 18. For the last three years, I've both conducted pilot research at CYW and taught scriptwriting and digital storytelling there; as such, I'm familiar with and to many of the students and know the inner workings of the program well, including its transfer to Zoom, a novel and confusing *place* for all of us.

In September 2020, CYW piloted a satellite program that specifically supported young writers with disabilities, taught by writing teaching artists who are disabled themselves. Given the success of this program, CYW became interested in creating groups that specifically support young people of other marginalized identities, including those who are LGBTQ+. I collaborated with CYW's program coordinator, Helene (a White woman several decades my senior), in starting a new program, Write It Out, for teenage writers interested in exploring gender, sexuality, and identity through writing. We began recruitment late in 2020, and after giving two extra weeks at the beginning of

the winter session to increase enrollment, we started with four students in late February 2021. I had hoped for more students—generally, the CYW has had at least ten students at any given time, and often closer to thirty, and the program for young writers with disabilities has around ten students as well. Several factors might have been involved in the paucity of our final recruitment numbers. One was the sheer fact that we'd already been existing largely in virtual educational spaces for nearly a year; both students and families could reasonably have been reluctant to sign up for more sedentary, screen-based time when all of schooling had become sedentary and screen-based by necessity. Another is that our recruitment may have been limited; although Helene and I contacted several local LGBTQ+ organizations with youth outreach components and/or missions and sent flyers to legions of local schools, the constant barrage of outreach for new virtual programs might have taken a toll by that point, and the follow-up I had the capacity to conduct was limited. Third is that the national organization under which CYW operates is strict in its requirements of parental consent for youth programming and its content. That is to say, teenagers who wished to participate in this program were required, of necessity, to be out to at least one of their parents or guardians, as they needed to offer written adult consent for their participation in a program with an explicitly queer focus. Thus, the *sociality* of the program was focused primarily around the dynamics of three students and myself, but always existed in the context of the social conditions mentioned above, which inevitably impacted who was present in the Zoom room. I was fortunate in finding the joyous, thoughtful writers and conversationalists who became the center of this study: Kaia, Lys, and Quinn.

Kaia
you walk
private footfalls
open the ground beneath
you. when you've chosen us, you meet
us there
-GCN, 2022

Kaia is a White, cisgender, bisexual girl, sixteen years old at the time of these stories. She has been homeschooled all her life, often as a member of a homeschool collective. Her mother was born in the United States; her father is a refugee from Communist Eastern Europe. Kaia feels this experience has turned her father against all things considered "leftist" in the United States, including LGBTQ+ communities, and thus, while her mother knows about her sexual orientation, Kaia isn't out to him or to many people in her life. However, she does feel profoundly connected to her father's eastern European roots. Kaia has long been a practicing poet; she was a CYW student for several years, and it's through my outreach in that group that she chose to join Write It Out.

Lys
you boil
and leap, you smoke
and rustle. history
lives for you and you tear up the
present
-GCN, 2022

Lys is seventeen years old at the time of these stories, White, and in their junior year at the public high school in an inner-ring, majority-White suburb of the CYW's small city. They come from "a queer family," but consider themself to be the only queer person in their familial generation, particularly salient for them given that they are a triplet. One of the teachers at their school shared a Write It Out flyer, and they were drawn in enough to participate.

Quinn
you turn
our everything
into a threshold, hurl
yourself over the lintel, fall
to yes
-GCN, 2022

At the time of these stories, Quinn is an ebullient White fifteen-year-old girl, bisexual and cisgender. The child of divorced parents, she's the youngest in her family, devoted to her mother and sister and ambivalent about her father, all of whom live in a small university town about two hours north of the CYW's home city. She came out about six months before Write It Out began, and was open about her ongoing struggles with mental illness and disordered eating, often the first in our group to initiate profoundly personal conversations. Her beloved freshman-year English teacher and Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) advisor had shared a flyer for Write It Out.

Briefly, we also had a fourth participant, Hart, a nonbinary White sixteen-year-old from a rural area about an hour outside of the CYW's home city.

Hart
you want
to know the things
you know and let us know
they're there, find ways to recognize
yourself
-GCN, 2022

They had been a central part of the winter sessions, but ended up withdrawing after a couple of classes in the spring. They appear in a few of these stories, but are not central to the ongoing narrative.

Gemma
I reach
forward to meet
all of you where you are,
backward to find the ways I'd write
myself
-GCN, 2022

Given the autoethnographic elements of this study, and to note with greater detail the *sociality* of this work, I need to situate myself as a participant as well. I am a White, queer, cisgender woman, thirty-nine years old at the time of these stories, a longtime writer and arts educator. I was raised in a large city, but had been living in the small Rust Belt city central to my students' region, where I moved to begin my doctoral studies, for five years in 2021.

Significance of Researcher Positionality

I became acquainted with Helene, the CYW director, through my advisor Dr. Marcelle Haddix when I first began my doctoral studies. Knowing that I wanted to conduct research with adolescent writers in the long term, I asked Helene a year later if I could observe and create a pilot research project at CYW. (I'd also taught theater and playwriting for many years before moving to this city, and was missing adolescent arts communities.) I did conduct the pilot research, but more significantly, before long I found myself functioning as a substitute workshop leader at CYW, and became a full-fledged instructor the following summer. Since then, I've taught scriptwriting, fiction, and digital storytelling at the CYW, coordinating multiple collaborative projects, including onscreen monologue performances and a young authors podcast. I maintained my CYW teaching position while leading Write It Out in 2021.

My identity as a queer writer has long been well-known and fully present at CYW, since I (a cisgender woman whose presentation is unconventional, but clearly femme) made strategic reference to having had a female partner after a few months of spending time there, after a few students had alluded obliquely to being bi and I had heard

another instructor, Nadine, mention her husband multiple times. I continue to deliberately make these references as new students enter the program, many of whom are now openly identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community. The opening of a program meeting also includes a window in which students and staff share "good news," and I have shared my poetry publications, several of which were in LGBTQ-oriented journals.

CYW participants (students and faculty) rarely discuss our racial identities and positionalities explicitly in the space, and socioeconomic class positionalities even less so. Currently, all of the instructors are White (though this has not always been true within the last two years), as are a vast majority of the students. The program is structurally accessible to youth across class backgrounds—students from the city's school district (which is 53% White, and where the median household income in 2020 was $38,893 [Census.gov, 2021]) can and do attend for free, and students from suburban and/or homeschooling environments (in the town where Lys and Kaia live, for instance, the population is 91% White, and the median household income in 2020 was $57,969 [censusreporter.org, 2021]) pay a moderate fee substantially lower than many other local arts programs. However, my own Whiteness, middle-class background, and semi-academic diction are clearly part of the norm for the CYW space. This gives me a certain hegemonic "invisibility" among White middle- to upper-middle-class students, even as I deliberately make myself visibly queer in such spaces. The question of White hegemony became a notable factor in my work with Write It Out (see Chapter 6).

I also consider my own positionality as a writer central to this analysis. At least as much as I share the identity *queer* with my students, I share the identity *writer*. I've been writing, somewhere between "steadily" and "constantly," since I was a child, and

the focus of all my education work has been writing, be it playwriting with teenagers, coaching in the writing process with adults, poetry with sixth-graders, or mixed-age classes like the CYW and Write It Out. At least as much as I write this dissertation from the vantage point of a queer cis White woman, I write it from the vantage point of a writer who experiences all of those identities. My long history of and my close identification with writing figure significantly in this narrative.

Someday I'll Trust Gemma Cooper-Novack
I'll wake up without
seeing photographs of myself through
years and tin mirrors through
the men and the women and the people outside them …
someday I'll name my faith in the girl I was at seventeen the same way
I name my faith in myself now am I
as incredible as she was and if
so when did I see it?
did I reach for her
then the way I reach for
her now am I as ethical as she
was as open as pretentious as unsure as sure
as kissed … someday maybe I'll decide
it doesn't matter only work
and love and justice can you be justice
can you justice the way
you can work and love? someday I'll trust
the future to hold something
more than the past and present did
already
-GCN, Write It Out poem, 2.27.2021

Class Structure

A Write It Out class meeting generally begins with a "quickwrite"—a prompt question to which students have ten minutes to respond in any written form, as long as they don't stop writing for those ten minutes. Students may then choose to share their work from the quickwrite, and we discuss as a group our responses to each piece, as demonstrated in the responses to Quinn's poem in the Introduction to this dissertation. After that, we read a text or several by a queer author or authors related to the theme for

the day. In the spring sessions, I synthesized themes in response to Quinn, Lys, Kaia, and Hart's stated interests at the end of the winter sessions. Some themes from the spring syllabus include "Questioning and Demanding: Education in Queer Contexts" and "Considering and Reflecting: Queerness in History." I elicit student response and discussion to that thematic mentor text, and then offer a writing prompt linked to it. Students then read their work and respond to each other's. We go through that cycle of reading, discussing, writing, and sharing twice in a class meeting, with two distinct but thematically related mentor texts.

We were met with instability, as is often the case for a group with only three students in which the teacher is not allowed to meet with an individual student on her own. I had ten classes planned for the ten-week session, but a large number of them had to be cancelled when, for instance, Lys had to work at a local supermarket and Quinn had to attend tech rehearsal or prom. In some cases, I would move the readings and discussion I had planned to the next week; in other cases, I would simply skip the week I had planned and move to the next on the syllabus. Ultimately, this study focuses on six two-hour-long class meetings between April and June of 2021. Table 3.1 shows the content of the focal classes for this project: who was present on each date, the quickwrite questions, the mentor texts, and the resulting prompts. (The quickwrite questions and prompts were created by me, and the mentor texts selected by me, unless otherwise noted; however, a conversation with the students at the end of the winter session greatly influenced the subjects and texts I selected for the spring session.) Appendix 1 also shows a lesson plan for one of these days, giving a more structured sense of what we do in the group. (The public reading my students gave after the spring session appears only briefly in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, and is central to the concluding story in Chapter 8.)

Table 3.1: Summary of Focal Classes

Class Date	**Students Present**	**Quickwrite Question**	**Focal / Mentor Texts**	**Writing Prompts**
4.17.21	Hart, Kaia, Lys, Quinn	"What does it mean to connect?	"Where I'm From," by George Ella Lyon; "[O who is that young sinner]" by A.E. Housman	-Write your own "Where I'm From" poem -Write a response to a historical or recent public event with deep resonance for you
5.8.21	Kaia, Lys, Quinn	"How do we know what we want?"	"Ring of Keys" from *Fun Home*, by Jeanine Tesori & Lisa Kron; "Vertex" by Gemma Cooper-Novack	-Describe a moment of recognizing someone who represented a world you wanted to live in -Describe a moment where you balanced hiding yourself and telling the truth
5.15.21	Kaia, Lys, Quinn	"When was the first time you recognized your queerness in a school space?"	"Strategies for Supporting LGBTQ Students," by Larry Ferlazzo (with collaborators); "Covering LGBT Issues in the Classroom," by Beth Hawkins	-Write a narrative that explores the enactment or absence of something from these articles -Write an instruction manual for teachers about supporting LGBTQ+ students, maybe in humorous or poetic form -Write a counter- or deepening of the argument for one of these points or ideas
5.29.21	Kaia, Lys	"How do you understand queer history/queer histories? What do they mean to you?"	Fragment XII, by Sappho; three movements from *Swan Lake*, by Pytor Tchaikovsky; "Sorry, Russia, But Tchaikovsky Was Definitely Gay," by Arit Joh	-Write to a space you see left in the Sappho poem, a question it leaves unanswered or a thought it leaves unfinished -Quickwrite responses to the Tchaikovsky movements, and then try to merge two into a longer or more cohesive piece

6.12.21	Kaia, Lys, Quinn	"How were you taught to understand LGBTQ+ identities—not necessarily your own, but LGBTQ+ identities in general? How might that have been tied to the place or society in which you lived?"	*Glass Poetry*'s special issue "Pulsamos: LGBTQ Poets Respond to the Pulse Nightclub Shooting"—students & I select mentor pieces	Prompts generated by students and instructor from selected poems in the moment: "Describe your feelings in the world knowing how its assumptions are almost always in the mind of a straight person; what does that mean to you as a queer person? How do you cope with the world having incorrect assumptions?" "Write about a time that you felt anger in a response to the world's treatment of queer people" "Write about a situation that made you have a scene-by-scene visual feelings" "Write about doing ordinary things on an extraordinary day"
6.19.21	Kaia, Lys	Images from Pride.com's "8 Incredible Black LGBT Fine Artists You Need to Know"—"Pick one of the images [of artwork] that speaks to you and write an immediate response to it"	"Mourning the Loss of Indigenous Queer Identities," by Astrud Bowman	-Write about the relationship between where you are, your cultural background, and your identity, particularly LGBTQ+ identity. "Where you are" should include being white and in the US, though it may also include: suburban or rural, your ancestry and/or ethnic background, the histories you know and don't know …

Data Analysis

As I mention above, all of this data was collected between April and August of 2021. Throughout that time, I was rereading field notes and memoing, using open coding to note the felt focal moments, thematic links from class to class, and the questions that kept coming up in my memos and affective responses. Felt focal moments (Hollett & Ehret, 2015) are a key component of my modality of affective coding. Kim (2015) explains that narrative research is a subcategory of qualitative research, and that in using narrative inquiry techniques of analysis one is using a subcategory of the general tenets of qualitative inquiry, of which coding is primary. I would argue that coding in and of itself is an affective process—we're looking for resonant moments, themes and ideas that stand out, all linked to an intensity of response, in all patterns of coding—but leaving that notion aside, I was certainly using a process of affective coding that engaged both the affective and the analytical, collecting felt focal moments and then analyzing thematic relationships among them.

In particular, I looked for narrative connections through these felt focal moments. With regard to my first research question, "How do LGBTQ+ teenagers' experiences and identities manifest in a queer virtual OST community of writers?", I was analyzing the data to see what had changed in my perception of my students' experiences and identities over the course of the spring session and what had remained consistent; what connected the experiences that they shared during our class meetings; and how they named, referred to, and framed their own identities across Lammers & Marsh's (2018) categorizations of identity (fixed, situated, and mobile). With regard to my second research question, "How did these LGBTQ+ teenagers' affective experiences meet those of their instructor, a queer writer and educator, in this community of

writers?" I looked for changes and transformations in our own affective state, and how each felt focal moment might have impacted the next. What themes might unify these moments?

It was not until I had interviewed both Kaia and Quinn (and become confident I wouldn't be able to interview Lys) that I began to transcribe our class recordings and interviews, at which point I reread all of them alongside my field notes, memos, and preliminary codes of thematic relationships. Upon listing the felt focal moments that resonated across the duration of our program meetings and my conversations with the students, I returned to the repeated questions that had arisen from them, and found that I was able to categorize those questions and moments into three loose categories: those related to *queer generation gaps*, those related to *queer histories,* and those related to *writing and queer community*.

I approached the conversations between my students and me primarily using an *interpretation of faith* (Josselson, 2004; Kim, 2015)—that is, I took the stories my participants told of their experiences in class and interviews, and my own journal data, as being "stor[ies] that [are] true and meaningful to their sense of their subjective experience" (Kim, 2015, p. 193). However, there were occasions when I needed to counterbalance it with an "interpretation of suspicion" (Josselson, 2004; Kim, 2015)—that is, "decoding or demystifying the implicit meaning that might go unnoticed in the first approach" (Kim, 2015, p. 194). I use a narrative mode of analysis to find stories in this data, trying to find the affective tensions in the modality of the telling, key to moving towards the fulfillment of the critical potential of affect (Dutro, 2019a). Contradictions between my experiences and my students' are part of the story. The points at which my students disagree with themselves, or at which we all disagree with

our own larger commitments to justice, or where we act counter to our own impulses, interests, or agreements, are part of the story. Where I find friction or transformation, I find the affective; where I find new meanings linked to the affective I find story.

I should note, too, that this work is linked to an artistic process. That is to say, coding and analyzing themes in an affective narrative is less linear than coding in traditional qualitative research. In addition to seeking felt focal moments within my primary data, I found felt focal *connections*—looking through a narrative and poetic lens allowed me to see our experiences as interlinked stories in a way that a traditional codebook might preclude. When I asked what connected my students' experiences and our shared felt focal moments of affective intensity to each other, I might answer the question through a poem or through another memo in order to discover the thematic links and the stories I wanted to tell.

Narrative Inquiry through an Affective Lens

Affective methodologies (Knudsen & Stage, 2015) of analysis are still somewhat new to literacy research, being much more common in fields such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. However, Ehret (2018), Dutro (2019a), Rowsell (2020), and Leander (2019) all provide frameworks for conducting literacy research affectively and engaging with the affective turn, as does Smith (2017) through her focus on the uneasy but necessary dialogue of nonrepresentational theory and multiliteracies theory. One aspect of affective literacy research, per Ehret (2018) and Rowsell (2020), is to look at the event and not simply the literacy product: "the event is amodal; that is, nonrepresentational, beyond words, ephemeral, and experienced." (Rowsell, 2020). I lean into the contradiction of documenting in writing the experiences and intensities of

writers that exist both within and beyond words by expressing them as stories rather than conclusions. Knudsen & Stage say:

> [T]he development of methodologies for affect research should be regarded as an interesting zone of inventiveness, a zone raising reflections about what 'the empirical' produced tells us … and a zone allowing us to generate new types of empirical material and perhaps to collect material that has previously been perceived as banal or unsophisticated. (p. 3)

One example of this in my analysis of the data was the impact of screen presence and engagement. I remained consistently onscreen during Write It Out class meetings, but with a backdrop (usually an image of a beach in southern Ghana) covering the view of my office; Quinn had her face and background visible about half the time, allowing us access to her wood-panelled room lushly decorated with a bisexual pride flag and black-and-white photographs of female movie stars; Lys would occasionally reveal their room crowded with pictures nearly wall to wall and a Progress Pride flag covering the part of their ceiling that the computer angle revealed, but often turned off their camera when the noise of human or canine family members began to come through; Kaia was frequently connecting to our Zoom call from her phone in a car, and thus appeared as a face only intermittently, even when she was heavily involved in our dialogue. My students could always see my face, and video recordings revealed that my eyes frequently went down to the field notebook I balanced in my lap during our meetings or flickered across their faces on the screen or momentarily (and humiliatingly) to my phone often charging to the right of my computer; half the time I was in conversation with three black digital squares, rarely able to see my students' faces while they were writing. There's no doubt that these details, "banal" by some definitions, had an affective impact on our connections and on the dynamic of the class and definitions of the space. In creating narratives of our experiences, I frequently lean into these elements of

physical description, watching the ways that my students' movements and screen presences impacted each other (Quinn's vigorous nods encouraging Lys to continue on their historical rant; Kaia's cautious social separation from the other members of the group represented by her absence from the screen) and seeing for the first time in reviewing the data the way my frequent eye movement as I connected different onscreen elements could have detracted from my presence in the group.

Much of my affective methodology for data analysis hinges on two elements: first, the combination of Dutro's (2019b) critical witness framework and Ehret's (2018) guidelines for feeling literacy through the event, both of which are detailed in Chapter 2; and second, my own practice as a creative writer. My first two research questions are addressed affectively through Dutro's and Ehret's approaches. The dialogue between the movement of affects within our Zoom room, my own affective responses, and what the students expressed of theirs is all a manifestation of critical witness. To see all of these affective elements together now, particularly, requires that I draw upon it—did I meet the challenge of bearing critical witness for my students in their complex queer experiences, some of which I share? How can the portrayal of these stories, those of queer teenagers living at a distinctively but profoundly challenging time in American history, itself be a part of bearing critical witness? By examining our experiences in all their multidimensionality, I aim to work in that direction. Equally, in portraying the manifestation of my students' experiences and identities, I aim to feel our shared and differentiated experiences as queer writers through the events of our classes, to attend to the minor of what was occurring and shifting in our room.

Regarding my own practices as a creative writer, I drew upon Richardson's (1997 & 2003) and Richardson & St. Pierre's (2008) assertions that writing does not simply

constitute the technical action of "writing up" the data, but is in fact in and of itself a method of inquiry. I ask in my research questions what it means portray these experiences affectively, and argue that my relationship to narrative inquiry is affective—that in portraying these felt focal moments (Hollett & Ehret, 2015) and finding the thematic ways in which they meet, I am letting the affective guide me through the telling of our stories and the bearing of witness.

I have collaged my own thematically related poetry and short prose with the narrative text. Some of this work I wrote during the Write It Out class meetings, and I have marked it as such, as with the epigraph for this chapter; some were written later, in response to my experiences and field texts. I've quoted my earlier poetry in the stories of discussing it during Write It Out meetings as well. There were times when I felt I could respond most clearly to a felt focal moment via writing a poem to it; there were other times when I could illuminate an idea or event for myself via a poem I had previously written. Affective analysis meant that I needed to find and bring to the forefront these affective connections, allowing the readers to experience my own ambiguities and uncertainties (Ehret & Roswell, 2020). It has long been my contention that writing *about* affect does not always have an affective *impact*, and I consider it necessary to bring the two together in order to address my third research question: "What does it mean for a teacher-researcher to capture these experiences affectively in writing?"

To capture an experience affectively is, per Ehret and Rowsell (2020), to move towards its uncontrollability. In collaging poetry, I look towards the uncontrollability of interpretation, allowing the reader to have a visceral, immediate experience in the reading. Poetry helps me to oust myself as the ultimate arbiter of interpreting these stories. If engaging with affect is an attempt to break through the controllability of an

experience, to capture an experience affectively in writing is to shake the writer's authority by leaving the work open to visceral responses from the reader.

The messiness of the collaged responses (Weems, 2001) is narrative and affective. Creating a narrative of experience is at some level an act of translation, and my fear is that too often the affective is lost in that act. Kim (2015) draws on Phillips (1994) in positioning what I see as the search for affective connection as "flirtation," which is to say, a flirtation with the data

> is an attempt to analyze and interpret the research data to exploit the idea of surprise and curiosity, as we don't know what is going to evolve and emerge until we deal with the data; it creates a space for us where we can discover ways to reach and negotiate our research aims with data; it encourages us to make time to embrace less familiar possibilities; and it is a way of cultivating ideas for finding yet another story, "one we haven't necessarily bargained for" ([Phillips,] p. xxv). (Kim, 2015, p. 188)

Including poetry as part of that flirtation means that I am not the only person who could find yet another story in the data. It is central to my ethic as a storyteller not to position myself, the author, as the definitive interpreter of the texts I create. I offer here my interpretation of experiences through poetry, research, and story, assembled as one text in a manner that tests the disciplinary parameters and affective impact of that text; as a matter of ethical commitment, I flirt with other possibilities, in which my readers may find possibilities less familiar to me and still another story.

Affect does not reside simply in one body, mind, or experience; it's shared, moving between and among as well as within. In this, it aligns with narrative inquiry, as Woodfield (2016) explains: "Narrative inquirers cannot be separated from the phenomena they study, but instead come to participate in and help shape the landscapes of their inquiries." (p. 63). In this, I find narrative inquiry an essential methodology for bridging practitioner research in education—in which one is inherently part of the

phenomena they are studying, the classroom in action—and affect theory—the prospect of "feeling literacy through the event" (Ehret, 2018).

Before and above being anything else, even an educator, I am a storyteller. I feared—and still fear on occasion—entering research spaces for fear of being asked to renegotiate my commitment to stories and storytelling, for fear of simply being asked to write down what happened and what I learned and have that be the be-all and end-all of my research process. Thus my encounters with both narrative inquiry and affect theory, bodies of work that challenge those notions, have been tremendously formative in my research journey. Per Clandinin & Caine (2013), narrative inquiry is "both a view of the phenomena of people's experiences and a methodology for narratively inquiring into experience." (p. 166). Narrative inquiry is the appropriate methodology for writing about storytellers through a storyteller's lens. Kim (2015) sees narrative inquiry as

> an aesthetic inquiry whose purpose is to produce aesthetic experience as a mode of knowledge through captured meanings of the lived experiences of participants in their stories. Narrative inquiry as an aesthetic inquiry intends, in turn, to provide aesthetic experience for the reader. (p. 71)

To see this dissertation primarily as storytelling has kept me both connected to my multiple and complex identities as a writer and to providing an accessible experience for my participants, young people who have chosen to identify in part through and with their creations of story. It allows me to not simply analyze the affective intensities present in my field texts, but to choose a form that conveys them (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014) with the potency and potential they deserve.

In portraying the affective, Leander & Boldt (2013) note that "narrative structures can close off a reading of emergence in favor of creating cultural freeze frames." (p. 36) They advocate writing in a more present and immediate style, pushing beyond the

academically descriptive, to portray emergence and movement. In this, they align with the goals Kim (2015) expresses for the aesthetic in narrative inquiry. For the last several years I have considered the difference between my life as a creative writer and an academic writer to be aesthetic; I've discovered since, through considering the work of scholars in "alternative" forms like hip-hop scholar Carson (2017), that the distinction is both aesthetic and epistemological. Writing for me is a modality of discovery; as mentioned above, with Richards & St. Pierre (2008), I view writing as a method of inquiry, not simply a way to record said inquiry. I have positioned my field notes for affective analysis, noting and engaging immediate and visceral interactions and responses, including my own. I have consistently noted and documented my own affective states and experiences as a teacher-writer (Gannon & Davies, 2007)— since I am so close to this site, conducting "backyard research" (Kim 2015, p. 247), it has been essential to maintain and document awareness of my multiple roles and their consistent fluidity, including the thorny and challenging questions that come to any teacher working alone and any writer sharing in writing community.

Through narrative inquiry and affective methodologies, I have endeavored to make this dissertation not simply a study *of* affective experience, but rather a study *in* affective experience. I have noted as carefully and fully as I can my own affective states and responses in the classroom as well as those that seem to be shared among us, and conducted member checks with Quinn and Kaia (Lys did not respond to email inquiries) to ensure their comfort with their representation here. The stories I am telling in this dissertation endeavor to capture the affective experiences central to being part of Write It Out in the spring of 2021 and the impact of those experiences on all of our writer identities and queer identities. I am telling stories about us in the ways that I best know

how to tell stories: through the relationships between different people, different moments, and different forms of writing and understanding.

CHAPTER 4

"There's a Generation Gap, But I Definitely Feel That": LGBTQ+ Generation Gaps in a Queer Writing Community

Despite years of working to support queer students and teachers, I had never taught in an explicitly LGBTQ+ space by the time Helene and I spoke about founding Write It Out. Without ever articulating the prospect consciously, I assumed that I would feel a profound and easy connection to the students, that they would be eager and relaxed in the presence of a teacher who is like them in this salient and often-ignored way. While in some ways this was true—I felt astonishing relief and flattery when a student said in the fifth week, to general agreement, "That's why we stan Gemma"—I found that the differences between my students' experiences as queer, White, American high school students now and mine twenty-five years earlier floored me. In some cases, my students seemed to have access to both a language and a freedom relating to their identities and experiences that I would never have dreamed of imagining at sixteen or seventeen; I was astonished to see some arguments about queerness, including those I had made to myself as a teenager to convince myself I wasn't really queer, come back around, as when Hart explained their friend's supposedly-revelatory proposition that sexual orientation was not real or relevant in practice, and one was just attracted to a particular person (Class recording 4.17.21). These differences constituted an odd fluctuation of event-time (Ehret, 2018), where each moment of misunderstanding seemed to expand between my students and myself.

But, my theory of sexuality is evolving again. I'm starting to think I don't believe in homosexuality, bisexuality, or heterosexuality. Sexuality is, I think, an entity unto itself that has fairly little to do with gender. Of course I support gay and lesbian rights as in

prejudice is sick and obnoxious, but gay and straight and bi are so ambiguously defined. I mean, in at least northern mainstream culture it's fine if girls experiment with girls, but that doesn't make them gay or bi as long as they still find guys hot, and gay guys still make sexual comments about girls and some of them mean it, and if a supposedly bi person settles down with a partner of one sex of the other people say he or she is suddenly not bi anymore, and the reason none of that makes any sense is because we try to define too rigidly. Individual sexuality has to do with individual people's attractions to other individuals, and not the gender of anyone. Or so I think.
-GCN, journal entry, 8.28.1999, age 17

I had assumed that entering a practice of critical witness for my students (Dutro, 2019b) would be relatively simple—that is to say, that I would already understand my responsibilities and the necessary actions to take in advocacy. But even where I had shared opinions or ideas with my students when I was their age, and even when we shared opinions or ideas now, the depth of the chasm between us sometimes felt startling. My students noticed this as well; it became a frequent topic of casual reference or discussion. Through this shared understanding, new possibilities opened for relational transformation in the course of the program. This chapter explores the stories of those generation gaps and the affective ways in which they endure and interweave with the significance of our shared experiences. Primarily, I look at the ways that we split over our relationships to technologies; our distinct levels of comfort and ideas of responsibility in matters of advocating for ourselves and others; and how we engage in a practice I call *landmarking*, that is, how we create landmarks in our lives and experiences out of significant historical moments.

Technologies

As an OST writing program beginning in March of 2021, Write It Out has met exclusively via Zoom since its inception. The very technological foundation of our program meetings brings both losses and startling intimacies. I'm accustomed to

teaching in a room and being able to feel out the energies of my students—to leading by affect, in a certain sense. As per Ehret's (2018) notion of feeling literacy through the event, I often found myself feeling my classroom through the events, as many instructors do—responding to student energies and adjusting my plans accordingly. In my prior years teaching at CYW, I came to know my students as much from our casual conversations walking into and out of the building as from the actual class meetings. I could watch group dynamics forming by means of side whispers, in loose social dynamics, in play (Vasudevan, 2015), and use all of those in the planning and adjustment of my lessons. I don't have those contacts with intensity, those flexibilities, in Zoom classrooms, and after a year in this state I find myself patently frustrated as an educator, unable to draw on my most valued skills; I'm frustrated that "tech problems" constitute attendance problems, given the inequity of technological access in the United States and globally. However, I quickly discover the imperative of weighing my own biases and experiences against those of my students.

On the first day of the spring session, as we're discussing A.E. Housman's poem "O who is that young sinner," which Housman wrote about Oscar Wilde shortly after the latter's conviction and imprisonment for gross indecency (Beckson, 2003; Sturgis, 2021) and Lys has expounded on Wilde's legend, Hart begins to throw out other historical figures they say they know to be queer—Leonardo da Vinci, for instance. And, they add, "if we're mentioning queer historical figures we gotta mention [Abraham] Lincoln."

Annoyed, as I sometimes am by Hart's need to shoehorn their knowledge into the flow of a discussion (even as I'm charmed by their urge to hold queer advocacy memes on their phone up to our shared screen as a gesture of connection), I say that I'd love for them to bring material on Lincoln to read during "the history week." Hart responds, "I

don't think I have anything that we could read, but I just know that—I just happen to know facts because, you know, TikTok."

"If you wanted to share a TikTok with us during that week, we could totally make that happen, and write in response to it," I say. (Class recording, 4.17.21) But I'm not a TikTok teacher (Hartung et al., 2022), and I know I'm not using their idea skillfully, pushing the limits of my own analog imagination. Watching the recording of the class months later, I cannot but note that I'm dismissing Hart, pushing aside what they're desperate to offer.

Why? I don't know, I realize, how to take the histories they learn on the social media platform TikTok seriously. One day, Lys imagines scolding their out-of-touch teachers, who don't know the ways that queer students signal to each other—for example, they ask "Do you listen to Girl in Red?" or refer to other LGBTQ+ artists. They end this tirade by saying, "Keep up with TikTok, guys. I don't … know what else to say about that." (Class recording, 5.15.21) I feel profoundly implicated in their rant. Though I recognize that "what constitutes a digital tool is ever-growing and changing" (Haddix, Garcia, & Price-Dennis, 2017, p. 26) and that "the use of digital tools and new literacies can be a way for teachers to support students in their own identity constructions and in the telling of their own stories" (p. 28), TikTok remains to my luddite self a mysterious land, one in which I can't understand the sources of Hart's information or understanding.

Technologies are one of the greatest generation gaps between me and my Write It Out students. I consciously recognized my own desire for other girls by the end of eighth grade, but it felt private and shameful. It never occurred to me, even when I logged into America Online through the cumbersome, screechy dial-up at my father's house, to

reach out to other teenagers and discuss my attractions or my identity. The political debates in which I loved to participate as a teenager were abstract: while I felt passionately about the subject of LGBTQ rights, among many other nominally "left-wing" issues, I grew up in an ethos that valued debate as a goal in and of itself, and felt that the important thing was to win my side. I brushed over emotional experiences I couldn't "win" via debate, and didn't seek to find any virtual communities once the first group I was part of collapsed over common but still-disturbing lies (one member of the group learned that another had been pretending to have cancer). However, where I found the contradictions and intrigues of dishonesty, my students found new routes to truth.

Both the potential anonymity and the intimacy of virtual spaces were essential components of Quinn's coming-out process. Her interest in the musical *Be More Chill* (Tracz & Iconis, 2015) led her to online musical theater fandom communities, where she encountered for the first time people comfortable and fluent with their queer identities. "There was this big group chat and everybody was like introducing themselves with like their pronouns and everything 'cause that's the musical theater community," she explains. Although she introduced herself to the group as a "straight girl" who "love[d] everybody," the truth of her identity had already become clear to her, and, "a month in I was like 'why am I lying? Like, these people don't care.'" She soon acknowledged to her *Be More Chill* group chat that she was bisexual, and was received with precisely the kindness that she expected. This recognition of her identity was explosive for Quinn—she came out to her adored mother, her father, and her older sister within a month of this revelation.

Quinn's wider coming-out process, too, was mitigated by technology, though not so deliberately. We interview the day after "my one-year anniversary of coming out to like everybody," which holds tremendous significance for her in part because "I came out on accident."

> It was originally, it was an accident, to like my best friends in a group chat. I meant to text my online friends on my birthday, 'cause my mom got me a bunch of rainbow stuff because she knew, and so I texted what was supposed to be my online friends, "Oh my gosh, everyone's gonna know I'm gay, this is so embarrassing"—and then I texted my real-life friends. And they were like, "Nobody was surprised, [Quinn]." I was like, "Yeah, that's fair enough," and then like I came out like, even later… with like a TikTok, which is just so GenZ of me. (Interview, 8.5.2021)

Quinn's "online friends" were distinct from her "real-life friends" (although she describes with great detail and intensity a recent in-person visit from one of the friends she's known online for years, someone she met through the *Be More Chill* fandom), but her status as "out to everyone" soon became fluid among her friend groups. Although Quinn doesn't describe it in precisely this way, it seems she served as something of an inspiration: several other members of her local friend group came out in the months following Quinn's "mistake," and many of her friends are now openly and happily queer—four of her friends, in fact, came out at the same sleepover party after Quinn herself came out.

Although Kaia explains that she is out as bisexual only in the most limited fashion—"my mom knows, I think three of my friends know, that's it"—technology played an equally central role in her coming-out process. While she knows that she first encountered queer women through her (straight) mother's friends in the belly-dancing community, her father, a refugee from the country now known as Czechia during the height of the Cold War, "is not accepting of the queer community—from his upbringing

he has to fight against all that stuff, past trauma stuff, um, and he and his friends are incredibly vulgar about that stuff." However, Kaia was aware of her own desires: "I think for years I had been going back and forth between, you know, 'I know something's going on, but I know I like men so what's going on here?'" It took her, she says, "forever to find bisexual, and that didn't feel right at the time." (Interview, 8.5.2021)

"How did you find it?" I ask. We're bent over a small outdoor café table in the suburban community where she and Lys both live, straining to hear each other over the noise of the street construction behind Kaia.

"YouTube." This wasn't an entirely solitary pursuit, or journey of self-discovery; one of those three friends of Kaia's, bisexual herself, made the suggestion when Kaia asked her the "most obvious question that I now know is such a—'How did you know you liked women?'" The friend guided Kaia into searching on YouTube, and Kaia learned here for the first time the term "bicurious," which, she says, suited her at the beginning of her viewing process. But "two hours later I was like, 'yeah, I'm bisexual.'" (Interview, 8.5.2021)

Of course, "older" forms of media—like movies and television—were central to both Kaia's and Quinn's processes of recognition and coming out, as they were for me and in my own generation. When I tell Quinn the pseudonym I'm likely to use for her, she responds cheerfully, "That's fine, I love *Glee*." (Interview, 8.5.2021) She immediately connects "Quinn" to the character Quinn Fabray on Ryan Murphy's long-running 2000s television show *Glee* (Murphy et al., 2009-2015), considered an ambivalent but significant landmark in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters on television (Dhaenens, 2012; Meyer & Wood, 2013). Quinn and her much-older brother first discussed her bisexuality through *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*: "I … joked about, like I don't

know who I'm in love with, Padmé or Anakin, 'cause we both like *Star Wars*, and then he was like, oh, Padmé's the way to go for sure, and I was like, okay, so he does know." (Interview, 8.5.2021; Lucas, 1999). Kaia says that she should have known she was bisexual long before her encounters with bisexual YouTube, because "there was no reason I should have watched *Pirates of the Caribbean* five times" except out of intense desire for the characters played by both Orlando Bloom and Keira Knightley (Interview, 8.5.2021; Verbinski, 2003). She frequently brings this point up during class as well, and seems relieved to hear that the pattern of obsessive attraction to fictional characters is common across the other queer teenagers in the space. The first attraction Quinn can remember, she tells me when we meet outside the bookstore/café belonging to the university in her "college town," is to "one of the Tinkerbell fairies" in a cartoon while all the girls around her had crushes on Peter Pan (a concept that in and of itself I find unspeakably surprising); when all her female friends were attracted to Ken in the Barbie cartoon movies, she wondered, "why not Raquel? And like not that I didn't like Ken, just that Raquel was just as good, so …" (Interview, 8.5.2021) Similarly, part of what made Quinn feel comfortable coming out to her mother was the presence on the reality show *Bachelor in Paradise* of a contestant named Demi (ExtraTV, 2019; Woods et al., 2014-2021).

> And she was like the first like openly bisexual person like on that show, and everybody loved her, and I was like 'all right'—and I knew my mom was supportive, but just seeing her like love Demi I was like "all right," and … so that night I like pumped myself up during commercial break and then I like—I like told her after. (Interview, 8.5.2021)

Quinn felt tremendously anxious during the next day at school, but by that evening, she trusted completely in her mother's support, a feeling that has lasted.

However, my students feel a more agentive relationship with these narrative media due in part to the prevalence of fanfiction, a phenomenon that existed but had very little mainstream traction in my own adolescence. One day during class, the conversation around being queer in schools drifts to the fetishization (a word that all of us, but particularly Kaia, struggle to pronounce throughout our discussion, but refuse to stop using) of LGBTQ+ people and characters. "Mainly cis straight women love to fetishize gay men," Lys asserts. Kaia, following up, agrees:

> Kaia: I don't think it's just women who are into other women that get BLEAAAHHHH—fetishized. … I think they get fetishized a lot more by straight men and then, like, gay men get fetishized by straight women. … The amount of BL stories that are primarily ingested by straight women, and I'm not saying that it's a problem, but it—I am, but I'm not saying that it's a problem to enjoy BL, just to a certain point it can get creepy.
>
> Gemma: Wait, to enjoy what? I'm sorry.
>
> Kaia: BL? Boy love.
>
> Gemma: Oh, okay.

Lys has been nodding intensely throughout Kaia's comments, which have been echoed in a different form in some public discourse (e.g. Hart, 2022). When Lys's turn comes to speak again, they build on this notion while Quinn smiles and nods, supporting their relationship to fanfiction:

> Lys: One of the biggest pet peeves I have [about fanfiction is] when cis straight women write and sexualize gay men. Because first of all, … they're usually like twelve-year-old girls from Oklahoma, they don't know what they're writing. Second of all, THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'RE WRITING! They don't know what they're putting down on like the internet, into the world, and also how inaccurate it is? … I remember being twelve years old and reading—couldn't tell you what it was now, but it was written by an 11-year-old girl in Alaska, right? But it was like the most abusive relationship between two men, and like … I remember reading the comments and like, it was all of these girls like thinking it was so sweet and so great. And that's also when I learned that … straight women, all they do is kind of romanticize literally everything gay men do except for the real romance, you know? It's really all of like the abuse and the gaslighting and

> terrible things and the using and stuff that happens in the community, they're "Oh, it's so sweet, it's so cute," and then as soon as like the crappy stuff is shown up, like this is bad, this isn't romance, they're like, "I think you guys are just being dramatic!" … and it's like no, we can experience romance the exact same way you can, it doesn't have to be creepy or wrong … It's like a known fact that straight men fetishize lesbians and women-loving women, but it's kind of like this unspoken taboo that really only the younger generation's focused on that women love … to hypersexualize gay men.

Fanfiction is not only woven into Lys's life in general (Black, 2009; Storm, Jones, & Beck, 2022), it is also a key component of how they understand, explain, refine their life as what they call a "biological male" and their current life with a more fluid gender identity. With their camera on, Lys continues an intensely nuanced discussion of gender, fetishization, and anonymity in fanfiction:

> Lys: I can see how, in mainly forms of like writing and art and comics and things like that, where you can remain anonymous on the internet, women putting things of boy love out there and fetishizing it because in our society … women publicly fetishizing gay men is not as okay as men fetishizing women, you know? Like overall I don't think any of it's okay, but you can tell with some of the things our previous president [Donald Trump] has said about women and etcetera … that people—men can get away with saying things about women and fetishizing them, but if a woman had done something about men, it's not good. … And I think women who are—[*air quotes*] appreciate—men-loving men, put their deep darkest desires or whatever you want to call it on the internet, because they for some reason need the world to know. … I've definitely seen the fetishization of women loving women publicly more, but I don't think ever—any way besides a platonic one, or like in the sense that I'm like a token friend—I've never seen straight women fetishize gay men publicly. (Class recording, 5.15.21)

Lys touches here upon a more "private" infantilization of gay men by (presumably) straight women, a subject also touched upon by queer adult critics and scholars (e.g. Chu, 2022). For my generation of young queers, when we were teenagers, the "online" world was, though significant, separate from "real life"—at best, it made "real life" more bearable to know we were accepted somewhere, acknowledged in our complexity (Alexander, 1997; Woodland, 1999). For my students, as with many members of their

generation, the fluidity of "online" and "real" is so complete as to be nearly indistinguishable (Nordquist, 2019).

you came out
of the wallpaper limb by limb, one sweet sneakered foot still tucked behind, one chandelier mingling with your curls, you were the room
of my imagination like an unknown marvel like Athena fully formed and ready to lead in wisdom
of the closet obviously, your grandmother's closet where she kept all the coloring books, the storage one in the front hallway where you hid behind the slick red toolbox, the one with a thousand green scarves that glowed against your skin
of nowhere
of the last room and into the next after exploring endless hallways like jungles you were prey they were ready to open their throats and swallow you whole, digest you for weeks
of a long long sleep with your eyes hooded and wary, all eye contact made to the sides of your face catching something that dared not speak its name something like sparklers their hulls cast off hollow in the morning
of the bars and into the streets
into the streets
-GCN, Write It Out poem, 6.19.2021

When in our first Write It Out meeting I asked the students to introduce themselves by naming something they loved to do other than writing, Lys said they loved criticizing TV shows, and Quinn said that she loved to watch Twitch streams—not even as a serious player, just to watch. (See Gray, 2018 & 2020.) However, Lys is a devoted Minecraft player, and Quinn and Lys have soon developed a friendship outside of Write It Out that's based primarily online, since Quinn lives two hours away from the town where Lys and Kaia reside. Quinn and Lys play Minecraft together—Quinn explains that she plays with Lys and "all of their online friends" on a realm server, a private server for a small group. However, it's equally important to Quinn that she reinvigorated a "real-life" friendship through Minecraft:

> Quinn: When I started playing it was because I wanted to—one of my friends, I felt like, I like felt like our friendship was like slipping away … Like, she loves Minecraft and I was like, wanna play Minecraft? and I was like—I had to like play on, like I play on my phone, like pocket edition, and it's all silly and they make fun of me for it, all my friends do, but … like I connected with her on that and

> now we're like right back where we were, we're—we're really close again. (Interview, 8.5.2021)

Minecraft has become a space where Quinn and other friends can share secrets: her sixth-grade boyfriend, later an academic rival, added her on Snapchat and they quickly learned they liked the same Twitch streamers. As they began playing Minecraft together, he came out to Quinn. Since this boy is an athlete, Quinn guards his confidence zealously: "Nobody else like knows, but … we're both bisexual now, which is fun."

Advocacies

During our interview, Quinn interrupts her own story of advocacy—on an eighth-grade trip to DC, a popular boy made a homophobic comment and she asked, "Oh my god, [Daniel], did you think that was cool to say?"—to ask me a question. "When you were in high school, was it like—were people seen as like weird for being gay? Like, were they like weird kids, were they popular …?" (Interview, 8.5.2021)

In spite of going into the conversation aware that we would discuss generation gaps, since our months of Write It Out have made their prominence clear in my experience of leading the program, I find I don't know how to answer her question.

I wanted you first, you with your layers
of subway hair, your fingertips trailing stars, hems
of your jeans trailing mud. your father's voice dropping heavy
from his height you wished
you could write like me. you never told me.
-GCN, Write It Out poem, 5.29.2021

"Um, I—I remember there being like sort of like, a cachet as long as you weren't thinking of them being in actual relationships with actual people at school," I stumble, noting my immediate depersonalization. In middle school and high school, I didn't know how to think of myself as one of the queer kids.

"As a side character," Quinn offers.

"You know there—I remember there were … two girls in the grades above me whose moms were lesbians … and like, I'm sure other people had gay parents. Those were the ones we knew about, and everybody respected them and everybody knew to like, not be terrible about it … but I was terrified to come out." (Interview, 8.5.2021)

I'm embarrassed to dwell on this terror, feeling a palpable need to be Quinn's adult queer role model and concerned that in admitting to such a fear I don't fulfill the role. Quinn has talked throughout our interview of her freshman-year English teacher, a young and open advocate (likely closer to Quinn's age than mine) who introduced her class to neopronouns (McGaughey, 2020) and queer literature and at whose encouragement Quinn joined Write It Out. Surely she's a better example of living in a bold, queer manner in the world than I am. But there's an affective echo between Quinn and me—she recognizes what I mean. Although she remained in that space of terror for a much shorter time than I did, it's a space that every queer person has inhabited, and to a degree, continues to inhabit (Muñoz et al., 2009).

Right away, my students were clearly comfortable in discussing their crushes and attractions. When we've barely even entered the Zoom room, Hart begins the first day of the spring session by explaining that they had a disturbing encounter at Starbucks: "Gay panic. The biggest crush of the whole school was there, and I woulda freakin' had him too, almost had him, and then all of the sudden he was just kinda like—" Here they make a growling noise, as though the ferocity of the emotion is beyond articulation. (Class recording, 4.17.21)

I spend days considering the difference between their experience, their openness, and my own fear at their age. I would never have been comfortable entering a queer

space, or even discussing my crushes openly, when I was sixteen. Such spaces existed, as research literature (e.g. Norton & Vare, 2004; DuBeau, 1998; Kissen, 1993; Khayatt, 1994) shows, but I thought I should have been "beyond" coming out, beyond needing a community of people like me. I was a sophisticate in my own mind, having seen far more plays and movies with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and even transgender characters than most of my peers had; I had a comprehensive understanding, I thought, of what existed in the world, and that was how I named my own feelings. I didn't need more than that and writing. Still, the secret pulsed, as I explain through the rare occasion I share one of my published poems with the group:

Vertex
Twice says Laila like it's nothing,
like we all *really* fall in love
every hour. We are lying heads
on one another's hips in an adolescent staircase
and onstage Prospero enchants the crew
of his usurping brother while
we lie here in the dark. *With who?*
Amanda asks her and Laila says
two people. Someone insists *who?*
again and she says one is Clay,
her boyfriend—obviously we've all seen
them pressed against each other in the stairwells,
ignoring the air—and the other we don't know, the other
doesn't go to this school. *Shakira knows*
them, though. Shakira's onstage, King Alonso transformed
into a Queen for sheer variety. We answer one
and then another, no one has
to ask anymore: *never,*
once, never, never, once,
once, once. Evelyn, who came up with the question
in the first place, says when she was twelve
she thought she was, but it wasn't love,
not *really*. I've just opened my mouth
for *never* as if anybody cares
about my stories
because tonight they might
but it's dark back here and my lips close over it so I

say *actually, once*. The audience laughs in the distance and Laila says
did he or she love you back?
Amanda tells her *That*
was very PC and I
stop breathing. All I saw two years ago
was Kara, too beautiful for me, too beautiful
for anyone, I swear I breathed
her like the smoke I watched her exhale every day
beside the courthouse, we were fourteen and what
was I going to do, keep loving her? I had
to shake her loose but Laila never saw that
and how'd she know? I say *no*
because you have to answer. *That always sucks*
says Laila and onstage Ferdinand
courts Miranda and Lauren says *once*
and now that's all of us. We sit up slowly in the distant hoofbeats
of applause, hair crackling
with the static of our costumes,
and our brocade sways when we stand.
We gather props for the next act as Shakira spills in
from the stage with the others and Laila says *Shakira,*
you know my friend Melanie?
Shakira says *Yeah* and Laila doesn't ask again
and doesn't answer. The lights are on now
but she doesn't look at me even though
I'm the only one listening.
(Cooper-Novack, 2017b)

"There's a generation gap," says Lys in response to the poem, "but I definitely feel that, and a lot of the ways where, like, you don't know if you can say it, or if someone knows and how to talk about it. I definitely related to it."

"Was that a personal story, like an actual … thing that happened?" Quinn asks. When I say yes, she links it specifically to her own experience in high school theater, where she finds immediate resonance in the generation gap. In her most recent production, she says,

> Quinn: I literally think there's two people in the entire cast that aren't openly queer. I think that's it. And we were all just talking about … who we liked and stuff like that, 'cause that's what people in high school do, as you … showed with that poem, and I think that is such a crazy generation gap because we didn't think twice about it.

Hesitant, I explain to the group that "I wanted to bring this as—as an immediate story, as what recognizing your queerness and not being able to bring it to a space in the '90s felt like." (Class recording, 5.8.21)

Quinn and I are engaged in reciprocal critical witness through this subject: as I see Quinn's self-discovery in its relationship to theater, and musical theater in particular, Quinn is witnessing my isolated experience as a queer high school student frozen with a fear I couldn't name. Quinn continues, finding resonance across the generation gap. "Like the silence, the quietness of the conversation, almost … exemplifies the stigma that is around queer conversation …" (Class recording, 5.8.21) There's no escaping homophobia, transphobia, queerphobia (Blackburn & Schey, 2018)—all of my students have endured and continue to endure it, as we'll learn in class after class. But I saw no way to advocate for myself, for my own visibility or my own acceptance, never mind for other queer people around me, members of a community I couldn't acknowledge belonging to. My students, even those who are not out to a wider community, consistently do. The generation gaps manifest in how we process those phobias and aggressions and how we respond to them.

During the first weeks of class, I found myself overwhelmed that my group of students "talk[ed] like woke Twitter." Phrases such as "the toxic masculinity so prevalent in today's society" and "I live in a very capitalist mindset" spilled from their lips, and engaging in such processes as distinguishing "the world" from "the cishet world" abounded; the Write It Out students referred easily to "toxic friendships" and the passage of activist-centered hashtags as "trendy" on social media. (Field notes, 2.27.2021; memo, 3.20.2021) At first the language didn't feel real to me, and I pushed

back against what I perceived as a lack of rawness and honesty, but before a few weeks had passed I could tell that something had settled. Even now, reviewing the data, I have no idea whether my students changed, or I did, or we met in a new and shared linguistic space—the shift was both gradual and affective. I noticed my embodied sense of being at ease with my students' conversation, that I stopped having the visceral response I have to anything I perceive as dishonest, something of a jumping back, a hesitation. I was all in with my students. They had been presenting cautiously to a new queer adult in their lives, and I had been expecting the language of a group of young people not to overlap with other parts of my world; we were wrong on both counts.

god, I was so tired
of learning alone and my organs
leaked with fatigue and I was dying
to be recognized and I was pretty
sure I wasn't dying but it was still
hard to say
and we'd all painted and performed and made music and we carried
what we knew into the classroom like warp and woof. for one year
we threaded our ideas and the fabric
glittered, throbbed around shards of
each other's grief. the year would fade like
every year does but when we gathered
in those basements and we read and we sang and we studied
it the next Monday
you saw me
we played
the doubting game the believing game the piano
I would rather be depleted on a library
couch than anywhere
-GCN, Write It Out poem, 3.13.2021

During an exploration of schools and schooling, Lys mentions the limits of sex education and health education for queer teenagers. Quinn returns with a story of her experience in a 20-week health course during middle school. When the sexual health unit did not include queer sex education, Quinn immediately went to the instructor and asked why they weren't having a "full spectrum" of education on the subject. When the

teacher asked what she meant and Quinn explained her point, the teacher said she was "not super educated about that." Quinn would have wanted exactly such an education at exactly that time, she says—she was fortunate she had resources at home. (Class recording, 5.15.21)

I explain how impressed I am, and Quinn names me as one of many "passionate and outspoken role models" who helped her, and links her experience to the history of the gay men who were lost to the AIDS crisis. Feeling a need to clarify queer history (see Chapter 5), I make sure to add trans women to the list of people lost to AIDS, which shifts the conversation in the direction of trans erasure (Class recording, 5.15.2021). Although Lys has indeed changed names and pronouns in the course of our time together, they have never explicitly referred to themself as transgender; Hart, who identified as trans and nonbinary but is no longer attending the classes at this point, was the person who advocated most frequently for reading trans literature and turning conversations to trans experiences. Their absence has made me more aware of my responsibility to do so.

The story of Quinn's advocacy clings to me for weeks, its stickiness (Ahmed, 2012) startling me. My memories of my own sexual education and health education are vague at best, but I know via my own memories as a writer how very little I knew about the mechanics of my own desire, how many stories I tried to write where I articulated what I wanted and simply lacked the education for my imagination to manifest. I didn't know, consciously, what I didn't know, and I certainly didn't know I had the right to ask for it. Almost nothing could make me prouder to know Quinn than the story she tells, but similarly, almost nothing could make me feel farther from her, less qualified to teach her.

Among the eight "passions" that Dana & Yendol-Hoppey (2009) list as the potential impetus for a teacher's practitioner research is "the intersection of your personal and professional identities" (p. 40). Given my profound personal identity as a queer writer, this passion seems to identify the impulse that brought me to the class and to conducting my research within and about it. However, the schism between that intersection and the intersection of those with my students' personal and (nominally) professional identities makes me consider what it is and isn't possible to discover through research, and what will come to me from dialogue with my students.

"I did bits and pieces of [coming out] through writing," I explain to Quinn back at the café outside the bookstore belonging to the private university in her town, "but even then like, I was enough of a writer that like people didn't make any assumptions about me based on my writing 'cause I wrote so much fiction." Is this even true? It's what a friend I'd known since kindergarten told me ten years after high school, but five months later a story that I'd always hidden even from myself will rise to the surface. During the last high school assembly of my senior year, a pair of select students read poems written in third grade by those of us who had been at the same school since that time. In third grade, I'd unabashedly written a loving ode to an adult female actor I'd met after a performance. Among all the poems I'd written every week for a year (such was my third-grade curriculum), it was this poem my fellow students had selected. I have no memory of anyone's reaction other than my own, and that memory is affective. I froze internally against any response that might come—and if any did, again, it's entirely escaped me. Even if I'd remembered during our interview, I don't know how I would have explained this to Quinn. Instead, at that time, I tell her a story of a boy named Jack I knew through theater, one of the only people who was known to be gay, publicly and seemingly

happily, when I was in high school. On the brown paper of the costume shop table, another boy in the play, Simon, wrote raps about every member of the cast, including the line, "Jack ain't wack, he just lacks a little something out of Balzac." I tell Quinn that Jack ripped the paper up, snapping, "What if my *parents* see that?"

"*Oh*," Quinn says, leaning on the word. "Yeah, yeah, so that's what—I think like it's changed a lot."

"Oh god, the way you all talk about it, it's changed so much."

"At my school," Quinn says, "and this isn't to say that it's true for every school, it's just really weird, like it sounds weird, I guess, but the popular kids now are almost all like bisexual or gay."

I can't help laughing, but the story Quinn expounds upon proves her assertion true, at least through her eyes. A gay actor at her school became prom king, her school community voices its support to its many queer students,

> Quinn: …and obviously there are a few people who still act like those like weird movie bullies, which is just like why, but like … the senior class that just graduated? Almost like everybody that was … popular, like in high school language, was like out. (Interview, 8.5.2021)

Quinn is the first to admit her high school isn't typical, but nor was mine, and I could never have imagined such a confluence of what all of my Write It Out students fluidly call "queer community" (did I use the term first? Since I don't have audio recordings of our first meetings, the transcripts can't tell me) in high school.

Transgender and nonbinary students are noticeably absent from Quinn's description of "bisexual or gay" popular kids. Quinn never excludes trans people from her notion of "the queer community" in conversation—she's fiercely conscious about respecting a person's gender identity and the pronouns they use. As such, I think it

likely that Quinn would have mentioned any trans students in her class at school. Even beyond the "allegory of the bathroom" (Farley & Leonardi, 2021), transgender students in the United States at this historical moment are the target of dozens of exclusionary pieces of legislation making their way through more than thirty state governments (CBC Radio, 2022), putting trans teenagers at grave risk of exclusion and harm beyond the simple moniker of "unpopular." Quinn's analysis of her school here reflects popular culture. For instance, contemporary television shows about teenagers, from *Sex Education* to *Riverdale* to *The Sex Lives of College Girls* (Nunn et al., 2019-2021; Aguirre-Sarcasa et al., 2017-2022; Kaling et al., 2021) tend to include at least one gay or bisexual student in their "popular" groups, which is rightly heralded as a significant sign of change, but it's vanishingly rare to see a transgender teenager portrayed at all, much less as a social mover and shaker. However, it's also noteworthy that popularity per Quinn's somewhat tongue-in-cheek definition isn't the only measure of social acceptance. Scholars and educators such as Wood (2020) note that it is becoming more common in schools for students to share shifts in gender identity and pronoun usage, and teachers are finding powerful and affirming ways to respond, even as ongoing anti-trans legislation threatens them and students they work with.

Every element of this becomes part of a generation gap, from even a modicum of mainstream acceptance of queerness in everyday social life to the possibility of asking your teacher to use the pronouns you know to refer to you. My students, even with the obstacles they face, know who they are and are comfortable if "who they are" changes. By contrast, the question of whether I was bisexual or a lesbian consumed my solitary hours in high school—a question that now seems to me, as it does to my students, close to irrelevant. Early in our meetings, Hart goes so far as to propose an idea they seem to

find radical, one that their friend has been trying to implement in practice: that a person's gender shouldn't matter, just the attraction in and of itself. I find myself explaining that in my time, that idea was something I said to myself to hide the significance of my own queer desires. I was aided in that by the popular culture of my own time, such as the landmark bisexual and biphobic film *Chasing Amy* (Smith, 1997). I wonder to what degree this movement between firmness and fluidity that ebbs and flows with generations, that one must establish a stronghold for queerness, get beyond it, and reestablish a stronghold.

Although neither Kaia nor Hart nor Lys presents a school or school experience of such idyllic queer community as Quinn does, my students seem to recognize that they deserve, and advocate for, kindness for themselves, a kindness that includes and encompasses their sexual identities and even their writer identities. I know I understood no such thing about my own sexual orientation as an adolescent. When we look at the work of queer writers in the class, from Sappho to Andrea Gibson (2021), Lys boils over in the intensity of their responses to the work, even in pleasure; Quinn expresses a kind of cautious awe; Kaia, the most practiced creative writer in the group, seeks to identify the specific lines and images that open another person's piece to her. But I see them all drive for a generosity that compared to my own adolescence seems shockingly open: they don't need to defend themselves against each other in this space. The priority seems to be kindness, seems to be holding the space open. They are not simply agitating for their rights, although they are also doing so; in being present for each other in this way, they are supporting each other in having and maintaining a space in which they all belong.

Even in the smallest details, there's a gentleness that simply was not present in my generation of queer adolescents. When I explain my longstanding nightmares about electric chairs (stemming from a long-term research paper I wrote when I was fifteen on the Rosenbergs' trial and 1954 execution), I turn to the shared class doc where we suggest media, document class guidelines, and comment on and adjust the syllabus, and I find that under a list of "content warnings," someone other than me has already added "electric chairs." (See Appendix B.) It's all I can do not to cry. For all my concerns about the insensitivity or the packaged formality of social media discourse, the simple kindness and acuity of the gesture leaves me beyond words.

Landmarking

Decisions
Impossible in a pandemic
to decide I wonder if
for the young a change can be self-
contained, move a piece and the ice
around the chessboard shatters perhaps
for me it's the ice and the ice and the ice did I
say *the world* or *your world* and at what
point do you start to know the difference
or do you ever
  in my world
it would be the loneliness like a needy
bay eroding my cliffsides is
I wonder it everyone's? the people who hurt
so badly they scramble
to the mountaintop they've taken
over screaming
MY PAIN MATTERS NOW to the assembled
and the damaged
and the damaged who damaged
and the damaged who destroyed my friend
wants to trace the fires and torches and cars in jagged reverse and gunshots and
  bloodslashed flags
to loneliness lack of belonging am I
the fool the egotist to think what I imagine
would solve for me wouldn't
solve for everyone? or was I

already wrong?
-GCN, Write It Out poem, 2.20.2021

In his memoir *How We Fight for Our Lives*, poet, journalist, and activist Saeed Jones (2020) describes the fear-based landmarks of his own queer Black youth as the murders of James Byrd and Matthew Shepard in 1998. A group of White men tied Byrd, a Black man, to a truck and dragged him to death; a group of straight White men beat Shepard, a gay White man, to the point of near-death, and he died of his wounds in a hospital five days later. Jones explains a profound sense of intimate connection with those acts of violence, that sense of threat.

My own queer adulthood now seems to have passed through a thousand such horrifying landmarks, but nonetheless a few remain central. Like Jones's, my burgeoning understanding of my own queerness in adolescence seemed marked by Shepard's murder and the galvanization of LGBTQ+ communities in its aftermath, to the degree that fifteen years later, driving through Wyoming, I made a point of finding the intersection at which he had been attacked, which I would include a poem about in my first book.

Pilot Peak, Snowy View
By now I think this town's forgotten you,
suburban sprawl reached where you didn't die.
I'm looking for another way to mourn.

Suburban sprawl reached where you didn't die.
You died five full days later, in the light.
By now I think this town's forgotten you.

I thought there'd be some sign to mark the spot.
Suburban sprawl reached where you didn't die;
I'm looking for another way to mourn.

Maybe your skull caught moon against that grass.
Suburban sprawl reached where you didn't die.
By now I think this town's forgotten you.

Suburban sprawl reached where you didn't die,
but still this intersection seems to bleed.
I'm looking for another way to mourn.

They shattered bones and organs, drove away.
Suburban sprawl reached where you didn't die.
By now I think this town's forgotten you;
I'm looking for another way to mourn.
(Cooper-Novack, 2017a, p. 8)

Equally, the story of Brandon Teena, a young trans man murdered in the 1990s whose story was retold by Kimberley Peirce in the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999), froze seventeen-year-old me in my seat at the film's conclusion. Although it's fair to say that we as queer people live in a general state of affective threat, such landmarks cannot but take space in our visceral experience. Acknowledging them, knowing the ways that I have built my life and self-knowledge around them, is a process of *landmarking*.

My adult queerness is landmarked by social moments of joy, as well. For instance, I will always remember walking through New York City on June 27, 2015, the day after the United States Supreme Court's decision in Obergefell v. Hodges, which legalized marriage between two people of the same sex, was announced, and seeing couples lined up outside the city's courthouses and trickling down their steps, flowers in hand. But it had not occurred to me how profoundly generational this practice of landmarking was until I had two conversations with my students surrounding the Pulse nightclub massacre that took place in 2016.

On our first day of the spring session, after reading Housman's poem about Oscar Wilde, I explain to the students that since Housman was himself a gay man, the arrest, public scandal, and prosecution of Wilde had a profound effect on him.

> Gemma: I want you to write a piece that's a response to a particular historical or present event that has deep visceral meaning for you. Housman was not good

> friends with Wilde, but he's responding viscerally to the arrest and conviction of Wilde because of how it echoes for him. Now that echo might be as direct as I share an identity with this person, it might be more indirect, it might be more about resonances and fears—we certainly live in a time with enough fears and violences going on that there are a lot of ways to find that. But I—I want you to write to your immediate response to an event that is outside of you. Does that make sense? (Class recording, 4.17.21)

Because we've been involved in complex conversations, which eat up our writing time, and I want time to share our work (Kaia has already had to leave early to get to her regular volunteer gig at a local stable), I give the students twelve minutes to write; Hart and I are the only ones who leave our cameras on during the writing time. When we return, Lys is eager to share their work, which begins:

In the month of marriage he ruined it
I can never know what it was like as the chaos ensued,
but I remember being a child who wanted to kiss a boy
and seeing my people slaughtered for doing the same …
-L, 4.17.2021

They conclude the piece with a line about "walking the path without them," "them" referring to the people massacred at Pulse. Quinn responds passionately to this. The victims of the Pulse shooting represent, to her, "a hole in the community that's, like, never filled. It can never be filled. Sometimes it feels like the hole just keeps getting bigger." (Class recording, 4.17.21)

Our classes take place in 2021, when my students range in age from fifteen to seventeen; the shooting at Pulse nightclub took place in 2016, meaning that my students were no older than twelve when it occurred. But the conversation immediately takes on a tighter and more profound tone, as if Lys has flipped a switch in reading their piece. Bearing critical witness for them in the moment means that I must understand the resonance of that day not only for myself, an adult at the time, but for the children my students were, just coming to a self-knowledge that the horrifying event infused with

fear. My students are talking about the discovery of this particular kind of fear, a profound and intimate social violation, and one by which, it is clear, all of them map their own queer identities. "This is the first time I ever really saw hate, I guess," Lys says.

> Lys: I knew about things like this, I knew that they existed, like school shootings and all of that, but I guess I'd from a young age become desensitized to that, and I'd never heard of homophobia to this extent. … It did not … affect me personally, I did not know anyone who was there, but, I mean, it was one of the largest mass murders in American history, you know? And we were, I was alive for that, you know? Like I remember coming downstairs and my mom was watching the news and I sat down, … and the next headline was "gay nightclub" and "gays killed" and I remember just feeling so cold in that moment. It was June and it was sweltering that day and I was just—I keep on, I always find myself remembering that … that someone did that to people like me, to our people, you know? And it makes me so like nauseous to think about and it didn't affect me personally but I—it's gonna stay with me forever, I guess kind of just like the memory of that first shock of learning that. People are cruel and … a lot of people don't like what we represent and what that means to them and how it all fits together … (Class recording, 4.17.21)

Even in its transcript form, Lys's answer here is racked with affective resonance. Their feelings are amplified through everything they say and reaching all of us, the flow of their emotion intersecting profoundly with all our memories. Although they continue to claim that the Pulse shooting "didn't affect [them] personally," by which they seem to mean they were neither acquainted with any of the victims nor present in or affiliated with the nightclub itself, all of their descriptions of their response are bodily and immediate—the coldness, the nausea, the physical shock. This is not a response grounded in editorial, retroactive emotional description; it is profoundly affective. Hart is quick to jump in with their own response:

> Hart: When I heard about it [the Pulse shooting] … you know, it was night and you know, we were watching, years ago when I used to watch the news … I was sitting in my living room eating dinner, and I just started bawling. I—I cried for two days straight after that, I—I couldn't—I couldn't fathom it, it just, it—you

> know, I didn't know anybody there either, but … it still hurt so much to know that somebody would do something like that, and for what reason?
>
> Gemma: Y'all were so young. Wow.
>
> Hart: It hit HARD, and I was just—holy crap, I cried for days. … I didn't go to school the next day. I couldn't …
>
> Lys: Yeah, we—our generation at least, we've grown up in a—it sounds gross to say a culture of mass murder … (Class recording, 4.17.21)

The Pulse shooting is, for my students, both synecdoche for this "culture of mass murder" and the first realization that their own vulnerability to violence exceeded that of their peers—though for my White students, the fact that Pulse was a club catering to a majority-Latine queer clientele doesn't enter into their affective responses. My students recognize simply (and perhaps reductively) that these murder victims were queer people, people my students viscerally knew to be their people. Lys's analysis reveals how Pulse stood out even in the fierce numbing processes of generational horror:

> Lys: Yeah, I remember all of them [school shootings], but from like first grade we would have drills … and they like mushed it into our heads that this could happen in schools, it could happen in schools, and I remember never thinking that this could happen to gay people, you know? Like I never thought that someone could hate us so much to do that … and it was an awakening that I think in some way I needed … that we live in a world where someone really thought about this and they were like, "yes, this is what needs to be done," you know? (Class recording, 4.17.21)

Though the students engage in other landmarkings of violence, including school violence—Hart feels strongly that "this culture of mass shootings and mass murders" can be traced back to the Columbine High School shooting in 1998 (when I was my students' age), saying, "I think that was the tipping point in everything" (Class recording, 4.17.21)—it's clear how close they hold their own experiences of Pulse. For them, it's the moment of their recognition that they live in a society where their queer identities are, in spite of greater mainstream acceptance and representation, closely tied

to the risk and fear of violence (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Clark & Blackburn, 2016).

Two months later, we acknowledge the Pulse shooting on its anniversary. Although I have forgotten the date until the day of class, I draw when I remember on a special issue of *Glass Poetry*, an online political poetry journal, published shortly after the event itself. The issue is called “Pulsamos: LGBTQ Poets Respond to the Pulse Nightclub Shooting.” I ask the students—Quinn, Lys, and Kaia—to find a poem in the issue that speaks to them, present it to the group, and give us a writing prompt based on it. Although I myself have a poem in the issue, I ask them to exclude mine and to move towards writers they’re not familiar with. Lys goes first; they’ve selected a poem by a poet now known as Raphael Schmieder-Gropen, “When America’s Queer Pulse Stopped Beating,” which ends:

the day after the attack I stayed silent
at the hair salon when my hairdresser
said, "got a boyfriend?" and felt

like I'd been shot or maybe like I
was the shooter. I think about the people
for whom that isn't a metaphor,

think about their fathers refusing
to bury them in their favorite clothes.
burying them. cremating names

their partners don't recognize. listen:
can you hear a whole world of us,
saying their names out loud?

listen: America's queer pulse is still
playing music. after I heard the news,
my first ferocious impulse was to kiss

my girlfriend in public, and then:
to dance in the streets with my hands
above my head. call it hope, call it

Hallelujah. call it reaching out to God.
(Schmieder-Gropen, 2016)

Asked to explain why they chose the poem, Lys responds:

> Lys: I liked how [they] talked about, um, how it felt to be a queer person … who like reacted to that, and thinking about the people who died and like what their family members were like, what their family members did, what that means, if trans—like were people buried who they were, or who their family said they were? … and how [they] wanted to kiss [their] girlfriend and stuff, and also I think the biggest part that like drew me in was like the day after [they] talked about how [they were] at the hairdresser and the hairdresser assumed [they were] straight, asking "do you have a boyfriend," you know? Like how it's so normal … for straight people to just—that's just what they do, you know? Like, I don't wanna be rude and say that they're just assuming, but … it's an assumption. … [The Pulse shooting] obviously was something that made national news … but I think for a lot of straight people it was kind of like, "Oh, another mass shooting, wow, this is surprising," um, but to queer people … it was an attack, you know? It was not just a domestic attack on America, it was an attack against the queer community itself, and how scary it was, you know? And how angry it made us … I liked that [Schmieder-Gropen] kinda talked about all of those things.

They offer a prompt about knowing that the world is controlled by straight people when you yourself are queer, one that we ultimately summarize as, "Describe your feelings in the world knowing how its assumptions are almost always in the mind of a straight person; what does that mean to you as a queer person? How do you cope with the world having incorrect assumptions?" This default assumption of straightness portrayed in Schmieder-Gropen's poem has come up in discussions with all three students frequently before today. Kaia, the least out of the closet in our group, chafes against it most vocally among us. She frequently explains how she's deployed particular pronouns in a conversation or a poem to test the waters with a potential friend or ally against assumptions like those of the hairdresser Schmieder-Gropen portrays. Quinn says the poem made her consider for the first time "the people … whose parents found out that

they were gay just because they found out that they were dead." (Class recording, 6.12.21)

And my other big worry is—what else?—my sexuality. I don't know what I am and I am sure as hell afraid to find out.
-GCN, journal entry, 9.5.1996, age 14

My own experiences responding to Shepard's murder, like Saeed Jones's as he describes them (2020), were private, so private that I didn't even write about them in my journal at the time of the killing itself. I wasn't out to my friends and family the way Quinn is, nor did I have an internet community I could turn to that might provide answers like Kaia. There's something that stuns me about my students, their self-knowledge and their intimate relationship with their own affective experiences. Watching the video recording of our Zoom call, it's abundantly clear to me—in my closed eyes, my long pauses, my stutters and repetitions—how challenging I found it to respond to my students' responses to this work, how I struggled to navigate the combination of their raw, immediate pain and grief with my grief and unacknowledged, latent envy. I am not a neutral party in this exchange. While I never made it my goal to be so—it has been important to establish and remain connected to my queer identity and experiences throughout Write It Out—I have never in my teaching career had quite so intimate a memory of a shared experience with my students. Too often teachers are asked to slow our reactions to our own affective responses. While this is often done with good reason—to prioritize the immediate health or safety of a student, for instance—it's odd to notice how firmly the habit is ingrained in me, and the points at which it may facilitate or interrupt the relational transformations, "bodies feel[ing] like they are in *something* together" (Ehret, 2018, p. 571, emphasis in original), in our Write It Out meetings.

Quinn introduces the piece she chose, “Can We Get Home in One Piece Please” by Guillermo Filice Castro. The poem is furious, pulsing with anger, as in the lines below:

Once
rounds and shots
meant just drinks. Please
I want to scream,
cornered by skidding tires
and high beams
into a dark lot.
I wait. I pounce.
My knife goes into the killer's belly
repeatedly and bloodlessly,
metal goring grimy sand.
More than ever
I am not an animal of peace.
(Castro, 2016)

After reading Castro’s poem to us, Quinn explains:

> Quinn: I chose that one ‘cause … the anger was really like prevalent in it, and I am someone who’s known for being like sad. Like I’m just sad all the time, you know? Not like in like a depressive way but just like, I’m a very emotional person, things make me sad a lot. But … my most like prominent experience with anger does have to do with my queer identity, like crying tears of anger feels so different than tears of sadness, and … my tears of anger were when Amy Coney Barrett was like put onto the Supreme Court … and nobody understood. … I felt like a connection there. It doesn’t feel as like severe as the Pulse shooting … but … the anger is a big thing for me.

The anger resonates for both Kaia and Lys as well. After Quinn gives her writing prompt, “Write about a time that you felt anger in a response to the world’s treatment of queer people,” Lys says they feel that people often allow mourning to eclipse anger, and that anger was “a really good response” to the violence committed at Pulse. Kaia sees it specifically as the poet’s anger that he could not commit the violence in the poem. She,

Kaia, has often imagined herself in situations of greater immediate horror than she has actually encountered, planned what she would have done. Often, she explains, this leads into a desire to go into the past and prevent such events as the Pulse massacre from taking place. (Class recording, 6.12.21) Although she's alluding to a common philosophical question—"if you could go back in time and kill Hitler as an infant, would you?"—Kaia's exploration remains in the murky territory of the visceral, glossing the poetry of Castro's anger as frustration that one cannot go back in time and anger at what happened because one couldn't, all contained in a poetic moment.

Is this what it means to bear critical witness to the past? We're exploring a past that has a profound impact on all of us, bearing witness to each other's retrospective trauma. Writing in response to it is, I hope, action and advocacy, a way of telling each other and our future readers that we grieve lives that might have gone ungrieved, and that we want to fight to care for each other.

Kaia reads Jonathan May's "Jockstraps/Gunfire," a short poem reprinted below in its entirety:

DJ, please don't stop the tactical squad from musicing
through the room like millions of bullets of sound

put some bass in your flee as you watch those around
you fall — hate will still live afterward, past these

beautiful souls on the ground, but don't let it live
in you — love doesn't stalk in with an AR-15 and make

us realize that death drops were practice for a life
we thought we could escape — but where the exit sign?

smoke machine churns — what is bomb, what isn't?
oh my sweet America, must we explode for love?
(May, 2016)

For Kaia, this poem "felt more scene by scene," and "having that in traumatic situations just makes sense … it goes by like a scene, pictures." The element of visual description is important to Kaia as well. It's this that she uses for her prompt: "Write about a situation that made you have a scene-by-scene visual feelings." However, Quinn, who tends to be far more naked in her immediate responses than the cautious and reticent Kaia, feels a pressing need to interject her own affective response, again without the "feeling words" that often indicate, for her, a level of processing:

> Quinn: "DJ please don't stop the tactical squad"—like ahhh! That was just a lot for me, 'cause like, I don't know, it seems like stupid, but like the DJ, like you know … "please don't stop the music" is what you normally would think of there. It just made me realize like how, like—something that's supposed to be like joyful and like a freeing experience for queer people at like, like gay nightclubs is now like—has a whole new meaning. So I don't know. That might seem like a stupid thing to like read into … but I thought it was just a lot there.

Lys builds on Quinn's response—they're pretty sure the lyric "please don't stop the music" comes from a Rihanna song (Eriksen et al., 2007) and they too picture the night of violence: "It was a normal night, you know? A song like that would've played and it's that switch." (Class recording, 6.12.21)

Kaia remains reticent here. It's in Kaia that I often recognize myself the most—it's a clear almost-physical challenge for her to relate her prompts or the content of her writing directly to her own queerness. Since Kaia is the least "out" among the Write It Out students, and has the most intense preexisting writer identity, there's a level on which I wonder if the two of us have less of a generation gap. Her prompt is so deliberately technical, so craft-focused, so much more focused on the process of *writing* than either Quinn's or Lys's. But why, I wonder, am I even making this distinction? All of us are queer writers; all of us, therefore, will produce queer writing as a result of these prompts. However, Kaia tells no stories of Pulse, unlike the others; her response, like

mine to Shepard's murder in 1998, would have been profoundly internal if it were present at all. The memory of the landmark doesn't rest in the moment. Nonetheless, she finds a poem that makes sense to her, relates to how she processes what she knows to be a landmark in a community she belongs to.

In an interview (8.5.2021), Kaia tells me she doesn't feel like a writer because "I don't feel like I'm good enough to be a writer … I haven't gotten to the point where I'm amazing by any means. … Like objectively I'm like, okay, you're a writer, you enjoy doing it, but not …"

"It's not something you feel?" I ask when she trails off. She agrees, and I ask, generally, what makes someone a writer. She responds:

> Enjoying writing, finishing pieces actually—that almost never happens for me. … And being, sharing pieces with other people … I guess mostly the sharing pieces with other people and being recognized for it … being appreciated and being recognized for what you can do … like, praise, I guess. (Interview, 8.5.21)

Kaia knows she loves to write and that she's centered aspects of her out-of-school life, and her homeschooling life, around writing for many years, but her definition remains social: she must share her work with other people and experience other people's responses to truly be a writer. I point out that she does exactly this in Write It Out, and that indeed Quinn praised her writing in my recent interview with Quinn, but this doesn't impact Kaia's perception of her own identity—"that's very nice."

However, the intersection between writing and her other identities is far more present for Kaia. She has chronic pain and writing is something she can still do in some form with her disability; she struggles to focus and writing is something she can do in short bursts; she's glad of her ability to put her queer identity into her writing because "that's incredibly frustrating because most people don't know about it … and being able

to share and that's okay because so many people still don't think it's okay." (Interview, 8.5.21) Because no one has known, she hasn't shared her relationship to the landmarks publicly before, and brings to this process of landmarking the sense of carrying secrets and of, occasionally, obscuring them through craft.

This runs counter to Lys, who responds to the prompt they themself have created with the following:

I believe I've been excused from people assuming I am a heterosexual
I do not talk how heterosexuals think heterosexuals should talk
nor do I walk, eat, dress, sleep, or shit how heterosexuals think they should themselves
so I am exempt from the awkwardness of the assumption where someone asks "are you gay?"
because even though I do not tell them
they know without asking
because I am not what they assume they have to be.
I am told this makes me strong
that my existence makes me brave.
I am not brave.
I am arrogant.
I talk how I want to talk, and I eat and dress and sleep and shit how I want to.
I do not do it because it is how a heterosexual person views a homosexual person doing it.
I do it because it is what I want
even if it does not run parallels to what other homosexuals are doing.
I know a homosexual and what that is
and how I am one.
It is not how I talk, nor eat, dress, sleep, or shit.
There is not a heterosexual way to talk, there is only the ignorant mindset of an ignorant heterosexual.
-L, 6.12.2021

The piece pulses with Ehret's notion of desire. Lys has written this because they need to write it, need to use the poem to fight a world that they fear hates them and people like them, needs to bring the ferocity and sharpness of these feelings into words. It's not the sedate and deliberate voice that Kaia often uses. But is Kaia's take really so far from Lys's? Both are using the parameters of writing to express the potency of their queerness. For Lys the priority is frequently explicit expression of their identity; for Kaia, writing, which she knows to be something from which she gets pleasure and that she can do under constrained conditions (physical pain and/or being in the closet), gives

her space to express and explore her queerness. She knows herself to be expressing a queerness that she knows and can clearly admit to herself is hers, something that felt very much out of my grasp when I was sixteen. Kaia's approach to writing is one that I recognize and find resonant in my own experience; her approach to her queerness as a teenager remains a profound and compelling gap between us.

As usual, Kaia has to leave early on the day that we respond to the poems in Glass Poetry's special issue *Pulsamos*. However, she stays as I share my own piece in the issue:

Endings
Because I don't like to
dance anymore anyway odds are it'll just be
my gut and loneliness, lung and large
intestine eroding while I settle into
mattress undulation, toenails
echoing on stairs until I wake
up breathless, unsustainable. Still, once
or twice a strobe light's taken
the rhythm of my pulse, so
I can see it: squares of violet
light on the corner where she's locked
her hips to mine and something worse
than bass lines splitting kiss from air. We'd hurtle
towards the street that we
escaped by entering, spectres from seven minutes ago already
rushing to bleed where skin touched.
(Cooper-Novack, 2016)

In this, Quinn sees a different incarnation of generation gaps. "[L]ike the whole like nightclub scene … us three … we never had any sort of connection to that anyway. But like, when—when you're an adult you have those experiences. Like, it's supposed to be a positive thing." Quinn knows she's not speaking, or reacting, from immediate personal experience. But she has read her queer history; she knows what bars and clubs have historically meant to our communities. "[T]he Pulse nightclub shooting took away … the

like positive intimacy of clubbing, and, like, being with your people, and turned it into this … scary, like, possibility to—now it makes you feel unsafe." In retrospect, even this very phrase feels like a generation gap. In my mind, the phrase "feeling unsafe" is used with great casualness, in response to anything from a slur and an explicit threat of physical violence to a darkened street. Even days before this, I would have said the term doesn't begin to encompass my own response to the shooting at Pulse. But in the moment, I share Quinn's affective tonality. She's connecting to the feelings as I portrayed them; we are there in the idea together.

> Gemma: Yeah, it—it put a threat into it no matter what. And, you know, I—I was living in Boston at the time, I was managing a chronic illness, I was not very clubby at that moment in my life. And it still—it still held me. I still had this very visceral picture of what it would have felt to be there, what it would have felt to survive it, and I still wanted to write it. … But it—it's—it's the rare queer poet these days who doesn't have a Pulse poem someplace, um, certainly the rare American queer poet of any race. … [A]nd I rarely feel that in-the-moment let's-respond-in-a-poem feeling—it's usually reflective for me. (Class recording, 6.12.21)

Before Kaia leaves, I hastily transition into reading the poem I chose from the issue, Mariama J. Lockington's "June 12, 2016." The piece opens with its refrain "we will not die today" as it describes an ordinary day between the speaker and her female partner under the present but never-articulated shadow of knowing the Pulse attack has just taken place.

we will not die today, no

we will tear into our steaks & with each bite
we will remember all of the light we've lost

we will drink our whiskey & promise
to stay woke, to hurt ourselves less

the night will open her fist full of stars to us
as if to say: *here, take what you need & hold it*

& the car ride home will be full with stillness
save our thundering, electric hearts
(Lockington, 2016)

This subtlety with a refrain of pain has a profound effect on Kaia:

> Kaia: Having—talking about a queerness plus the author's brownness, as well as talking about how, you know, this doesn't stop their lives—their period is going to continue to come, it's not going to stop because of this horrible scenario. It's going to continue to happen and it doesn't necessarily care about anything else in the world. … Having to do these things, these day-to-day things, yet sort of feeling dread or heaviness—I'm going. Fuck it. Thank you very much. (Class recording, 6.12.21)

She articulates this not with bitterness—when I laugh at her last line, she laughs in response—but with near overwhelm. The poem has reached a space inside her she didn't seem to know she had. Given that she's out to herself but mostly in the closet in her daily life, I wonder if this poem is a closer portrayal of how she lives, or of how she wants to live.

Meeting Across Generations

Write It Out is a space where queer writers meet across generations—where young people who are, as Quinn says, "so Gen Z" are compelled to consider where their queer identities and experiences do and don't overlap with those of their queer Xennial instructor. We have a tremendous gap in the group over our experiences of technology—technology pervades every aspect of my students' experiences of themselves as queer people, where I struggle even to make the fact of our virtual classroom a part of mine. For me, advocating for myself as a queer person would have required me to face the frightening prospect of revealing myself; my students are accustomed to self-advocacy as a part of their queerness, even if they are not entirely out of the closet. And while both the students and I engage in intense practices of landmarking, particularly around

traumatic public events relating to queerness and queer people, my students came to the practice much younger and much more openly than I did.

Almost every classroom space is by its very structure and nature a space where generations meet. Too often this means the older generation—that is, the teacher(s)—is treated as exclusively the expert passing on wisdom to a vacant younger generation, a notion called "banking education" and challenged by Freire (1970), among others. In an educational space based on affinity and shared identity, like a space for and by queer writers, we are compelled to consciously recognize and engage with the vulnerability and volatility in this meeting of generations. My students share with me a novel sense of what it means to experience the world as a queer young person; I bring to my students a personal connection to a past that might before have been a distant history.

CHAPTER 5

"History Just Really Messed Up": Queer Histories in Social and Personal Contexts

While my own 1990s private high school experience wasn't uniquely homophobic, and in fact I had multiple teachers I would later learn were LGBTQ+ (and even one who came out to our U.S. history class in tenth grade), queerness was almost entirely absent from the curriculum. The single moment in which my European History teacher said, "Don't make the mistake of assuming there are only two sexes, or only two sexual orientations," was far more revelatory than I allowed it to be in the moment. Although I had grown up in theater communities and was at least acquainted with many gay adults outside of school, that first taste of queerness and gender fluidity being not only real within a school space but also *historical* would echo through my own coming-out processes over the next ten years.

Bishop (1990) offers the metaphor of *mirrors, windows*, and *sliding glass doors* to explain the different ways that young people can "look into" literature. Sometimes, students want to see themselves; sometimes, students want to look into an experience different from theirs; sometimes students want to enter or connect two spaces that they imagined disparate. For this particular facet of my identity, my own early education was almost entirely devoid of mirrors in literature or history. It didn't stop me from searching for such a reflection, and nor, a generation later, does it stop my students. Having a queer-directed writing class gave them a unique space for such a search, even as it was clear they had a great deal more access to and communication with the histories of queer communities than I did a generation ago. My students drew upon this

desire and this knowledge, too, to set the context for a deeper understanding of their own personal histories, an endeavor in which I frequently found myself joining them. Bringing our knowledge together gave us encounter stories (Kellinger & Davis, 2016), connecting our own intimate experiences—narratives of personal history—to the "identity experiences of other people" (Kellinger & Davis, 2016, p. 75) and the narratives of those who came before us. These ways of sharing brought about surprising relational transformations and allowed us to become more thoughtful and complex critical witnesses to each other's experiences.

This chapter looks at queer histories—particularly, the distinct but related experiences of finding queerness in more "public" histories and of mining one's own personal queer history. My students, in part *because* of their connections to more public queer histories, find an intense sense of their own personal histories as queer people, and the affective tonality of our conversations about personal histories over the course of the spring session makes me feel more connected to my own.

Public Histories and Affective Resonance

In the winter session, when I was asking for topics of interest to include in the spring syllabus, my Write It Out students said that they wanted to learn more about queer histories. I've set aside days for queer history later in the spring session, but on this, our first day back, I've brought a historical text as a teaser. Since I share the screen from the Poetry Foundation website as I read, the writers can see the dates during which the poet, A.E. Housman, lived.

O who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?
And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?
And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?

O they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.

'Tis a shame to human nature such a head of hair as his.
In the grand old time 'twas hanging for the colour that it is.
Though hanging isn't bad enough and flaying would be fair
For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair.

O a deal of pains he's taken and a pretty price he's paid
To hide his pall or dye it to a mentionable shade,
But they've got the beggar's hat off for the world to see and stare,
And they're hailing him to justice for the colour of his hair.

Now 'tis oakum for his fingers and the treadmill for his feet
And the quarry gang on Portland in the cold and in the heat,
And between his spells of labour and the time he has to spare,
He can curse the god that made him for the colour of his hair.
(Housman, 1965 [first published 1937])

After I've finished reading the poem aloud, I ask, as I always do, for immediate thoughts and responses. The room remains silent for a long time. Finally Quinn begins to speculate about the time period in which Housman lived, from 1859 to 1936—specifically, the forms of bigotry she knows about from that time. She's glossed it immediately as a poem about prejudice and hatred, but recognizes that the poet, listed as English in his website bio, didn't live concurrently with the Holocaust. "Oftentimes I only think about such limited forms of hatred," she muses—her ideas of atrocity, according to her, are anchored in imagining slavery or the Holocaust.

"To go back to a word we've been using," says Hart, "it's raw … but raw yet full, in a way."

"I will now reveal," I say, "that this is a poem he [Housman] wrote about Oscar Wilde. Who knows Oscar Wilde?"

Lys sits up straight and sudden; energy radiates from their Zoom square. "Me. I know Oscar Wilde," they say. Hastily, I open the floor for them to talk about it, noting

how polite this group of writers often is. Lys's words seem to spill from them, tripping over each other:

> Lys: Um, Oscar Wilde. First of all, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I love that book. It is a very good book. I have it in German even though I don't speak German—I don't know why I have it in German, actually … but Oscar Wilde was a very outspoken and flamboyant British gay writer in like, what, Queen Victoria's time? Um, and he was known a lot for his kind of being like, "oh yeah, I'm a homosexual, what are you gonna do?'" Um, and he's very like—he dressed in a—in manly clothing but it was very effeminate styled, and he was very himself in a time when people weren't allowed to be … they had to do what everyone else was doing, and to dress how everyone else was doing, they had to basically be heterosexual and he's like no, no thank you. Um, and he went to prison for that for—for not like forever, but he went to prison for a time for that, 'cause that was a crime back then, to be gay—to—to do what gay people do. … [A] lot of people who knew Oscar Wilde were afraid that he would like out them as well and that they would go to prison and all of that. EM Forster, in his book *Maurice*—I like that too—talks about things like that and homosexuality and what makes you different during this time period … I think it's really interesting, 'cause it's not just about all like Oscar Wilde and EM Forster and all of that, it's not just about being gay in this time, it's about your class, like in the class system and being gay at this time and what that means, and I just—I don't know, it's Victorian England, like … what can you not like?
>
> "Well, clearly, there's plenty not to like, but also plenty to be absolutely fascinated by," I respond, laughing. (Class recording, 4.17.21) I've known Lys to be vocal, intense, vigorously present in conversation before, but I've never seen them quite like this, both their knowledge and their relationship to that knowledge sweeping our Zoom call like a tidal wave. They have an affective relationship to Wilde, one that I hadn't anticipated but that seems to transcend the moment. Their sense of connection to Oscar Wilde isn't at all limited to his work (as demonstrated by the German edition, which Lys can't even read) or even to his legend. In the vigor of Lys's speech, in the passionate intensity with which they speak and the way that their knowledge of and intimacy with Wilde flows out of them, they're reaching across history for him.

Hart breaks in eagerly with their TikTok-based knowledge of Leonardo DaVinci's trials for sodomy and how difficult it was for Da Vinci's persecutors to make their case (Nuland, 2005) and I explain that in Wilde's case, there was indeed evidence, as shown in Moises Kaufman's play *Gross Indecency* (Kaufman, 1998), because the father of Wilde's lover Lord Alfred Douglass knew their correspondence. But even then, I later find I've misspoken—I tell the students, wrongly, that Douglass's father the Marquess of Queensberry had Wilde prosecuted, when in fact Wilde initiated the court proceedings himself by suing the Marquess for libel. It was only after these proceedings that Wilde was indicted for, tried, and convicted of "gross indecency." I explain that Housman himself was gay—not nearly so much of a public or flamboyant figure as Wilde, but that the source of the emotional resonance for him would be quite historically clear. Even this image—of a less public gay man responding with passion to the persecution of a more public gay man—speaks to Lys and to Hart. Both of them are vocal about the fact that they were assigned male at birth (AMAB); both of them have said they at some point, at least, thought of themselves as gay men. That has changed now—Hart easily identifies as nonbinary, and Lys, recently shifting to a more feminine name and they/them pronouns, seems to embrace fluidity—but nonetheless their words and presences onscreen display clear intimacy with this historical figure.

> Lys: You know, at this time you couldn't say things like, "oh yeah, they're putting him away because he's gay"—you couldn't say that because people would be like, "hmm, why do you care so much?" … The way I interpreted it is the color of his hair is just something that's so meaningless, and being gay is kinda the same way—like it's just a part of you, that's all it is … and the fact that he has to hide something that, at least in the modern world, is so—not even yet, we haven't reached this point, but overall, being gay is something that's just so mundane, you know? Like it's just who you are … he still has to hide the one thing that they put him in prison for … that kind of vulnerability that he has to cover up is really—it hurts. [It] makes me at least feel a little like a twang of pain, because it's

> something so small in the long term but overall it's—it's so big, and it brings out so much emotion that you don't know what to feel all at once, I guess. …
>
> Hart: Okay, I think Housman is—there's a phrase that magicians have: they hide it by painting it red, you hide things by painting it red. … You're so obviously hiding something, but at the same time …you're hiding it in just such a way that only like-minded people or people you've let in on the secret will understand that you've hidden it. … [T]o quickly go back to queer history, "hey, are you a friend of Dorothy?" Everybody knew it was code, nobody could figure out what it was for. (Class recording, 4.17.21)

Lys and Hart's historical precision or accuracy is almost irrelevant to this moment. They yearn towards the scraps of the past they've been given; they strive to fill in the blanks with their own emotions and desires. I see in them the pull I've felt to, for instance, the work of lesbian historical novelists Emma Donoghue (e.g. 2021) or Sarah Waters (e.g. 2006), or even the Housman poem itself, which I first read as a high school freshman. Call it longing, call it need; there is an affective pull to find the proof that we have been there all along.

Sometimes there are no stories, only ideas about
stories. Sometimes we suffocate under narrative.
Sometimes we put feet on intersections of thirteen
paths and try to choose just one direction while stories
converge. Paths are only because someone cleared away
trees, anyway. Roots will take over eventually.
Sometimes in between it's just cracked cement. Potholes.
We trip into what we don't know, what we'll never find
out. Maybe the shattered asphalt goes all through the earth
and we land somewhere. Sometimes we narrate positions
we land in. What other way to start? And when are we
writing, when writing down? Really there are never no
stories. We're just choking on where and how we can tell.
-GCN, 2022

The common, primarily-but-by-no-means-exclusively right-wing dismissal of twentieth- and twenty-first-century queer identities and communities as "new" or "trendy," alongside the fact that taboo events of the past often went unrecorded and, when recorded, untaught, can serve to cut LGBTQ+ people off from our histories.

Helmsing (2016) describes a poster hanging in a social studies classroom that neatly encapsulates this experience: “History has set the record a little too straight.” My students have yearned for these histories since Write It Out began—it was one of the first requests they made when I asked in the winter for contributions to the spring syllabus—but I hadn’t seen how much space it took up for them until Lys’s passionate response to Oscar Wilde filled our Zoom room.

What does it mean to see oneself in history? Certainly the present-day furor over queer texts, and trans texts in particular, in United States schools indicates that the very concept has power. Although this might not be the power often assumed by hack journalists or school boards—that a novel might “turn” a child trans, for instance—a significant answer is to be found in Bishop’s (1990) framework. A good portion of the power of literature is the power of mirrors and windows—an opportunity for a reader to see what they cannot see otherwise, be it themself and their history or an experience that their isolated environment (a condition common to the vast majority of teenagers) has precluded their accessing. Building on ideas from Norton & Vare (2004), Johnson (2017) explains that “the inability for students to see themselves in the curriculum send[s] alienating messages of despair and denial.” (p. 15) Per Johnson, these messages often serve to turn queer young people, and particularly queer young Black people, against the selection of literacy practices schools seem to offer them, necessitating the alternative approach of teaching “writing the self,” moving beyond *authentic* writing and into *transformational.* But the self is not isolated; as always, it exists in context, a context that has been rendered more difficult to find for queer students by centuries of erasure.

This is to say that in some way, my students and I are bearing *critical witness to queer history* (Dutro, 2019b). We are seeing within the experiences so often hidden by the historical master narrative, those of queer people whose queerness was labelled abhorrent, taboo, illegal; we are driven to action and advocacy via this witness; seeing the queerness of prior generations is reciprocal, making us feel seen in the present ourselves.

In Write It Out, weeks later, we come to the first week labelled as "Queer Histories" on our spring syllabus (posted to "The [Write It Out] Document," a Google Doc to which all of our students and, per the rules of our umbrella organization, their guardians, have access; see Appendix B). "We're doing it in a very casual way because I am not technically your queer history teacher," I tell the group, "but we're looking at a couple of different cool places in queer history and interesting questions around it." With that disclaimer, I move into the quickwrite, a response to an abstract question with which all of our class meetings start. The question today is "How do you understand queer history/queer histories? What do they mean to you?"

I'm not surprised when both Lys and Kaia include the Stonewall uprising (Baumann et al., 2019; Schneider et al., 2018; Duberman, 2019) in their responses. "We never deserved to live in the shadows of society as an unspoken taboo," Lys says in their piece. The first brick thrown at Stonewall arcs through their quickwrite, which is phrased, as their work frequently is, as a bold and assertive call to action. After reading, however, when I ask how it felt to write it, they reflect on the fact that "it wasn't just that one moment that led … it didn't just combust, there was a boiling point that led to it." Nevertheless, they feel they used the moment to talk back to a straight audience. Speaking to that imagined audience, they say, "[Bigotry is] your own ignorant imperfect

viewing of us, and we can't do anything about it—that's yours. We can only look through our own eyes and see that we are truly beautiful beings and we're perfect in our own way." (Class recording, 5.29.21)

Again characteristically, Kaia's piece is reflective and careful, and attempts, even as a quickwrite, to be comprehensive. She considers how some of the figures most central to Stonewall were "Black trans women … their actions are taken for granted and … they are not listened to today." However, she also refers to the histories of lesbian pirates and to Sappho, and explains that she was beginning to write about Greek mythology, the goddess Artemis specifically, when the quickwrite time ran out. (Class recording, 5.29.21)

Our subsequent conversation reveals that both of them have reached into corners of queer history that I haven't reached myself. They're looking to create narratives of queer history that feel coherent to them, but to do so, they must understand and claim them as counternarrative (e.g. Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2013). As high school students educated in the United States, albeit under very different circumstances (Kaia has been homeschooled for many years, often as part of a homeschool collective, and takes a few courses at a local community college as well; Lys attends their local suburban public high school), they have a clear understanding of what the grand narrative, the master narrative, is. But they're searching for themselves under the surface, at the margins, and are eager to discuss the results of that search.

I begin by asking Kaia about the pirates she mentions.

> Kaia: So there was actually history where two women were disguised as men on, um, some pirate ships, and they fell in love with each other without realizing that they were actually women, but they just didn't care and ran off together. And they were still pirates, relatively fierce … these two would rip their shirts open to prove to men before the killing blow to say, "Ha ha, you got bested by a woman."

"Interesting," I say, "'cause … a lot of the times when we go into those historical tales of like women disguised as men … probably in some of those cases those are people who we today would think of as trans or nonbinary." Both Kaia and Lys, their videos up (it's unusual to have them both visible at the same time), nod vigorously. I continue, "And there were times when we didn't really fully have that language or that way of looking at it, but at the same time that's not true of all of those stories. There's an interesting range of it." (Class recording, 5.29.21)

I feel fiercely underresearched as I speak, blanking on my own knowledge of queer history, feeling I should have prepared better for this level of conversation. But Lys immediately jumps in:

> Lys: I remember being in like elementary school and we had all these like junior chapter books … of women in the Civil and Revolutionary War who just, "Oh, they were just dressing up as a male soldier and they just did that the rest of their lives." It's like, "Oh—woman? I don't know about that." And like looking back on all these little like anecdotes of queer people in history—who are by the way just utter badasses— and then history just—missing every hint possible. Like there's the whole cliché where it's like … "The woman moved into the woods with her really close friend and they never got married, they were always seen holding hands as if it was their husband." It's like, no! They're gay! Get over it! And I just love like stories like that where it's like, you can tell history just really messed up, but at this point no one wants to do anything. (Class recording, 5.29.21)

Kaia and I are laughing along with Lys's dramatic, theatrical phrasing and demonstrative responses, and I barely have time to register the intensity what they have said: *history just really messed up*. Like me, and other queers in my generation, Lys and Kaia have sought desperately to find themselves in history; unlike me and my generation, they have, at sixteen, the resources to find it and the confidence to seek those resources out.

Fire Island Poem
My father didn't want the responsibility and neither did my uncle and my grandmother couldn't stand seeing her dead husband's beach-wet footprints on every weathered floor. Waves swirled in the bight and she sold the house and carried herself to apartment 4D where the window looked at a courtyard with an ever-trickling fountain. When my uncle lived in California far from water and my father and my mother bought a corner of a rehabbed factory and I slept over in apartment 4D because I existed and I was old enough I knew where everything was.

I was a child and men on subways all around me were being eaten alive from inside and I hardly noticed. That's just what subways were like. I was learning to read and ran my fingers under the words on public posters "or … sha-ring … a … needle …" and sometimes some of the men weren't on subways because they went to the beaches where they'd always gone, thin on a map as their arms. I had no reason to know where they were or where it was or think I could have been there watching a late-night lighthouse beam, one phallus touching another's tip, new continents forming from the topography of lesions.

I don't know what my uncle or my father, straighter than the island's long, saw on their teenage beaches besides their own footprints disappearing under tumbles of shells. The men were still healthy then, unsecret secrets sculpted and oiled into the Pines and Sailor's Haven.

Maybe it wouldn't have mattered if we had it, my father at loose ends and idle another decade, rental income slipping through his fingers like every kind of money. Maybe a man died there. Maybe two. Maybe they wanted to, watching the water. I'll never know which house it was or whether it happened.

I was a child and my sister was born in the hospital where so many of the men died, breath faltering like tides. The elevator rose past their rooms to a room I almost remember, light taller than me from an infinite window, scrambling to climb the bed to the infant in my mother's tired arms.

It's only a sandbar, rose up when the water receded and will disappear in the next hurricane or the next. Every house gone. I never wanted anything much but to write and watch waves write something I couldn't read until I got tired.
-GCN, 2021

For Kaia, one of the greatest sources of queer obfuscation, of "history really messing up," is Greek mythology. "The amount of stories that people just go, 'oh, yeah, they're totally straight!'" says Kaia in a tone of deep exasperation while Lys nods and smiles along. "Like, I'm sorry. Artemis is not straight. She didn't just run into the woods to not marry a man, she ran into the woods to have her harem of women." I can't help laughing, but my laugh both acknowledges the humor and the incisiveness of her observation.

When Lys picks up Kaia's theme, Kaia keeps her camera up and her emphatic gestures of agreement are visible. Greek mythology is "so unapologetically queer," says Lys, "and then, well—plot twist!—the Renaissance happened, and then everybody was like, 'how about we take these amazing queer people and just give them like husbands and wives and it works like it totally works!'" As they continue, Lys's assessment of humor reflects the reasons I laughed at Kaia's thoughts about Artemis:

> Lys: I love how in history, historians spend so much time trying to cover it up that gay people were a part of culture, in history, and the way the world like worked through other people's eyes—like gay people were part of those stepping stones and stuff, and historians are just like, "No, what about our—our Judeo-Christian values, we have to insert those into things that aren't that!" And it's so funny … Honestly, in an ironic way, it brings me joy when I find something that's just so obviously wrong but people are still, "Yeah, this makes sense!" Like it's … their stupidity is funny. (Class recording, 5.29.21)

I laugh, and Kaia grins and nods, at their comic deep-voiced delivery of "Yeah, this makes sense!", but none of us, Lys least of all, misses the import. Marginalized artists from Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892) to Jordan Peele (2017) have seen the absurdities and ironies of their constant struggles. Lys, like many a sophisticated reader and writer, finds humor in the foolishness of the mainstream public, but they know this "stupidity" ultimately damages them, Lys, far more than it does its purveyors.

At the same time, Kaia's smiles are rare; she's by far the most reserved and careful member of the group, and it's unusual to see her so emphatic. She's never had a circle of queer friends, or even colleagues, before, as she'll tell me in our interview, and she discovers common ground among other LGBTQ+ teenagers:

> Kaia: [It's] incredibly amazing. Because quite a few of my friends are not queer, at least that I know of … it's incredibly refreshing to have actual person-to-person interactions with people … that are my own age … that's typically the age where people tend to figure themselves out.

I have to laugh at that—"oh, honey, I don't want you to be under the illusion that that ever ends"—but Kaia will not be dismissed when she's trying to convey a thought of complexity and import. "Oh, I'm not," she answers, "but, you know, where that sort of starts, and figuring yourself out that way, um, is incredibly—it's really nice to have people to bounce that stuff off of." (Interview, 8.5.21)

I read Kaia and Lys an excerpt from my own quickwrite on queer history: "I think there's part of me that likes looking for myself, my echoes, my familiars, at the margins of history, not the center. I identify with the surprise, the secret, the defiant." Both of them, their faces still visible in Zoom squares, nod along with me. "So," I explain, "I know what you mean about the pleasure. It's like, on the one hand we're being historically dismissed; on the other hand, we know how to find ourselves when we can. I feel like both of those sort of circle each other." (Class recording, 5.29.21) This returns to Seidel's (2012) discovery in Kaufman's reflection: in finding others on the margins, we find that we might not have the same need for the unsafe center we had once imagined was our only choice.

Kaia has not developed the independent friendship that Quinn and Lys have with each other via Minecraft and Twitch, but she has found what Phillips & Lund (2019) describe as *affective resonance* in our third-space learning community (Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006; Gutíerrez, 2008). Per Phillips & Lund (2019):

> *Affective* resonance, then, is resonance in which feelings are amplified as people, resources, and flows of emotions intersect in relationships such that there is vibration and resonation of a natural frequency—meaning that there is understanding, mutual respect, safety and care in the interaction as feelings are felt, named and/or shared. (p. 1536)

The reserved Kaia's feelings are indeed "amplified" in the Write It Out space. She is a person who's decided she's required to be in the closet at home, in the presence of her

father and his friends, who "are—pardon my language—misogynistic pigs who … are quite racist and awful people" (Interview, 8.5.2021); being in a space where she can take the natural frequency of shared feelings (and takes on history and mythology) for granted is tremendous for her. Kaia is often a barometer of our relational transformations (Ehret, 2018) within the writing space—she sees and responds to the ways that we are building upon each other's ideas, the ways we're building into a community.

This shared energy only increases when I ask Lys and Kaia what they know about Sappho.

> Lys: I've read a bunch of excerpts, like her fragments—which, by the way, her fragments, when it's just one line, decimate me! They just ruin me. 'Cause just that one line—imagining that in an entire poem! Bonkers! Um, but she … lived on the island of Lesbos, which is now where we get the word lesbian, because Sappho was like basically the first recorded lesbian? In the sense that her most favorite—um, not favorite, her most known—poem is like the ode to Aphrodite or the hymn to Aphrodite, where … she says, "O mother I cannot stop"—like something about weaving, 'cause Aphrodite's gonna mean fall in love with another girl, and basically she was just a big lesbian who couldn't weave because she was just so in love with a woman. Which if that's not lesbian culture, I don't know. …
>
> Kaia: She was basically everything that [Lys] said … she just always comes to mind because …she is just a huge figure. … I can't think of words right now, but she—she's one of the people that people in general can actually say typically is queer, rather than having to beat around the bush about it. I have met some people that don't believe she's queer but—

Here she holds out her hand with a flat palm towards the screen, as if gesturing "stop" to a crosswalk. I laugh, as she and I have been laughing at Lys's performance, and Lys grins and nods emphatically along. The affective tonality has shifted in our Zoom room; there's a new lightness, a humor, related to how blatant our shared understanding is. Sappho is a lesbian, the very source of the word; there is no historical archaeology, no reading of the margins, no proving to be done here. We know we're in this history. I

explain that another twentieth-century word often used as a synonym for what we now call lesbian was "sapphic," for exactly that reason. There's a part of me, I think, that in spite of all evidence to the contrary still doesn't believe I'm "teaching" when it's Lys or Kaia bringing the history instead of me. But indeed, Lys raises their hand again:

> Lys: One last thing about Sappho—what I really liked about a lot of her writing and stuff is when you think back of ancient history, you think, "Oh, they knew all the answers, like this is how we got here." But Sappho is just like a completely human person, and in her writing she's so just completely emotional. And in a lot of other classics, your like Homer, et cetera, et cetera … they just portray emotion, but it's not the narrator's emotion, it's what's going on in a story. And Sappho in her a lot of her writing is—she's explaining the emotions she's feeling, and it's emotional … like you can feel the emotion in her words and you can relate to it, because it's emotions that are just really true feeling of love, that you just can't do anything else. I've never really seen it written in other writing, besides certain YA which is just—yikes! But Sappho is just so fluid with it because she makes it relatable to all time, but also has it relatable to her own time period, where like—weaving, women did that regardless of status, [but it's still] universal feeling, and … I really like that about her work. (Class recording, 5.29.21)

Lys's intimate connection with "the classics" of Greek and Roman literature far exceeds those of their classmates in Write It Out (as their writing about Patroclus later in this chapter will also show), something I find hard to separate mentally from their upbringing and socialization as a nerdy White boy. (Their dismissal of young adult literature seems to fall under this umbrella as well—few and far between are the seventeen-year-olds who consider themselves "intellectual" and will admit to reading literature about seventeen-year-olds.) But their analysis here is nothing short of breathtaking. I cannot but read this in and of itself as a discussion of affect and affective response—per Lys, Sappho takes us, her readers, into the visceral moment even across the thousands of years between us. Sappho is not describing her feelings and asking us to analyze them, according to Lys. Rather, she's bringing us into the rawness that is

driving her. And that reaches Lys themself, amplified through their experience as a reader.

I ask Lys to read Sappho's Fragment XII aloud, given that they're in "high Sappho mode at the moment":

In a dream I spoke with the Cyprus-born,
And said to her,
"Mother of beauty, mother of joy,
Why hast thou given to men

"This thing called love, like the ache of a wound
In beauty's side,
To burn and throb and be quelled for an hour
And never wholly depart?"

And the daughter of Cyprus said to me,
"Child of the earth,
Behold, all things are born and attain,
But only as they desire,—

"The sun that is strong, the gods that are wise,
The loving heart,
Deeds and knowledge and beauty and joy,—
But before all else was desire."
(Sappho, 2018, tr. Carman)

When I ask for immediate responses to the poem, Kaia quickly responds, "Jealousy. Longing." Characteristically, Lys is more verbose, meditating on the concept of desire and its history in ancient Greece in the context of sexism.

> Lys: I think in the poem she's talking about—and all of these feelings that come with desire are just these primal things that, everyone's experienced it, and I don't necessarily mean desire in a desire or romantic attraction or sexual one for another person, just desire in general and the feeling of want. I just feel like the difference of want in greed and the want in desire are two different things—greed makes more of a negative aspect and desire's the good one, and she's talking about the good one … Sappho's asking the lady of Cyprus, which I'm pretty sure is supposed to be Aphrodite, … "why do men get to feel this when I cannot?" Because especially in that time period, women didn't really get a say in much of anything, and men basically got to do whatever they want and get away with it, um especially their carnal desires which were just—yikes! … And Aphrodite's kinda telling her in it, "Hey, you know … it's the most primal feeling, everyone

> can experience it, … just 'cause the world's telling you only men can do this does not mean it's true." This is the whole feeling, everyone feels it, everyone experiences it, it's nature.

Again, Lys has dug here for the deepest connections in history they can find and aims to universalize them, to understand their own feelings—their own queer desires, which are so profoundly a part of their own history and self-concept (Shavelson et al., 1976) as a historical human drive. Equally, Lys as a queer writer and reader is driven by Ehret's (2018) notion of desire—they aren't simply trying to understand as an intellectual exercise, but are driven by the *desire* to understand more. Since I agree, I build on their response in conversation:

> Gemma: I mean, what—what we know of ourselves first as queer people is at some level desire. … It's not necessarily, as you say, [Lys], romantic per se, but we know somehow that what we want, [and] it's not the same want that's being expressed around us … I see in this poem the notion of that making us who we are … what we want, what we need, what we long for, deeds and knowledge and beauty and joy, all coming from desire. Jealousy, as [Kaia] said, coming from desire. So many different permutations of it, but with that at the root. (Class recording, 5.29.21)

I question myself constantly with texts and ideas like these. In this out-of-school time program, I'm a teacher with no immediate oversight, no modality of checking my responses other than myself, and it's incredibly difficult to balance in the moment what counts as shared knowledge between queer people that straight people can't understand and what crosses the line as an adult sharing her thoughts with teenagers. Am I talking about sex with my students right now? Can I? Certainly, English teachers in secondary classrooms are often called upon to teach texts that include sex and sexuality, and, as discussed in Chapter 4, sex education has been foundational to my students' experiences and coming-out processes. I can't tell if it's only my status as an out-of-school time

teacher that makes me so uncertain of my province here, or if my uncertainty is linked to queerness and shame.

Kaia says, “I love ‘to burn and throb and be quelled for an hour / and never wholly depart.’ I love that.”

I stumble through my own response. “Yeah, and—and that’s—that’s love itself, and that’s separating love out from desire, the way she’s phrasing it. The, the, the ‘I’—the speaker—is asking about love and, and Aphrodite is saying, ‘No, desire comes before that, desire need come before that.’” (Class recording, 5.29.21)

Can I assure myself that this is acceptable? Where are the lines? We’re not talking about sex or sexuality, we’re talking about *desire*—by many measures an affective experience. I concur with many scholars that queerness itself is at a certain level affective (e.g. Niccolini, 2016; see Chapter 3) and that this in and of itself is the subject of Sappho’s fragment. I see it in looking through my own journals from when I was Lys and Kaia’s age—the slow process of bringing the obvious truth of affective *want*, of *desire*, into conscious, articulated identity and experience. Whatever this nebulous experience of desire was, it came long before love, long before it made another person its fixation. And yet it was a clear element of both surprising and knowing myself, this sense of what Lys calls “desire in general and the feeling of want.” I think I hear what they’re identifying, think I am connecting it to my experience in order to understand theirs, in a way that a straight teacher could not. Am I projecting? Am I assuming? How can I know? What allows a teacher to know?

hooks (1994) may provide some answers here. She advocates for eros and the uses of the erotic in pedagogy—with the meaning not limited to sexuality, but connected to passion and love. “Well-learned distinctions between public and private make us

believe that love has no place in the classroom," she says (p. 198). However, she advocates for this passion, for seeing to our students' real needs and making a connection based on those needs along with our own. I am trying to speak to my students' needs and vulnerabilities; in our case, in a queer space, there are vulnerabilities we share that many other teachers do not share with them, and those vulnerabilities are connected to our *passion*, or our desire. Meeting my students in a space of love (hooks, 1994) means that I owe those vulnerabilities pedagogical acknowledgment and engagement.

Sprawling
I tripped over myself again, this
weight and this weight and this weight. I had
too many directions. I was a starfish. I exposed
my intestines and they crusted with sand. In the ocean I
was weightless. It was almost too late for that.
-GCN, Write It Out poem, 3.6.2021

"As [Lys] said, a lot of Sappho's surviving poems are fragments," I say to Kaia and Lys, "and because of that we don't always know when they're not, even the ones that stand and feel more complete like this." I ask them to "write into a space you see left in this poem—a question that you think is unanswered or a thought that's unfinished" for the next fifteen minutes. I leave the screenshare up so that they can continue to use the poem as a reference while they work, but both of their cameras remain on. This is an unusual move for both of them, and the two are a unique combination—I've seen lessons alone with just Quinn and Kaia, lessons alone (briefly) with just Lys and Hart, but never this particular pair.

Kaia volunteers to read her piece first. "It is relatively short, but—"

"What? Responses to Sappho? Relatively short? Never," I say. I'm delighted that this earns me a laugh from both Lys and Kaia, relieved for the moment that both their laughing images are visible to me.

Kaia writes:

This thorn does not discriminate with my fingers
did the storm forget the way of life?
is this blood just imagination?
or is it privilege that I believe
to receive this bitter honey
that is tripped upon
in twilight
-K, 5.29.2021

"Mmm, that's got some Sappho going on," I say, which again results in a smile from both students. Lys's response is energetic and focused. They say that desire "isn't really something that experiences bias," and explain that the feeling of desire is universal, going across all kinds of people and all kinds of lives. "The thorn pricks everyone, you know? It doesn't choose who it can and cannot harm, it just … happens, universally."

"Was that what you were hearing for yourself, [Kaia], or is that a new take for you?" I ask.

"That's what I was hearing for myself." (Class recording, 5.29.21)

I keep to myself that the poem to me felt slightly obscure, that I myself was having trouble following Kaia's line of thought. But to Lys, it was instantly clear. If this assignment was to reach into history, Lys seems to have recognized the same blank space in the Sappho piece that Kaia saw, felt a similar connection to this particular moment of queer history. Indeed, they, Lys, write a piece they say comes "after the line 'but before all else was desire'":

before the trees

and the ocean
and the soil you walk upon
there was desire
and it filled the void
and it made it into everything
It is not owned by man
nor woman
nor humans
for desire predates them
Desire comes before the rose, the kiss, the wedding vow
Desire is not to be claimed or quarreled over
Desire is not the subject of wars or love
but the kindling that spreads that fire
it acts in neither benevolence nor malice
for its precedence predates that as well
Desire is existence and consciousness and feeling
and it comes before all else in time and in life
-L, 5.29.2021

"This is weird," Kaia responds, "but it sounded like a recipe. As in, like, one can't lead to the next without the building block, sort of." I comment on the near-religious tone of the piece; Lys responds to both of our comments with a smile, and I wonder what they think of our brevity given the weight and freight of their own comments throughout the afternoon. I share one of my own brief pieces, and my questions only increase when Lys responds to it. I read:

I gnaw on memories like bones
marrow desiccated by the time I reach it
and I wonder
when bits of blood-starved sponge melt between my teeth
whether that's all I was digging for
-GCN, 5.29.2021

Lys, without raising their hand—something that seems much easier for them when Quinn, so devoted to the protocols of being a "good student," isn't in the room—gives an immediate and verbose answer.

> Lys: I like how, at least in my mind like how I interpreted it as, um, desire is something that you can't really pinpoint what you're finding or what you're looking for. When you feel that, it's just something that it's—it's—it's like—it's a gut feeling. You just go with it. It's not something that you really can like think about, in the sense that you have a linear like reason behind it, you just do it. At

> least that's how I feel desire as well. So. That's what I saw in that, with the bone and you're gnawing down and then realize, "What was I going, is this what I was looking for in the first place?"

"Bone to me," says Kaia, "just is more of like how hard it can be to acknowledge, to find or acknowledge desire, and how hard it can be to let go even?" Both Lys and I are nodding along with her. "Like—like a dog with a bone sort of thing." (Class recording, 5.29.21) She smiles, and I laugh, again uncertain of where and when I should share my work in our class. When Quinn is present, I often choose not to do so: I can't get a word in edgewise when all three of them read, and the wise choice seems to be prioritizing the students' work. I've chosen to read today to balance out Quinn's absence. Still, something has made me question the appropriateness of this Sappho poem throughout, even when I find it necessary. We are reaching, as per what Lys articulated, into the viscera of history, into what reads as a very intimate moment of desire that happens to reach across thousands of years. Our writing group has always been intimate, from the first day we met, and I have aimed to set a tone where that's comfortable, where students feel trust in me and in each other; I was almost surprised when that trust lasted through my careful articulation of informed-consent procedures for centering my dissertation research on our Write It Out meetings. How will I know if something is "too adult" for older teenagers in this atmosphere of confidence and comfort? And how will I know when I've internalized the mores of a society that still finds the very existence of queer people to be, at best, "inappropriate"?

And still, I know my students need to think about this. In contextualizing themselves in history and even in the present moment, they need to have this affective connection. Or so I conjecture based on the relief that both Kaia and Lys articulate today, how clearly each of them has looked for themselves in a larger history.

Queer Personal Histories

In addition to wanting to find reflections of their own experience in the more conventional notion of "history"—historical texts, historical events—and looking for an affective sense of connection there, my students in Write It Out are driven to narrate their personal histories as queer people. I find myself sharing more of my own history of queer identity than I'd known I would as we enter the process of bearing critical witness to each other's personal narratives, each other's questions and traumas and uncertainties.

There is perhaps no denominator more common to the American queer experience than the coming-out story, but I've often felt hard pressed to admit that I never exactly had one. I "came out" in fits and starts from my teens to my twenties, sometimes relying on my writing to do work that I didn't want to do in interpersonal interactions, often acknowledging my interest in women as a fact only to deem it immediately unattainable and turning my focus to the more conventional narrative of men.

My sexuality is bugging me again (and again and again). I don't know what I am. I'm always so close to saying, "I'm bi, okay, I'm bi," but I can never quite do it. I can say "everyone is bi" and not know if I'm using it as an excuse or not, but I can never just directly say "I am bi." Is it just because I have no experience, or what? See, I don't think straight makes sense to me/for me, but I don't know, I truly ruly don't know. Why is this not simpler? It's <u>me</u>—I should understand it!
-GCN, journal, 8.3.1998, age 16

In some ways, my experience was most similar to Kaia's, whose own staggered coming-out process feels almost dated compared to the accelerated realization and ownership of identity among her peers in the group. When she joined Write It Out, she

explains, “I had, um, recently basically come to terms with [my bisexual identity] myself. I’m not fully to terms with it, um, I still forget sometimes.”

“What does that mean,” I ask, “to forget?”

She responds:

> Kaia: Um, a lot of times when people are talking about the LGBTQ community, or when they reference, you know, okay, the queer community can use this word but you straight people cannot, or, you know, only the queer community can understand that, I’m like, “[But] I understand that—OH! OKAY!”

I have to laugh, though I’m concerned for a moment that reserved and careful Kaia will take offense; she smiles, letting me know her theatricality was intentional. “Especially with a lot of … people saying, you know, okay, ‘I only want to listen to queer people talk about scenarios or stuff’ … it’s like, ‘Oh, that’s very interesting.’ … I often forget that, you know, I’m actually part of that community.” (Interview, 8.5.21)

Kaia, Quinn, and Lys all use “the queer community” and “the LGBTQ community” loosely, as default terms for the collective of queer people in the world. To them, we are all in community. This is directly reflected more in Quinn’s behavior and expressed philosophies than anyone else’s—she tells story upon story of reaching another queer teenager, being part of someone else’s coming-out process, feeling connection to others based on their shared identity—but the other two seem to accept it uncritically, as in Kaia’s statement above. There exists some monolithic “queer community” on the periphery of which she exists. “And I think that also comes into, you know, like, the bisexual part of it,” Kaia says. “Like I get both worlds a little bit … and a lot of times people will go ‘lesbians,’ and then I’m sort of sitting there like, ‘do I count, do I not count?’” Her uncertainty is reflected in a poem she writes in response to the

quickwrite prompt "How do we know what we want?" It's one of the more direct and emotionally explicit poems that Kaia writes in the course of our meetings:

sometimes it's a buildup in my stomach that pulls me around
or maybe the twitching of fingers
that twitch on their own
but when thoughts leave me
I get stuck and broken
cogs slowing the whole clock down
maybe I wonder if I did it to myself and it chanced to be less of a drag
did this trouble trick me out of finding myself sooner?
the want's removed from my body
but I need to know what sweater
what type of ice cream
what attraction?
-K, 5.8.2021

Quinn, also bisexual but confident she "counts," is out to everyone in her life, even a father she feels contempt for; she and Lys, with their shared interest in Minecraft and Twitch, become a natural social fit. She acknowledges in our interview that though she admires Kaia's work, "I haven't really gotten to know Kaia like that well yet." (Interview, 8.5.21) Kaia understands this; she doesn't see the relationship she has with Quinn or Lys as a friendship, but she's astonished at what the three of them have shared based on their affiliation as queer writers. Lys's open embrace of and advocacy for feminism is particularly potent for her. When we discussed schools and schooling, Lys, talking about the harassment they experienced as a queer person, explained how their fellow students and even teachers objectified them in the name of "acceptance." In one example, they wore a mesh shirt to school with nothing underneath and received multiple compliments from teachers, but on the same day a cis girl was sent to the office for violating dress code because her bra strap was showing. Lys articulated this as an unacceptable double standard, and part of the confusion of being objectified without really being heard or understood (Class recording, 5.15.21).

Lys's articulation of these complex dynamics astonished Kaia, as she explains in our interview. "That people even, you know, that were born male actually can understand that this is something that happens and are aware of that, and you don't actually have to school them on the fact that that happens …" She trails off in astonishment. (Although Lys has also referred to themself as a "biological male," it's controversial in transgender communities whether one's assigned sex at birth should be considered "the sex you were born.") Kaia continues, telling a story of a straight male friend whose response to Kaia's own feminist concerns was the diametric opposite of Lys's advocacy. (Interview, 8.5.21) In Kaia's combined relief at accessing and engaging with queer teenagers her own age and hesitancy to let one identity (bisexual) eclipse another (writer—or at least, in Kaia's case, person passionate about and invested in writing), I recognize the marks of my own adolescence, the pattern of mental embellishment and scars left by my personal history.

Although Quinn's experience as a bisexual teenage girl is entirely different from mine, I do find familiarity in her openness. From our first class meeting, I feel it is Quinn, more than me as a leader, who has driven the simple sense of open comfort in our Zoom room. She smoothly shares the struggles in her own personal history—with mental illness, with disordered eating, with perfectionism—in a way that acknowledges that all changes and improvements are still in progress and invites her colleagues to ask questions, to engage. This, at least, is my perception; she feels the order of operations was different, as she later reveals in our interview:

> Quinn: I've struggled a lot in the past year with like depression, like … issues with like borderline personality, and then like also like anorexia. So it's been hard. … With [Write It Out], like I was able to like write about those feelings … I was like eating properly, I was waking up at a normal time, like even not on Saturdays [when our meetings took place]. (Interview, 8.5.21)

Quinn responds to the "How do we know what we want?" prompt with the following:

passion-filled glares and tear-filled eyes
blood on my cuticles and winning on my mind
tapping my foot and cracking my neck
any number higher than 1 is a red alarm
If I can fall asleep I'm not working hard enough
If I don't sleep I won't do my best tomorrow
If I achieve my goals should I be proud or should I mourn all that I have lost?
All the YA books I never finished
All the pink flowers I never smelled
All the desserts I couldn't eat
All the half-grown nails bitten with my teeth
All the inches of hair that I cut off at midnight
All piled into one big casket
that I will soon fill
me who is so light that one gust of wind will push me in
and so heavy that I can hardly stand
-Q, 5.8.2021

Coming out didn't ease all of the pressures Quinn has experienced or put on herself over the years, she explains as she breaks down these images for me and her classmates. She rejected stereotypical femininity—"pink flowers"—and the nominally childish—"YA books"—to prove her own mettle. She rejected desserts in the acute stages of her eating disorder, because "nobody ever sees a bigger girl doing that." (Class recording, 5.8.21) Nonetheless, she approaches these challenges with the same frankness she engaged her queerness, as described in the previous chapter. All of Quinn's personal history is woven into her experience of being a bisexual girl, and all of her story is present for us—it's how she reaches for us, how she connects. Quinn's openness alters our affective tonality as a collective. I won't understand this style entirely, what the community means to her (see Chapter 6), until I interview her months later, but although her openness seems much more like my own approach as an adult than as an adolescent, I feel both profound resonance with her storytelling and gratitude to her for bringing this sense of self-

compassion, which easily extends to compassion for her colleagues, into the center of the group.

The students' openness—Quinn's frank demonstrativeness, Kaia's halting courage—makes me feel a need to share my own queer personal history, and I find myself inserting the landmarks of my own ersatz "coming out" in our class conversations. Many or most of them are connected to writing. It's flawed to say that these questions or ideas come up randomly—I am, after all, the person who sets the discussion questions and prompts for the group—but I'm surprised by the near-unconscious, affective impulse to share. During the winter session of Write It Out, our first weeks together, I found myself explaining a distinct memory from fifth grade, when we were asked to write a poem about one of the characters in our D'Aulaire's book of Greek myths (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1962). I hadn't been able to tear my eyes away from the illustration of blonde Andromeda, chained to a rock by Medusa before Perseus rescued her.

Let's take it from the top
Strands of lovely, fine yellow thread
Skin—no! 'Tis silk of peach
Two perfect blue stars twinkle
Above a button nose
Below it, a perfect heart-shaped cherry
Neck long and graceful
Shoulders clothed in many layers of fine cloth I long to unwind …
-GCN, 1993, age 11

After reading my effusive words about the character, I knew, profoundly, that they weren't things I was supposed to say, felt a deeply rooted sense of shame in my own writing (Ahmed, 2004; Probyn, 2010). What did that mean? I was writing words about a woman—a fictional woman, an illustration of a woman—that were clearly romantic, and

I was a girl. I knew this wasn't acceptable to my classmates, knew I would be due for mockery and ostracism.

My solution rested on the sophistication of my own writing, of which I, at ten, was already very much aware: I titled the poem "Andromeda, by Perseus" and claimed the poem was written in the voice of the male character textually in love with Andromeda. "I was just like, 'I'm going to pretend this was written by a mythological man!'" I explain to the students. No one had to know it wasn't, and I'll never know whether anyone did. I felt I had hidden, which was right, because I felt like I needed to. Many months later, I will allude very vaguely to this experience in a poem draft I share with the group, and Kaia will recognize it immediately, demonstrating, to me, that my history had enough resonance for her to lodge in her memory. I share the story of the crush I portrayed in my poem "Vertex" (see previous chapter), and on a day when we're talking about the relationship between writing, queerness, and desire, I explain the story of my first crush—and the story of the story of my first crush.

> Gemma: I had my first undeniable crush on a human when I was thirteen, on a girl, and I wrote—I wrote a story about her and just, you know, and it was very fictionalized, but I—I kept the story and I knew it was really good. And I mean, you know how it is, you—you'd be shocked, all of you, if you looked back at something you wrote in eighth grade and thought it was really good, right? It would startle you if you looked at something you wrote in eighth grade two or three years later and thought it was good?

Even Quinn's emphatic nod onscreen makes a difference to me in the telling of this queer personal history. I've explained it before, but never to a queer teenage writer who could understand, I believe in that moment, every dimension of what I was talking about, who might feel the resonance right then.

> Gemma: So I looked at the story three years later, when I was sixteen, and I was like, "Oh my god, this is still good," and I decided to submit it to the school literary magazine. And I don't–I don't remember it as being conscious altogether,

> but I do—when it got in I do remember thinking, "I don't know if this is coming out, [but] if it is I guess I'm okay with it." But really, only my one friend ever talked to me about it, and years later I asked a friend from high school and he said, "Gemma, by that point everybody was so used to you being a writer that nobody assumed anything you wrote was autobiographical." And so I—I felt a lot of confusion even a few years later about that because I couldn't tell if I wanted to reveal myself. (Class recording, 5.8.21)

Lys responds immediately, "I think, um, writing can be a good place to, um, hide—not hide feelings, but like, veil them loosely … and like, show what you're really thinking, but since it's in a way that no one else would recognize … you can feel safer. At least for me sometimes." There's no question in my mind that they have heard me, that some part of this relationship I've articulated between writing and queerness is also part of how they view their personal history. They're bringing the reciprocal element of critical witness to the table, meeting my testimony with understanding and connection.

Kaia, too, builds on my statement and Lys's response:

> Kaia: I do get the whole buffer thing, and it's also having that chance of, "Okay, okay, if this is coming out, this is coming out, but do I want it to be coming out?" sort of thing. Because you're—it's such a hard decision, and even … if you know you're supposed—I don't wanna use the word supposed to, but you would think that you would know if you wanted that, but it just doesn't happen. (Class recording, 5.8.21)

Here, again, it seems Kaia and I have seen each other's queer personal histories in a distinct way. Her hesitations to reveal her own bisexuality mirror mine at her age, and we find resonance in these meetings of our own narratives of personal history. Although her choice to engage with queer community and the fluidity of her technological access mean she often has language for it that I did not at the time—on many occasions she's spoken directly of fear, of the societal and interpersonal threats that she and other queer people might face, an umbrella under which I was reluctant to directly include myself at sixteen—her halting speech often indicates a certain kind of affective intensity for her.

The question of whether and how to come out, and how that question relates to writing, is central to how Kaia understands herself.

Knowing
I think it might
have been my mom's friends and the one bed
in their loft but I don't know
about knowing
I mean whether it means
understanding
it might
have been the love poems I dictated
to my teacher about actress
after actress in the plays
we saw all the time but I didn't know
they were love poems and I didn't
know you weren't supposed to only
in every show I saw there was a woman who
captivated me and I wanted each time
to meet her backstage and most
of the time I got to so she was
and wasn't the woman I saw onstage and I didn't know
if the overwhelm and worship crossed
over or what that
would mean and I don't know
even now if it did or how the actresses
saw the intensity of the casting director's
cute kid or if
they even noticed
I noticed and if
I were a boy I knew
they'd say something
different about it or it might
have been a joke I heard
on some sitcom I don't remember or it might
have been my mom's smooth voice talking
about our cousin at lunch *she's gay*
she has a partner like these were essential
to the story about art school
or my cousin's next visit while I sipped
my ginger ale (no Coke allowed
until I was eight) and blew out through
the straw and watched
bubbles but probably it really
was the actresses
the relief that they stayed
onstage in my mind so it made perfect sense
for them to glow
-GCN, 2022

One particular assignment and conversation casts us all back into a memory that asks all of us to bear critical witness (Dutro, 2019b) for each other. On the day that I present the quickwrite question "How do we know what we want?" I've brought in a song as a mentor text. Although the students have brought songs as prompts when asked to bring inspirational texts (both Quinn and Kaia, for instance, are particular fans of the group Mother Mother [e.g. 2018]), this is the first time I've done so, still bound, perhaps, to a dated idea of writing as only related to words on page, rather than multiple and complex forms of composition. My chosen text is the song "Ring of Keys" from the musical *Fun Home,* Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron's adaptation of legendary lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir (Bechdel, 2006; Kron & Tesori, 2015). In the song, the adult Alison introduces the scene of a preadolescent Alison witnessing a butch delivery driver bring crates into a diner where she and her father are eating. The child Alison then sings the lyrics below:

Someone just came in the door
Like no one I ever saw before
I feel—
I feel—
I don't know where you came from
I wish I did, I feel so dumb
I feel—

Your swagger and your bearing
and the just-right clothes you're wearing
Your short hair and your dungarees and your lace-up boots
and your keys, oh, your ring of keys

I thought it was supposed to be wrong
But you seem okay with being strong
I want—
You're so—
It's prob'ly conceited to say,
but I think we're alike in a certain way
I, um—

Your swagger and your bearing
and the just-right clothes you're wearing
Your short hair and your dungarees and your lace-up boots
and your keys, oh, your ring of keys

Do you feel my heart saying hi?
In this whole luncheonette why am I the only one
who sees you're beautiful?
No.
I mean … Handsome

Your swagger and your bearing
and the just-right clothes you're wearing
Your short hair and your dungarees and your lace-up boots
and your keys, oh, your ring of keys

I know you
I know you
I know you
(Kron & Tesori, 2015, p. 56-57)

In my own experience, I've seen this song interpreted as focused on romantic love, as in noted lesbian comedian Tig Notaro's television show *One Mississippi* (Becky et al., 2015-2017), and I've come to class determined to counter that interpretation of the text. I'm often concerned that portrayals of queerness in media are limited to romantic love or sexual desire, and I consider this piece an exemplar of portraying our experiences beyond those limits. I plan to tell the students exactly that should they share what I consider a misinterpretation.

But to my surprise, all of the students recognize its subject immediately. When I ask what "Ring of Keys" is about, Quinn quickly offers:

> Quinn: Like a grown—a girl, I think—I could be wrong—like remembering her—one of her first personal realizations of like her queer identity, and then like, it's like the young version of her singing about it, and just being like wow, this is a—like this is a strong woman who isn't afraid to show that she's strong. And it's almost like she can see herself within her. It was a moment of realization for her, but she didn't quite understand why, 'cause she's like not, not able to put her sentences, she was just confused.

Lys agrees and takes the sentiment further:

> Lys: I definitely related to the younger voice … I remember when I was younger and still very confused on what everything meant and what my feelings were and seeing people in public and looking at them and being like, "Wow, I'm feeling something, I don't know what it is, but I'm just hyperfixating on your existence right now." And looking back, I know why, but like I remember coming home to like, I always had some random like journal with the strap on it so that it closed and I'd write about it, I'd write about like all the amazing things about them and how much I wanted to be like them.

Lys's words here allow me to picture their experiences perfectly. As a teenager, I always felt pulled to portrayals of queer couples and narratives of queer self-discovery; I sought the rare character written as queer with a voraciousness that always startled me. Since I lived in New York City, queer people were more visible in my daily life than in that of most 1990s adolescents, but I felt both frightened to be connected to them and powerfully drawn to them. It's astonishing to me that Lys doesn't have that fear, or that if they do, it's been eclipsed by their longing.

> Lys: And these complete strangers in the world that are living their lives—now they probably have like 401Ks and like two cats or whatever—have like subconsciously shaped my identity and who I am. You know, I'll think about it and I'll be like, "Man, remember that one time, it was February and I saw that guy in heels and like, where is he now, you know?" And I can remember going and writing it down and I'd think about it and I just—I knew I was one and the same with them, I just didn't know what it meant, and it's really like nice to think about now … and that maybe there's a really good chance I'm one of those people that someone else is looking at, has seen, and they're like, "Wow," and they do the exact same, and it's kind of like this snowball effect that happens for everyone.

"Yeah," Kaia responds. "I feel like this was …" She pauses for a long time before continuing.

> Kaia: I—I totally agree with everyone. But having her confusion, and her trying to—I don't wanna say correct herself, but going, "Oh, you're handsome," and not being able to finish her sentences because she in her mind thinks that this is wrong—it was very relatable and I liked it. (Class recording, 5.8.21)

The song is concrete and clear for my students, intimately linked to their queer personal histories. They don't see it as a romantic love song, they see it as a story of their own childhoods. "I am fascinated by how clear that felt to all of you," I tell them, though perhaps I shouldn't have been—it's a song about queerness in youth, an experience from which my students are not nearly so distant as are adults like Tig Notaro. Kron and Tesori are illuminating an experience in which my students recognize not simply themselves, but their recent selves, and of which they have an immediate, affective understanding of the significance. They have found a new type of mirror, and found a new form of "credibility" in the lyrics and music (Bishop, 1990; Halverson, 2007). I'm about to expand on some of this in our classroom, but my students are instead intensely eager to continue, pressed into Ehret's (2018) version of desire in our conversation. I decline to center my own speech when their words are practically spilling over each other, at least as much as the medium of Zoom allows.

> Quinn: This is like, later in life than when I truly realized I was not straight, but like that sense of like a connection even though it was such a short interaction … The musical that I saw in New York City, *Be More Chill*—I was at the stage door with a bunch of other people and that musical is like, a lot of queer young people really enjoyed it, and it was like, I never talked to these people again, I don't know who they are, I saw them August 2, 2019, but I just remember … social anxiety in me like completely like left my body, and I just like talked to these people, and it was like, I knew because they had short curly blue hair—like I remember one of them, and we talked in the elevator about their Cos Plans, which is like cosplay plans, but I don't even do cosplay! But I was just so excited because I knew, I was like, This is somebody who … is like me and like, how proudly they're living! And they might even be younger than me, I don't know, but it was just like, these people that I can talk to comfortably they're not gonna judge me and they care about the same things that I care about. … That song reminded me of that. …
>
> Kaia: It felt extremely relatable because I've always had—like I've always known but never actually known, if that makes sense. … And just going, "Oh, she's just really awesome," rather than the rest of it—yeah. And going back to what Lys said, wanting to be the person that someone else finds who they are on, if that makes sense—yeah. I totally relate to that. (Class recording, 5.8.21)

As Bechdel's small, specific memory from the age of ten has been memorialized in her graphic novel (2006) and translated by Kron and Tesori (2015), also queer writers themselves, into a resonant moment of imagined song, the immediate details of Quinn's experience at *Be More Chill* (Tracz & Iconis, 2015)—down to date and physical description—remain with Quinn, become key to narrating the history of her queer self. Listening to her, I'm once again startled by my impulse to share my own experience—but in this case it's a recent experience, something that happened only days before this conversation. Even as I've brought my past history into the class—that is, my own experience as a queer adolescent, as my students are now—this feels different, but personal history is ongoing, building, and the conversation leads me to recognize an aspect of it for the first time.

> Gemma: Me too. My cousin actually said something to me about that this week—um, she's about twelve years younger than I am and we're like the queer people, um, on our side of the family and so we're very connected over that. And she has another much younger cousin who's around y'all's age, I think a coupla years younger, and she was talking about how she feels like she's able to be that person for him as he's coming out, as I was for her. And I was like "Oh my god! I was for you?" and I just—I was gonna cry. …
>
> Lys: [W]ith queer people, even if you don't know them … sometimes when there's someone that just like, you know—maybe they're not even queer, maybe they're just someone who, their like alternative appearance or how they are holding themselves, you connect with. It can erase all anxiety and you just feel, in that moment, comfortable … you just know that you're not alone in that sense. … We could have completely different backstories and lifestyles, but that one small connection that can mean that [what] could've felt so isolating is nice to connect over, 'cause then you realize you're not alone, you know?

Quinn jumps in, carefully addressing me as well as her colleagues:

> Quinn: I just wanted to add that, for the people who like make you feel comfortable—obviously I've like known since I've been in this group, but this group has completely destigmatized the word "queer" for me to describe myself and the whole community. Like, I used to like kind of like see it like, "Oh, I don't really wanna describe myself as queer—what if people think I'm weird?" and now I'm like … [Shrugging], "I'm queer! That's fine!" … and I've got a whole army of

> queer people all around me and all around the world … so like, if you ever think that you're not that person, in a way you are that person, just in a different way.

"That is lovely," I say. "That is a lovely thing to know." (Class recording, 5.8.21) I'm telling the truth. I wish I'd had a word like "queer" in my own adolescence, one that covered not only my desires themselves but also how out of sync they made me feel with most of the people around me. I wanted words that could help me reach for other people and, when I found them, that could help me articulate what it was about them that I could recognize, that seemed familiar. Quinn is explaining that we are bearing critical witness (Dutro 2019b) to each other's weirdness and queerness, both absorbing the testimony of our experiences in the moment and developing the acuity of our critical understanding about the social injustices that built our experience. We, who have now had months of experience of knowing these things about each other, are queer together, witness to our histories and our presents.

I offer, then, a prompt in response to "Ring of Keys":

> Gemma: So I mean, honestly, I thought I was gonna have to explain this prompt, but that song was as immediate for you all as it was for me, and I really just want you to write a personal narrative about one of those moments. About one of those moments of recognizing someone else in the world who connected to you, someone who maybe represented a world you wanted to live in or a way you wanted to live, one of those moments of recognition. The only parameter I'm gonna set is that it's not romantic. It's not somebody you recognized out of … like sexual [or] romantic attraction, it's somebody you recognized in some other way. 'Cause a lot of times I've seen this song interpreted as a romantic love song and I feel strongly that it is not.

I can't help feeling relief when Lys nods decisively at that statement, and my curiosity rises immediately when they ask, "Can it be a fictional person?"

"Yes," I say. "About that moment of connection or recognition, however it manifested." (Class recording, 5.8.21)

For both Quinn and Kaia, these pieces take the form of thank-you notes, speaking directly to the person they recognized in the moment. Quinn's addresses a girl she met at camp:

Summer Camp
All of these tall straight-haired girls who smile like they know they're popular with tight black shorts clinging to their long legs. I was a tree stump compared to them, short and chubby, but you still sat next to me, combed your fingers through your short brown curly hair. It's the color of milk chocolate brownie batter. You wore long basketball shorts and a welcoming smile, and I knew I was okay with you. You recognized me from a STEM camp we both went to a year prior—I don't even play volleyball, and I hate science and math—and then you moved back to South Korea. How did two people seven thousand miles apart meet twice? How does another person's haircut make me feel safe? How do I thank you for wearing shorts and cutting your hair?
-Q, 5.8.2021

Kaia's, as per her usual style, is slightly more obscure, but no less affectionate. "It's quite short, and muddled," she says. "But whatever."

We knew before we knew, latching onto each other, just for an hour, the connection that I knew, for once, wanted to keep. You pushed me gently on the path of acceptance even though your hair was curled and makeup was done. I knew deep down that we matched, one invisible battle scar. It took you two calls to open the gates of hell and invite me in. Thank you.
-K, 5.8.2021

Kaia and Quinn—both White, both bisexual girls, but beyond that dramatically different in background and experience—both want to thank the first girl with whom they felt welcome. To recognize someone else, both these pieces say, is to be able to *be* oneself, to allow the familiar to meet the familiar. *I know you,* ten-year-old Alison repeats in the song. Is she talking, then, about a kind of affective knowing, as Quinn and Kaia are? If we *know*, in this way, we are then known.

Lys comments specifically on Kaia's use of the "gates of hell":

> Lys: I liked the um, "it took you two calls to open the gates to hell" … it was like a nice sense of irony that I enjoyed.
>
> Gemma: Yeah, that–it's an interesting combination of completely sincere and lightly tongue-in-cheek. Um—
>
> Lys: Um, sorry, just I have a little bit more to go off on that.

> Gemma: Yes.
>
> Lys: The gates of hell part, I think at least how I perceived it as—um, well, there's obviously like the Judeo-Christian sense that queer people are going to go to hell and all that gobbledegook … but … that kind of helped me realize, a lot of the time in my life I've looked back and I'm like, "Why? Why did you do that? What—how could you do this?" You know, it's like, "How could you open up this giant pitfall for me—you know, like, for what?" And I like how that—kind of that one line, it really struck both the irony and that also sense of—you kinda take a step back and you're like—doubt. Not doubt that you feel that way. But that's kinda—it resonated with me. (Class recording, 5.8.21)

Again, Lys *knows* the experience in Kaia's poem, so much so that they overcome their usual classroom-style formality to interrupt me and make their point as clear as they can. They want me to know I've missed my cue, perhaps in part because it's so important for them to share with Kaia that they caught *her* cue. This sense of intimate history, of resonance—affective resonance—is core to the ways we meet in Write It Out.

Lys's own piece in response to this prompt connects personal history to queer history across time.

> I remember flipping pages so fast I got paper cuts around my thumb as I scrolled through the glossary looking at the name. Patroclus. Patroclus. Patroclus. I was eleven, and it was an encyclopedia of mythological characters, and his name appeared: the lover of Achilles, the greatest of Greeks. The name was so masculine, his description portrayed him as a soldier. A soldier? I thought there were no female soldiers for the Athenians. And the wheels turned and turned and turned in my head as I looked and looked for his name, and when I got to his name there was a picture of a painting. The mournful Achilles lamenting over a corpse. There were no plump feminine curls on it, not long locks that brushed its shoulders. The strongest soldier in myth sobbed and cried over the blanched body of a man. It stirred in my heart a sense of confusion. How much did he love him, and what kind of love did he feel? But I read and I read and I learned that the cries of Achilles reached the bottom of the sea, where the pale nymphs of salt lamented in pity of the passing of his love. … And when the god of its waters retaliated, not even he, an immortal being, could stop him. I read that when the arrow of Paris slew him and his pyre had flickered out, they put his ash in the same urn as Patroclus's. I had never seen love so emotional in the way that I felt. I had never known that we could feel like others did. Like Pyramus and Thisbe and Romeo and Juliet. I had never known that our love was as strong, and if not stronger, than theirs.
> -L, 5.8.2021

In this narrative, as Lys describes it, our connection to long and documented human histories—for instance, Kaia and Lys's conversation about the obfuscated queerness in

Greek mythologies—returns to and entangles with Lys's personal history, their narrative of themself. Patroclus is fictional, mythological, legendary, but in encountering his story in *The Iliad* for the first time, Lys saw the possibility that they were not alone in their desires—that in fact their desires could be found throughout human history if they knew where and how to look.

"There was something so stormy about it," I say when I've recovered my faculties to speak. "I mean, obviously you—you—you know my story of recognizing I was attracted to a Greek mythological character, … but this—" I open my hands wide, not quite finding the words I want to bring to tell Lys of the piece's impact. I watch my students watch me onscreen.

"It—it springs up," I say at last. "It really does, it just—it feels like it storms. I feel the intensity of your younger experience." Quinn hasn't turned her sound on, but her image is visible; on screen, she mouths the word "Wow."

Kaia, though, has found a much more simple and direct response than mine.

"I always feel Greek mythology revolves around gayness," she says. Their own sound muted, Lys mouths a clear "Oh yeah." Kaia continues, "But—yeah, I—I loved it. It was beautiful." (Class recording, 5.8.21)

Queerness in the Historical Moment

My students are desperate to see themselves in narratives of the past. They want to know that queerness predates them, that they are not alone in the world and not alone in time. Because our histories have so often been erased, my students find particular resonance in reading not only contemporary queer writing, but also writing from the past by authors known not to be straight. This group of students devours

historical evidence, champs at the bit to share queer historical knowledge with each other. As a teenager, I lacked the wherewithal to understand that I wasn't learning queer histories; the search wasn't conscious for me. But seeing it be so for my students makes me want to connect not only to their narratives of history, but also to my understanding of my own past as a young queer person—my queer personal history. In this, all the young writers in Write It Out join me—and as we learn more about each other, we experience relational transformations within the group, creating a more profound shared affective experience (Ehret, 2018).

One risk of these relational transformations, of course, is becoming overly intimate or too vulnerable, thus perhaps crossing into the inappropriate. In a time when even a passing reference to LGBTQ+ content in schools is decried as "grooming" by certain factions of the right wing in the United States (Block, 2022), the stakes of treading this line carefully become even higher. However, the context of my queer personal history also becomes a part of the students' understanding of a wider queer history: I, a teacher and (in queer parlance) an elder, lived as an LGBTQ+ person in a time that exists for them only in their imaginations and readings. Sharing more than I would in a typical class becomes a responsibility—Kaia, Lys, and Quinn have questions that I am, in their lives, uniquely positioned to answer, stories they are uniquely positioned to connect to. I read the balance carefully, affectively. I attune myself to changes of affective tonality. My students listen to my stories—bringing them up in later classes, even later seasons—as I listen to theirs, bearing critical witness. One of the actions we take is to form these supportive connections to each other.

I met the young people in Write It Out at the crux of a global pandemic, and at a point when anti-trans and anti-queer legislation in the United States was gaining a new

and frightening foothold (Kindy, 2022). Queer adolescents, transgender adolescents in particular, looking for themselves in contemporary news programming and political arenas will find funhouse mirrors—endless rippled, distorted, exaggerated images of their identities, experiences, desires. Among the many things they hear is that being queer and/or transgender is "trendy," that they are followers of a flash-in-the-pan fad rather than fully realized individuals who are inheritors of long, complex, and substantive histories. In writing themselves into history and writing in dialogue with queer histories, the Write It Out students and I were able to connect to the multiple facets of our identities (fixed, situated, and mobile, per Lammers & Marsh [2018]); we were driven by the affective desire to connect not only to each other, but also to multiple places and times in the past and future. As Johnson (2017) illuminates, *writing the self* has the tremendous transformative potential. "When teachers invite students to compose themselves in ways that enact their queer identities," she says, "we liberate voices that are normally silenced." (p. 30)

CHAPTER 6

"Safe in a Moment Like That": Becoming a Queer Community of Writers

We're connected to everything, you know. But that means … everything is nothing and so we're connected to nothing. And it's just this cycle of connection and disconnection and I think that's what it means to be human, is trying to find the place in the world where you're connected to, but that's kind of like impossible, because you're connected to everything, but at the same time you're not. You know, there's always going to be one part of you that is and that one part of you that isn't.

-Lys, 4.17.2021

Communities of Writers

In the 1980s, both Belanoff & Elbow (1989) and Zemelman & Daniels (1988) wrote books titled *A Community of Writers* that endeavored to provide distinct guides on how to make one's classroom exactly that. Often, "community" is thought of as something fixed, something consistent in the life span—a neighborhood as community, for instance, or, as my students use the term, the queer community. However, there's power in considering something temporary, such as our writing group, a community of practice (Wenger, 1998)—that is, a group of people "who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor … who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." (1998, p. 1)

Our umbrella organization advertised Write It Out as a program for "LGBTQ+ and Gender-Nonconforming Students and Peer Supporters" under the aegis of the Center for Young Writers (CYW). Everyone who joined the group made clear that they felt allegiance both to writing and to LGBTQ+ identities in some form, but those levels of connection varied. Quinn, for instance, happily out as bisexual and deeply academically minded, says that when she saw the flyer for the program through her

freshman-year English teacher and GSA advisor, "I was like, 'Huh. I need a résumé builder.' And then it … became so much more than a résumé builder, which made me so happy 'cause I'm sick of everything being a résumé builder." This is to say, Quinn was already ensconced in some form of queer community through her GSA—it was making a connection between that queer community and a hitherto almost exclusively in-school writing practice that was unusual. By contrast, Kaia had been involved in OST writing programming for some time, including the CYW's youth writing program, where she and I first met; it was connecting a private queer identity with the longstanding writing practice that made a difference. She was trying to "figure out how to introduce *queer* with *writer*." (Interview, 8.5.21)

How are these approaches similar, and how are they different, in the building of a queer community of writing practice? This chapter considers what it means to lead with "queer" or with "writer" as identity terms in this community: how we share our queer identities in writing community, and how they connect to other identities we hold and experience, particularly racial identity; how we share our writer identities in queer community, and how being an OST space contributes to a new form of that sharing and community-building; and how these different emphases come together in our process of becoming a queer community of writers.

Sharing Queer Identity in Writing Community

When I've asked the quickwrite question "How do we know what we want?" and several students have shared their work, all with their cameras up and faces visible, I ask, "Do you think there's something specific for queer writers and queer writing about the relationship between writing and want?"

Quinn nods vigorously and raises her hand icon, which Kaia also puts up at the same time. Eager as always to eschew formal hierarchies, I say, "Anybody—you can jump in," and then listen as Quinn and Kaia politely defer to each other for a moment, ending finally with Quinn speaking first.

> Quinn: Um, yeah, I do. 'Cause that's an exclusive memory that I have where it's like—to show my want for something I feel like I have to write it and I have to use my words like, in, like—within my queer identity because … it's like that fear of being seen as like a predator.

The fear is profoundly recognizable to me, as well as to any queer woman, and has deep histories in queer narratives and experiences (e.g. Cornwall, 1997; Miccio, 1997; Jones, 2017). Quinn continues:

> Quinn: Like, you can't just like do what I normally do with my friends where it's just … that demonstration like visually. I have to like write with people and—oh my gosh, I just remembered. Before I had come out to anybody, um, I met this girl on like TikTok and Instagram, and we actually like sent letters to each other … and like, those were just so powerful. We don't really talk that much anymore but like, we still sometimes like will talk to each other and get like, "Oh my gosh, we should start writing letters again!" And I still have like Polaroids of her, and she has them of me in her room, and I saved the letters because it's like—that was like my first actual experience as a queer person, and it was like so much easier to use words and use letters and even though we never met face to face, those words just made me feel so accepted and so like normal. Because like, you always see these like love stories on TV and it was like my mini love story that I never would have gotten in my hometown. I like forgot about that until now, how important that was to me within my queer identity. (Class recording, 5.8.21)

Quinn has interpreted the question in a manner different from what I intended, but still entirely salient here. The desires she had to keep hidden—she takes pains to clarify that she wasn't out to anyone else at the time of this correspondence—seem to have flourished in writing. She was uncomfortable expressing her desire, or even any aspect of physical and social ease, for fear of being seen as a "predator," but in this letter correspondence, her honesty flourished. Once we've gotten past the fact that the girls met on social media and exchanged mailing addresses, the story Quinn tells seems

almost an epistolary romance of the past, a brief love that flourished in words alone when no other form had offered itself to the burgeoning queer teenager.

> When she was alive and we were fourteen, she was everywhere to me. It was different, and yet the same. I was scared to feel it.
>
> When I was twenty-four she was dead. Heroin overdose. We hadn't talked in years. My queerness stayed hollower without her.
>
> -GCN, 50-word memoir for Write It Out, 2.27.2021

There's something almost horrifying to me about the fact that my students, of a nominally freer and more queer-friendly generation, still experience that fear of being considered predatory, one that I feel has held me back for much of my own life. Kaia responds to Quinn immediately, and it's clear she's drawing upon similar familiar feelings and fears:

> Kaia: I think it's incredibly important, queer identity with want and writing, because it can be—I feel like so much more personal if you write it down. And I totally agree with [Quinn], the, um predatory feelings that—that's not the right word. The predatory stigmas, I guess, around queer people. It's incredibly hard to come out to people because you're like, "Oh, will they think less of me or will they think da da da da da?" Um, and I think writing it down is easier to control who it goes to and easier to explain things because I think if you get … caught off guard and they're asking you things, you're not necessarily going to be able to explain them, and I don't necessarily think you should explain them in some instances, but, um, I don't know if that makes sense. (Class recording, 5.8.21)

Kaia has experienced this same fear of being considered "predatory," and I remember it myself—the possibility of attraction making friendship between girls feel "unsafe" to the straight one(s) in the equation, the sheer concept of attraction as risk, as threat. The truth is that such circumstances are much more dangerous to the queer girl in question—as Kaia later explains, a young queer girl has to ask herself before coming out in such a scenario, "Okay, if I say something, will I die?" (Class recording, 5.8.21) Both Kaia and Quinn are explaining that they find in writing a place to commit to honesty. Writing honestly might, as in Quinn's case, predate the ability, choice, or risk to be

honest in everyday, in-person life; as in Kaia's case, writing might control access to who engages with that honesty (not always possible when speaking to another person). Lys offers still another perspective: they believe that their own queerness is "obvious," that anyone who meets them assumes them queer, and as such they've encountered a large number of rude, impertinent, and invasive questions in a nominally casual conversation. They tell us that they're often tempted to respond rudely, and have often given into that temptation; writing, they say, offers a counterbalance to both the questions and the answers.

> Lys: I think writing is something that can be so crafted to your own liking, that, um, you can kind of perfect it and show exactly what you want to say in words that could be sometimes harder to say, um, vocally. Because your mind is something that's always—at least for me, it's always moving, and sometimes you let that get ahead of you, and you can say things that you don't either honestly mean or they're not really in a way that the other person can understand. And I think that could be—it's—it can be easier for us to rely on writing, 'cause you can get that down in the exact way you want it and get that message right there without having all that stuff muddled.

Quinn is nodding along as Lys explains not speaking "in a way that the other person can understand." My students' desire to be understood, to make themselves understood, and their relief when it happens is tangible even in our virtual room.

The "outsider-ness" of queer experience is affective. It is replete with intensities, coming at us from all sides, and yet difficult to name as an emotion. What I feel isn't *rejected*, or *sad*, or *angry*, it's a bone-deep sense that I am not in tune with the rest of the room, what it needs, expects, assumes, and that my feelings cannot "count" in any social sense (Cvetkovich, 2003). In writing, can I then be writing my way into a shared affective experience and understanding of queerness?

Being a queer writer, for example, gives Quinn has multiple ways to continue what is de facto a queer outreach ministry. In our interview, she tells me multiple stories

of being the confidante for queer kids at her school and beyond who are not otherwise out—not to their families or to their other friends. Her sixth-grade ex-boyfriend and current Minecraft partner (see Chapter 4) is only one example. Her ethics of being a safe person for them to talk to shine through the interview, and clearly align with her way of measuring her own safety (Interview, 8.5.21). Like gaming, writing becomes a key component of this ministry. During class, she explains:

> Quinn: Like, writing—yeah, it's like so much easier, you can reach more people, but also less people. … You can find the people that—that like are in this culture that like respect you and like love you and you never really know when you're speaking with somebody because you don't—like, there's not enough words, or not enough time in the conversation oftentimes to understand. … When I was in eighth grade, somebody on my track team said like, "Are you straight? You seem too nice to be straight," and I was like, "Excuse me?" I was like terrified in that moment … 'cause I was nowhere close to out, and this year I feel like if that was on writing and I had known this person through words—like written words—I would have known that it was like not offensive. … He has two moms, like, I would've been like okay. This was not an offensive thing, this was a genuine question. But culture is so hard to connect in like a sense of safety for queer people, like it's so hard to understand if you're safe in a moment like that, and I was like terrified, but …

In Quinn's narrative here, writing becomes an essential component of her foundation of queer community—that is, *writing is a place to be safely queer.* She longs to have connected to this young man through writing, which would have given her the latitude to see what he really meant, rather than freezing in the in-person interaction.

> Quinn: [E]ven when you're like learning in like history class you see that like, oral history is really important, obviously, but everybody was so much more connected like after prehistory, you know? … People were so much more connected because they could connect through words and written artifact, and like I think that happens to knowing and safety that's incredibly important to queer people, especially when we're young. (Class recording, 5.8.21)

To Quinn, connection through written word—which she feels a need to set in a wider historical context—erodes this visceral sense of "terror," replacing it, in a sense, with

"knowing" and "safety." Writing offers a window for "safe connection" for queer youth, one that allows Quinn to skip the step of fear.

Kaia, similarly, articulates her relationship to her colleagues in Write It Out as "having a safety blanket of people who actually know what you're talking about … and people who you feel comfortable to … show parts of yourself that most people don't necessarily feel comfortable [with]." (Interview, 8.5.21) The socially reticent Kaia has shown herself to Quinn, Lys, Hart, and me through her own writing, trusting that we will pick up her cues and safely connect with her content. She explains, "[You] know exactly that you're not necessarily a hundred percent safe with them, but you're at least quite a bit safer with them" than with writers with whom she doesn't share queer identity (Interview, 8.5.21). It is this combination of *queer* and *writer* that gives Kaia what Quinn calls a "sense of safe connection."

This safe connection is, also, a manifestation of our ongoing practice of critical witness (Dutro 2019b). The students and I share our stories, reciprocally; the sharing of stories, the declaration that we are here, queer writers in a world not built for us, that will not welcome us if we do not declare ourselves and demand it, is a part of our action and advocacy. And that very reciprocal sharing returns to hooks' (1994) ideas of eros in teaching and pedagogy. Witnessing and connection are acts of love, profound engagement with each other's work acts of passion.

Sharing queer identity in a writing community also allows my White students and I a range of modalities and approaches for exploring and understanding our Whiteness. All of them are self-aware of being White, though they have a variety of ways to engage with it. For instance, after Hart shares a poem that explores their Italian heritage, Quinn responds passionately:

> Quinn: I, I really enjoyed that piece because I really like hearing like about other people's culture—just because I feel like I have like a lack of my own, you know? Like, I don't know, like Italian culture is very like strong, and I feel like the only culture that like ties to my identity is like gay culture, like LGBTQ culture, 'cause like—it's not like I have any of my personality or like morals or ethics are formed from like maple syrup or hockey, like that's just—it's just not like the same as stuff like Italian and like all other cultures, and I think it's really cool to hear about.
>
> Hart: When you say maple syrup and hockey, do you happen to be talking about Canadia?
>
> Quinn: Yeah, I'm a first-generation American technically.
>
> Gemma: Thank you for being another person who says "Canadia," [Hart]. Because I also do. (Class recording, 4.17.21)

Throughout the spring session, everyone in the Zoom room is White. Quinn's perception of Whiteness as "a lack of my own [culture]" is not without precedent (e.g. Case & Hemmings, 2005; McIntyre, 1997), but relates to the insidious tendency of White people to see, and even name, our own Whiteness as *neutral*, thus claiming hegemonic invisibility (Ewing, 2020). For Quinn, this even goes back to norms more linked to the early twentieth century than the early twenty-first. That is, in Quinn's dialogue above Italian is "culture" and Canada—meaning the Canada of her immediate White ancestors—is not. I make a point of pluralizing "queer cultures" in my conversation with students, and at the end of the winter session Lys in particular expresses interest in learning about queerness in non-United States contexts, but the sense of "othering" remains part of my White students' approach to the subject. The small community of Write It Out, for these three months, is a White community.

I sit with my discomfort about that fact, noting the limitations in what I feel I can do and am doing. While I've reached out to a number of organizations that support Black youth and immigrant youth, and organizations that are explicitly directed towards

queer youth but not towards the arts, my mental health during the pandemic has left me without the capacity to conduct extensive follow-up, and my physical health limits the spaces I can visit in person for risk of contracting COVID-19. I'm a White teacher myself, and the Center for Young Writers has historically been led by White instructors and composed of mostly-White participants, even in a city where 29% of the population is Black and 13.4% of the population was not born in the United States (Census.gov, 2021). Admittedly, given the small number of participants in Write It Out, the students' Whiteness is not statistically significant, but nonetheless it compels me to attend to the cultural Whiteness of the space, and how it means we process our social and political positions and experiences.

Following Lys's request during the winter session for writing that takes a more international and expansive lens on queerness, I've brought in an article by Astrud Bowman, "Mourning the Loss of Indigenous Queer Identities" (Bowman, 2021). The author defines themself as "part of the Filipino diaspora" and explains that while they have begun expressing their identity as "gender-fluid" in the United States, they feel that the term doesn't cover the realities of their own identity and that while the third gender they know to be deep in Filipino history, *bakla*, might be closer, too much has been lost to centuries of White, Christian colonization for that term to have a fully comprehensible history and connection even to the author. (In his *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*, for instance, Filipino American journalist Jose Antonio Vargas [2018] defines the term simply as the Tagalog equivalent of "gay.") When we have finished reading the article aloud, the Zoom room is silent for a moment. When I ask, "What's surprising to you in reading this article?" Kaia is the first to raise her hand, but stutters when I call on her, stroking a black cat beside her on the bed.

> Kaia: I'm sorry. I cannot think right now.
>
> Gemma: No worries. [Kaia moves her cat so it's no longer visible on camera] What's surprising or what's hard to think about?
>
> Kaia: Um, the surprising part is like having a whole—it's not exactly surprising, really—history—but having this whole culture that is quite cool and doesn't have shame in it sounds amazing. Like that—like not being able to know the right word because you don't know it because of history.

Kaia has been taken by Bowman's first-person perspective; the story has allowed her to imagine herself in Bowman's position or in a similar experience. Kaia, unlike her colleagues, has a father who came to the United States as a refugee from Communist Eastern Europe in the 1970s; a cultural experience outside of US social mores does not feel so distant to her as it does to Quinn or Lys. She explains that she's done extensive research into queerness in her father's home country, with which she identifies closely—like many writers, she digs for her identity in research and writing. She feels connected to Bowman's uncertainty—"Christianization," she says, has also broken her from any sense of queer ancestry in her family's country of origin.

Lys at first sees Bowman's loss entirely as a tragedy, as part of what's cemented for them the notion that America is an imperial power through a historical lens. "The whole thing of America is [saying during its founding that] we're not like other White-dominated countries, we don't do that here, we don't colonize, we're not like other imperialistic—and then as soon as we became a country we did exactly that." Because they are passionate about history, they explain, they feel this dishonesty with particular acuity. However, their lens soon shifts, and they, like Kaia, imagine themself in a position similar to Bowman's—perhaps, per Bishop (1990), the article becomes a sliding glass door.

> Lys: I as a Caucasian person can't really relate to having that personally happen to me, but it sounds terrifying to be someone who's a native Filipino and to know that you could very well possibly align with something that's part of your ancestral culture, but since it's been destroyed you have no way of knowing what that actually is and how you align with that. That seems so just shattering to me. (Class recording, 6.19.21)

In this space of shared queer identity, my White students cannot fully distance themselves to identify as members of the White-dominated, colonizing, imperialist United States, even as they understand their own allegiance and connection to it. They're reading the writing from an intersectional perspective, as White Americans and as marginalized, minoritized queer and trans youth.

On Teaching On
For two Saturday hours
I wasn't trying
to figure out what
to say when I answered
your email that kept
me up all night, wasn't staring
at my toes wondering
how they'll navigate
floodwater when my
mother's street submerges, when
my government will bomb
your neighbors and how
I'll breathe, still breathe,
I was watching Xander imbibe the words he wrote when Henry
and Taylor rehearsed, seeing Matt step out of cautious silence when
he knew what the camera had to do, listed objects and weighed
the bleeping of curse words, where in the neighborhood we'd shoot the rambling
walk where Taylor's character turned Henry's down, each nuance of tone, each
hesitant hand movement, and their cameras had chips for which miners had pennies poured
into their cracking palms and spines curved slowly towards starvation and I didn't know
I wasn't letting them into
the room, not that
they'd asked; it was electric like
keys after a kite how hard
four white teenagers, feet
in triangles on cheap
heather carpet, wanted
to tell a story well
-GCN, 2019

A week earlier, I've given a quickwrite prompt I intend to use to help my students focus on the complexities of queer culture. "How were you taught to understand LGBTQ+ identities—not necessarily your own, but LGBTQ+ identities in general? How might that have been tied to the place or society in which you lived?" Lys returns with the following poem:

Queer culture is drag queens and eye contact causing you to plan out your lives together
Queer culture is cracked bricks shattering windows and "do you listen to Girl in Red?"
Queer culture is Buzzfeed results that just couldn't be true and "you're not like other boys"
Queer culture is rainbows and awkward excuses to why you haven't gotten a girlfriend when you're at a reunion
Queer culture is someone asking you "what are you?" and you can't even give them an answer because you don't know yourself
Queer culture is the polymaths who made society and history itself, yet in the shadows, fell in love with those who presented as they did
Queer culture is walking into a room and knowing you are not the only one there
Queer culture is exploring Oz with Dorothy and writing meter with Sappho, painting with Da Vinci and singing with Sophie
Queer culture is Doc Martens and rainbow bandannas in back pockets and sweater weather
Queer culture is culture showing itself in every medium of fashion, literature, music, politics, and art, theater and religion
Queer is everywhere
-L, 6.12.2021

"I like that litany style," I say, "the use of repetition at the beginning of lines." (This, again, is my attempt to make my critique deliberate, to infuse the Teaching of Writing into a raw conversation without tearing down anybody's work—simply to observe and offer terminology for what they've already done.) The connection between history and the present in Lys's piece is particularly salient to Quinn—"just by like seeing somebody with like Doc Martens you can be like, 'Oh, I'm not alone.'" Kaia finds the Buzzfeed quiz line "relatable … because you want to be a certain way? but you also are afraid to be that certain way?"

However, it's Lys's own consideration of their work, and of their idea of queer culture, that leads to a profound discussion of Whiteness and White identity. "The cool

thing about queer culture," says Lys, "is that it's … queer culture's found in all other cultures, you know? It's a part of everything. It's its own entity but it's also everywhere at the same time."

Kaia responds with immediate caution. She feels it's necessary to exercise caution about "claiming everything as queer culture."

> Kaia: Like certain things yeah, but some other things we shouldn't necessarily claim as … queer culture, or [we should] be very aware of where they came from, because a lot of times it came from … you know, indigenous people or Black communities and … queer people don't necessarily … realize that we have to actually look at these people and be like, "Oh yeah, this is something that we have to be careful about and respect these things." I'm not sure if that made sense, but not—not saying that we—it can't be queer culture, but just being—being respectful.

Quinn expands on Kaia's point immediately: "Um, I agree with that 'cause like, I think one of the biggest parts of—and I'm doing like airquotes here—queer culture would be like the use of AAVE [African American Vernacular English]." Kaia, whose image is onscreen—though Quinn's is not—gestures and nods emphatically, indicating agreement. Quinn seems encouraged to continue:

> Quinn: I've seen a lot of discourse about that and it's hard because it does feel like it's like been integrated into queer culture, but it's also important to understand that like when like LGBTQ people use it, like White LGBTQ people use it, it's like seen as like "Oh, look at you! Yaaas! You go girl! Like, you're killing it!" but when Black people use it, it's seen as like "ghetto" and stuff and it's just like it's—it's one of those like things that make you realize that being White comes first. It just does. Because you can be walking and like, even if I'm walking in my Doc Martens, I'm not gonna experience a hate crime because of that, but a Black person just can't walk around and not be Black or like you know? Like an Indian person can't just walk around and not be Indian, like a Muslim person can't just walk around and not be Muslim and experience that stuff. Like, being White really does come before any other parts of a minority's identity, 'cause like you can't just hide that ever, I think. (Class recording, 6.12.21)

All of my students here are striving, in community with each other, to make sense of their own queerness in relationship to other embattled identities, including those that

they do not hold themselves. Kaia and Quinn ask Lys to exercise more caution with the words they use both in and about their writing; all three struggle and stumble through their consideration of the concepts. Even Quinn has conflated "Muslim" (that is, a religious identity) with visible elements of identity (likely, wearing a hijab). I'm uncertain of my role here—whether I should act as a moderator in the moment, or structure a space that allows students to respond directly to and engage with each other. It's clear to me that the conversation is, while volatile, imperative for the students—as writers, they are questioning the use and "claiming" of words and phrases, and as queer White writers specifically, they are interrogating the intersections and parameters of their marginalized writer identities.

Because I can already see the other students' hands raised, I don't slow the pace of conversation to clarify Quinn's words; instead I simply offer, "Which leads to the question, is there one queer culture? When we say queer culture are we talking about something that all falls under one umbrella?" I call on Lys and Kaia in sequence.

Lys acknowledges Quinn's and Kaia's points, that some language used by White queer people has roots in Black culture and "AAVE," and that White queer people need to be aware of the history. However, they're even less certain than Kaia about what constitutes a valid use of terms with Black origins and roots.

> Lys: I think that we, as all of us—mainly White people here—um, need to realize that it's not horrible to use it, it's just horrible when people call you out for it and you're like "I'm not doing this," you know? You have to understand what you do, I think, and I think that a lot of people, especially White people in the queer community who don't realize that their whiteness is a—White people have a privilege, a not-good one obviously—but, through the eyes of society, you know? There, there's, there's a—it's a double standard, you know? Black queer people are treated differently. So you have to treat them with respect and respect their culture as well, you know? …

Lys acknowledges what Quinn has said, that Black queer people have experiences with their constant visibility that White queer people are often able to hide from or evade. However, they seem firm in the stance that the use of African American Language (Smitherman, 1999) has so infused "queer culture" that it might be considered "ingrained," even as they believe that a White queer person called out for such language use should be open and responsive. The contradictions in their thoughts are clear—they seem even to be clear to Lys themself—but Lys seems to feel a need to claim those contradictions as part of their experience.

I quickly ask, "Does everybody here identify as White? Does everybody here understand themselves as White, or …" Kaia nods, and both Quinn and Lys say "yeah" quickly. "Yeah," I say, nodding along, "as do I. Um, I'm White and Jewish so that's a little bit its own thing, but, Kaia? Your turn." Why do I add this, a White teacher nominally facilitating this conversation about race among White people? I know that as a White Jewish person I'm still White. However, the students are balancing the questions of how they are minoritized—as queer people—versus how they belong to the majority culture—as White people. The contradiction of my cultural and religious history seems relevant in my mind, but could easily be viewed as an attempt to throw off responsibility for my connection to White supremacy as a White person.

However, Kaia begins, as I asked, so I don't mitigate my thought aloud. She says that she agrees with Lys about the relationship between "Black culture" and "queer culture," but she notes that we need to understand the difference between "appropriation and appreciation."

> Kaia: Like as long as you have permission to do so, and of course you can't have everyone's permission, but as long as you'll—if someone tells you, "Hey, please don't do that because of these reasons" and you are respectful about that, um, I

> think that … changes it. Sorry that doesn't make any sense, um, but, uh, Gemma, you were asking is there one queer culture, and I don't think so because—like … there's a bigger … umbrella culture, but there's not—there's always like these subcultures … I specifically think of them as like an overarching one and then pieces of that—that sort of communities. (Class recording, 6.12.21)

Kaia agrees with Lys that some of the phrases and behaviors that White queer people have adopted and adapted, or appropriated, from Black communities—Black queer communities in particular—are part of this "overarching" culture. Still, she tries to offer the same precaution Lys did: that there's an acceptable form of permission that could come to White queer people from a Black activist, and that it's the responsibility of Black people to tell a White speaker to stop.

The students are struggling, again, with intersectionality within their identities (Crenshaw, 1994) and to what degree their and other people's queerness is connected to their and other people's racial identity (Chan & Howard, 2018) in the course of this conversation. That is, how does our own Whiteness impact the ways we define and understand ourselves as a queer community, and how do our linguistic choices as queer speakers and writers relate to that definition? Quinn, Lys, and Kaia feel themselves part of a marginalized group that can claim very little of "history" for its own, as shown in Chapter 5; they are desperate to claim some of these linguistic markers as belonging to their community, since it makes their community recognizable to themselves. However, they have, per Chapter 4, been raised on social media, and thus even those raised in mostly-isolated mostly-White communities have access through this medium to at least some understanding of the obstacles and marginalization Black people face. Since my students understand marginalization deeply themselves, they don't want to contribute to anyone else's, and they do recognize that as White queer people they easily have the potential to do so. However, as Quinn brings up, they also fear schisms or dismissal:

> Quinn: I know [Lys] said, like, "Oh, I don't wanna be like wrong when I say this." I think that it's like become a part of like society, to be like "your opinion is either right or wrong," and it's like it's the end of the line for you if you say something like as an accident or say something that you didn't know was a microaggression, it's like, "Oh, sorry, well, now you're just racist, now you're just homophobic." Like, I think that it's important to understand that like, you're not like wrong for struggling to voice your opinion on such an intricate topic with so much nuance … (Class recording, 6.12.21)

The most fluent and veteran user of social media among the three, Quinn knows whereof she speaks. In some ways, her concern is self-protective. She recognizes that since she has grown up around few people of color, there are leftist social norms—often demanded on queer social media—that don't make sense to her yet. However, as she continues, we see her investment in the connection between Black cultures and what she considers queer cultures as well. She adds, "[Q]ueer culture has so much overlap with Black culture because … like Black trans women are kind of like the whole reason that we're where we are right now, like we would be nowhere without them." (Class recording, 6.12.21) A few weeks earlier, Kaia, asked to reflect on queer histories, wrote a piece that alluded to Marsha P. Johnson, the Black transgender woman central to inciting the Stonewall uprising and supporting queer liberation movements (Feinberg, 1997; Jackson, 2021). My students are well-read enough in their queer histories and critiques to understand how central a role Black people, and particularly Black trans women, have played and continue to play in the movement for queer liberation.

As Lys reveals in their response here, however, a White teenager's profound admiration of a Black queer icon carries confusion and risk as well.

> Lys: I think that, at least myself, um, as an example … RuPaul once, in something I can't really remember, said this phrase: "She done already had herses." It's based from some time when she met a woman at a gas station talking about her break or whatever and clearly that has some I believe connotation to AAVE itself and how it's said … and I have used that phrasing, obviously. And I think that, because it's something that's been claimed by the queer community by a queer

> person—not that it's a like a green light to use it if you're a White queer person, but I think that also a lot of the time when White queer people are using it or phrases like that … [they're] saying like, "Hey, this is because I like this queer celebrity who's also a person of color." … It's a really … intricate and confusing topic, like you [said]—it's kind of like walking in a minefield … but I think sometimes they're not using it in forms of appropriation, they're using it in looking up to or trying to emulate that person who can also just happen to be … a person of color. Um, that was a lot. Sorry. (Class recording, 6.12.21)

However complex I, an adult queer cis person, might think the cis drag queen RuPaul is as a role model for a teenager who embraces gender fluidity and uses they/them pronouns, it's essential to attend to Lys's ideas and the confusion that underlies them. RuPaul, host of the legendary reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Bailey et al., 2009-2022), has had tremendous cultural influence on Lys's self-perception. They intend—at least consciously—for their emulation of RuPaul to be entirely a manifestation of admiration. That is to say, they are not trying to mark themself as imitating Blackness in taking a phrase in AAL from RuPaul; rather, they're trying to mark themself as queer. However, in so doing in a context that assumes we are "beyond" race—one that they didn't create but that could easily be said to be imposed by much of suburban American and television culture—they ignore the potential for their quotation to be read as mockery; they use a phrase out of the context of its grammar and vernacular, which they likely do not use or understand; they misunderstand the question of appropriation to ultimately be limited to intention (Illich, 1968; Applebaum, 1997; Ortega, 2006; Evans et al., 2020).

At my request, in response to Lys's ideas, Kaia struggles to define the difference between appropriation and appreciation, a concept that's had clear resonance for her (Pearson, 2020). She's responding with the vocal force that usually connotes a subject

she's considered outside of the group, but still struggling to put words to what she means.

> Kaia: If you have asked, like if—if someone said stop, you'd stop, or if—if someone said, "Hey, can you do it this specific way? That way you are not harming us," as well as learning about that culture or, you know, that specific practice more. That way you're learning how to do it correctly. … There was an awesome video about um, appropriation versus appreciation talking about that. Um, if you see something that you enjoy from another culture, ask us first before you—before you make it into your own culture. Um, obviously you can't do it with AAVE, but asking people, and if someone asks a person, "Hey, can you not do that?" just—stopping, even if you have questions about it.

Kaia, like her colleagues, has learned from videos and media; in coming of age as a mature, White, queer artist, she's trying to understand the application of this media to her experience, to her practice as a writer.

Quinn begins her response by saying, "[I]t's hard to have those discussions sometimes because people get defensive. And that's fair, like it's fair to get defensive when you've been treated like so poorly your entire life." However, when she shifts her lens, she shifts the affective tonality of the group entirely: she changes the positionality of the three White students in their imaginations by talking about straight appropriation of queer cultural practices, or straight people's "opinions" of controversy centered in and most likely to effect queer people. Her own opinion has changed, she says. "I used to think like, like—and it's totally fine to have a different opinion, obviously … 'Okay, like, no, straight and cis people should not get a—like, an opinion on any LGBTQ issues, that's not—not okay.'" Her change of opinion, she tells us, came through a British law student and composer she follows on TikTok.

> Quinn: She, like, she's bisexual and she thinks that straight people should have an opinion and should have like a voice in the discussion? Not that they don't have a voice already, but it would be like—I don't know, I kinda think it would be weird if you just like suddenly were like, "All right, now nobody's allowed to have an opinion ever," 'cause it kinda just—I don't know! This makes me sound like

> annoying and "Oh yay, like, I need like straight people to validate me!" but … it's easier to gain support if you let people have those opinions and don't let stupid discourse like—like dismantle somebody's support of the whole community.

"Is gaining support the goal?" I ask. To Quinn, it is; she talks particularly about the impact of the musician Lil Nas X (2021) on mainstream acceptance of queerness. Ultimately, she concludes that "seeking validation is I don't think the right thing to do, but gaining support is good because it gives people an outlet to be understood." (Class recording, 6.12.21)

Quinn has made queer people the embattled party. We are no longer focused on whether White queer people are appropriating language from Black people, we are focused on whether outsiders to the queer community—be they Quinn's acquaintance's fellow law students or Quinn's sister—get to have a say in "queer issues," which also go undefined. The switch isn't conscious or overt, but it turns something in Lys, who now responds with profound fear and a sense of affective threat. "I think a lot of straight and cis people are not educated in queer culture," they say, and Quinn hastily responds in typed agreement in the chat as Lys continues. They recently watched the trans-focused documentary *Disclosure* (Feder, 2020), they explain, in which actor Laverne Cox, a Black trans woman, appears. Cox said, according to Lys, that "like eighty percent of like cis people in the United States don't personally know a trans person."

> Lys:. So all of the all of the stuff they're learning about trans people's from the media, and well, we all know the media sucks. Um, and I think that when straight people think they can have an opinion on something that they don't know about and they don't know anyone that is personally effected by, that their opinions are usually skewed and biased due to incorrect media, and it's more harmful to the community than it is positive, because, it—it's something that—hmm, how to word this? Um, it's something that they—I don't wanna say can't fully understand, but they sometimes don't understand the severity of it, you know? (Class recording, 6.12.21)

Lys rattles off what they know of global threats to queer rights and queer bodies as indicators of this severity: "72 countries" in which it's "illegal to be gay"; the "gay panic" defense, which they say is "in Queensland … and they had it in America for a while"; the normalization of straight culture as default. As they speak, they start to realize that their perception and understanding of "queer culture" is anchored in the long history of needs to adapt and to hide.

> Lys: We—queer culture, I think, which is leading to my other part—queer culture is something that is adaptable, because throughout history it's always attempting at being squashed and then rises back up somewhere else in the shadows. And it—it's always adaptable. There's no singular thing that's queer culture, but—and I think that we as queer people also have become used to this, kind of … the 21st century's different, but beforehand we were used to this in the shadows kind of thing, where that's our entire culture, that's our entire thing. And in the modern world we're finally having our own voice, and then we want to give—not, not, I—I—I swear I'm not trying to be rude, I'm not trying to call anyone out, I'm not trying to be offensive or start an argument—but we're just finally getting a voice for ourselves, and then we wanna have straight people in the conversation to make decisions with us? Which, me personally, my own personal fears is that—are they going to make decisions with us or for us? And that really scares me, I think. Um, I don't mean to be negative or call anyone, I just—that's my own opinion on the matter. (Class recording, 6.12.21)

They demonstrate profound affective vulnerability here. Lys is, at this point, in a nominally "safe" space with us, a space in which everyone is openly queer and knows they are seeing their experiences, and the world, through queer lenses. However, they're expressing a deep, and deeply known, sense of threat. They feel, like Saeed Jones describes in his own adolescence (2020), the risk of hurt when any queer person is hurt, the sense that that risk, that fear, belongs to them. Including straight people in such a conversation means a greater risk for Lys themself. I try to summarize the points they've made and the points I feel they bring up—what is the difference between having an opinion and having a voice? are we assuming the unity of "queer culture," and if we're looking at queer culture along different lines of minoritization, racial and regional, how

do we draw the question of appropriation and appreciation into that?—and call on Kaia. But Lys utters an uncomfortable "um," and I realize that I've unintentionally cut them off.

> Gemma: Oh, no, go ahead, [Lys]. If you have new thoughts, go with that first.
>
> Lys: I—I think also, of course there are certain subcultures within queer culture, of course there are people who maybe have certain things, if they're southeast Asian and their queer culture and how that fits into there, and if they're a person of color, and if you're White and if you have certain religious background. … I think there are subcultures within it. I just think, all people regardless of race or religion and stuff, there are some brief overlaps, you know?

The danger of appropriation is significant, and Lys also feels deep connection across queer cultures and histories. However, they are still framing the "overarching queer culture" as defined by Whiteness and White norms. They continue, saying that they believe queer culture can "surpass history."

> Lys: [And] I'd like to believe we're living in a progressive age where this will all become obsolete one day, but … the keeping the secret of being gay or trans or etcetera … the idea of the secret, I think, is the one part of queer culture that is, has been, at least, eternal—you know, the whole keeping it within, and other people can't know, 'cause how does the world view you? I think that is the one thing that all forms of at least modern Western culture can say—"Yeah, this has happened to me, this is how it's been." And that's wrong, but it—it—something that I think a lot of people have gone through. I don't know if that makes sense. (Class recording, 6.12.21)

Zooming from "global" to "modern Western" both shows the imbalance of Lys's views and their deeply held need to both express and course-correct. They want there to be a universality to queer culture, because they want to be connected to all LGBTQ+ people from all geographies and backgrounds, and they see this "keeping secrets" element as perhaps the only universal. Their backtracking to "modern Western culture" could be read as a recognition of their own ignorance. They know they don't understand all queer cultures globally; they know there's information they're missing. Their argument is

fundamentally that of many theorists of marginalized and embattled cultures: that contemporary incarnations of queer culture are forged, in large part, from marginalization. Across all the queer culture and queer cultures Lys knows, they see this common denominator; they desperately want it to *be* a universal common denominator, because they are expressing a visceral desire to share experience with all queer people across difference in race, region, and structural and social power. In this conversation with a community of queer writers, Lys is searching for a modality for understanding. However, they're not ready to cede any element of their perspective, including their prejudices and the gaps in their knowledge, to do so. The community of writers that includes them includes them whole.

Kaia, while overwhelmed by the sheer volume of her colleagues' words, takes on the role of bringing the themes and ideas back together.

> Kaia: I—so [Lys]'s first point, I agree—queer—I agree with what—aaahhh, so much stuff! Um, going off [Quinn] and [Lys], … I think there's a difference between having just—having a voice and rather having a discussion about things. That way we can educate people, and for me there's a difference between a discussion and just a voice, because, you know, personally I don't necessarily think that they are going to—I'll use a different scenario.

She returns the conversation, smoothly, to the questions of race and Whiteness.

> Kaia: Like personally I don't necessarily count myself—like, I don't think that I deserve a voice in Black—any Black decisions. But I think having a—a discussion about things, because that way we can all get—not necessarily on the exact same page, but we can all understand where everyone else is coming from. … [H]aving more discussions rather than, "Oh, we need to have a voice in this," because it's not like there's a voting committee. … I think that would solve the problem of education as well, because the people actually listen. But that's another problem—having people not from your community actually listen to you is extremely hard, so.

Black queer youth have had to contend with the way their racial identities are received in a White supremacist society from an early age, no matter when they start to

understand their own queerness (Love, 2019; Vetter, 2010; Johnson, 2017), while White youth, no matter what their sexual orientation or gender identity, are rarely asked to do so. My students, driven to this conversation in part by their experiences in queer communities on social media, are now taking on their own racial identities within their community of writers.

Lys, in response to Kaia, struggles to find a balance.

> Lys: I as a White person cannot … part of the decision-making of the Black community. But I can be there in the discussion … because—it's kind of a comparison. You know, what—what it's like for the White community, okay, what's it like for the Black community? How can we make this intersection between the two? And the same thing with the queer community, I think. … [W]e need straight people to be part of the discussions of what we want, you know? 'Cause what we want is to be humans! To be—to be under the world, just like them. Living under the same sun on the same planet, having the same ability to walk amongst life unafraid, you know? And I think that education is the way to get there, because a lot of people use things that are biased factors into deciding whether queer people are considered, you know, morally good, or even human, or sinners, or whatever bohunky they can think of. Um, it's—it's just, I think, for me a lot of it does come from, you know, fear. … And sure, that's due to the lack of an education … but things like that have gone on for so long that how do we know they're not just going to rely on it to do more than us attempting to educate them? And that's what scares me, you know? … [I]f we give them an inch, are they going to put their foot in the door? And kind of like regain—reclaim power that was that was never theirs, uh, rightfully to own, you know what I mean? … I don't know if I sound like paranoid or something by saying this, but I think about it a lot. (Class recording, 6.12.21)

Reviewing these transcripts, I remain uncertain, from a practitioner perspective, if I should have pushed Lys at that moment to make the connection to how Black people might feel a similar fear when experiencing appropriation or interference, that White people becoming "part of the decision-making of the Black community" has historically had an impact quite similar to that which Lys describes as the impact of straight decision-making on queer communities. That is to say, the majority culture has denied that the humanity and experiences of Black people matter (Love, 2019); Black people

are “endangered,” and the truths of their lives—Black girls in particular—often go unheard and un-engaged, something that can prove destructive to their great creative potential (Brown, 2013); Black people have been caricatured, stereotyped, and dismissed as immoral and subhuman (Knight, 2020). I’m not sure if Lys was thinking any of this in the moment, and while I see in my field notes that I was thinking about it, I didn’t push the connection into the conversation.

“The affective subject,” says Stewart (2007), “is a collection of trajectories and circuits” (p. 59). As in many of my teaching experiences, I was guided in the moment by affective impulse—I made no conscious decision to avoid response, nor did I in the moment actively steer the conversation away from the subject—but affect is no more values-neutral than any other facet of human experience. By necessity, I as an instructor must acknowledge the depth to which I am subject to affect. It’s always the wild card, always present, rarely adequately engaged or acknowledged. I might have unconsciously internalized the problematic but long-touted value of “respecting difference” in difficult conversations, particularly about race (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014); I might have drawn upon years of experience teaching White students to know that Lys had pushed themself as far as they could at that time; I might have felt, rightly or wrongly, that I shouldn’t push my own authority, but allow Quinn to respond in that moment, as she was eager to do. Just as I can occasionally understand my students’ affective impulses, I cannot always fully identify my own. I am a practitioner responding to years of experience in classrooms, years of antiracist training and practice, years of living queer in a straight-dominated society, years of living White in a White-dominated society, and years of living as a queer, White writer attuned to the complexities of dialogue in human interaction.

Affective teacher research like this can be both enhanced and constrained by the positionality and affective awareness of the researcher. My affects are not free of cultural politics (Ahmed, 2013), nor are they bound to what I, in retrospective analysis, consider ethical or right. My understanding of affect in this class, too, might be limited by its Whiteness (Garcia-Rojas, 2017). What Garcia-Rojas calls "White affect studies" has not, the author says, learned how to connect to the violent social structures that impact the intensities and emotions of marginalized people. Women of color feminism(s) can "expose new critical strands of thought for understanding how queer subjects create alternate ways of moving, knowing, and being that do not fall within dominant paradigms of knowledge" (Garcia-Rojas, 2017, p. 256). I may have been attending to affect but, like Lys, overlooked significant elements of the analysis due to my racial subjectivity. But Garcia-Rojas (2017) reasonably identifies our affective experiences as always existing beyond the intimate. Visceral intensities, affects, play a driving role in racism and racialization, for instance, as Ahmed (2004) explains in her construction of affective economies—individual White people live in societies that exchange and amplify affects of hate, threat, and fear, amplifying racism in the process. My students and I, in this conversation, are struggling to understand our own affective responses to our complex and intersectional roles in an unjust society, and in so doing, bear critical witness to each other's struggles, confusions, and vulnerabilities. The effort to hear and understand each other is significant; so are the limits on what we can hear and understand. Becoming a community of queer writers in practice, though, per Wenger (1998), means that we share not only *community*—the mutual support manifest in this conversation—but also *practice*, the dedication to learning and improving our work as

queer writers who are also White in a White-dominated society. This conversation is, or can be, a step en route to building an ethical queer community of writing practice.

Quinn, in response to Lys, tries to negotiate the relationships she sees among fear, power, and knowledge:

> Quinn: I don't think that these straight White people should be making the decisions, I think that they should just—I think that just like everybody needs to be in a discussion, because no consensus can be reached unless everybody's part of a discussion, and nobody can ever agree with everybody, like in—nobody's ever going to agree with everybody, like that's just a fact, but like nobody's ever gonna reach a point of understanding if entire groups of people don't converse. Like you can't just be like—you can't expect like change to happen if just queer people are talking about queer problems, like, you just need to make sure that everybody's a part of the discussion, so that the decision that is like made by the minority communities is understood. … And like, the things that have happened to the like queer people in the past, it's scary, and like … we're in a more progressive time now, but it's still scary, 'cause things still happen. (Class recording, 6.12.21)

If indeed writing is a place for my students, and for other queer youth in writing communities, to be safely queer, then what they are negotiating here, in exploring the use of words, idioms, and structures that have their linguistic roots in African American Language, is testing the boundaries of the safe place that is writing, and particularly, of the writing community they now know themselves to belong to. Already as of this writing in 2022, Quinn's assertion of a "more progressive time" is being challenged by cruel, regressive, abusive bills and laws all over the United States and beyond, particularly in the lives of transgender students and their networks of adult support (Freedom for All Americans, 2022). Lys's self-protective impulse is justified, as it is for Black communities, straight and/or queer, across the country and the world. In our community of writers, my students and I are coming together in our shared queer identity, contending with and constrained by our own Whiteness in striving to understand what our words and the words of our compatriots can and cannot do.

Sharing Writer Identity in Queer Community

One Saturday in May, I've focused our meeting and readings around school experiences, a request that the group made when we discussed the spring curriculum at the end of the winter session. The quickwrite prompt is "When is the first time you recognized your queerness in a school space?" We spend ten minutes writing, and then share our work. When it's Quinn's turn, she pastes her poem into the chat:

let's all play house during recess today
voice inside told me that it wasn't a good idea
unless i wanted to reveal something about myself that i didn't even understand
recess is overrated anyways
except when she swings with me until we feel sick
no, no recess today. a puzzle will be fine
-Q, 5.15.2021

After we read it, she has to issue a correction.

"I had a tiny typo that kind of messed with the whole flow," she says. "Before 'voice' in the second line it's supposed to be A." That second line should begin with "A," she explains, because the poem is about her first crush and the first letter of each line spells out her name.

I feel a shock through my torso at the explanation. I say, "So it's an acrostic, yeah—no, no, that's the form, when the first letters of the line spell it out. That's actually—" I put my hands to my temples in fists and burst them open, trying to express that my mind is blown. "That's echoing something for me 'cause I used to write poems like that a lot when I, like particularly in seventh, eighth grade, and I had one that I made into a song about the girl I was in love with in eighth grade. It was 'Like I Lost You'—her name was Lily. So …"

Lys has their handraise icon up in their blank screen, and I interrupt myself to call on them, still reeling.

"Acrostic poems and like love poems like that and putting people's names in it … if I looked hard enough—" Lys is momentarily interrupted by "the plethora" of dogs barking in their background and mutes their sound on Zoom for a moment while Quinn and I smile at each other and I talk about my own dog, who is in the background of our Zoom and not responding to the barks.

Lys returns, their digital square still black but their sound back on, and continues. "If I looked hard enough, the amount of poems I've made with the codes of guys' names in them?" I laugh awkwardly, still both shaken and thrilled to share with my students something I thought belonged to my early adolescent self alone. Lys goes on, saying that the number of such acrostic poems "would be astronomical, okay? Like ASTRONOMICAL. And I relate to that on so many levels of doing that, 'cause I think I'm like, 'oh it's—it's a code,' but it's so obvious." (Class recording, 5.15.21)

While I feel pressed to ensure that a brief Writing Lesson comes from this response—"Well, it's obvious if you're looking for it … but it's not necessarily someone would see if they didn't know … you can write acrostics so that it's very clear, but you can also do it as within lines…"—before we continue with our discussion, I'm reeling from the specificity of this shared experience (Class recording, 5.15.21). I have formed community with innumerable writers over a lifetime of writing, but I've never shared this private element of my adolescent work with anyone. Writing the piece "Like I Lost You" was, in fact, a liminal moment in my own writing development—it's the only independent song to which I, fourteen at the time, ever wrote lyrics, music, and accompaniment—but the provenance of the title had been a secret I guarded closely,

confident that no one else would figure it out. I treated it as a message to myself, which was rare in my treatment of writing—I was extroverted, proud, eager for an audience and excited to discuss my processes with anyone who would listen. To hear that Lys and Quinn have done the same, to see Quinn doing the same right here in this space, draws me into a potent sense of community. Sharing queerness across the board, *assuming* the shared experience of queerness, is new to me in a community of writers, be I teacher or colleague. I never expected to share an experience so small and so intimate.

It's qualitatively different to share experiences of queer crushes, generally taboo—common to all queer people who experience attraction—and to have articulated our crushes to ourselves in such a specific and writerly way. We are not simply a queer space; writing has been key to the development of all of our particular queer identities. These private acrostics stand as exemplars of our telling the stories of our queerness to ourselves through writing—and now, we have shared them with each other. Lys, Quinn, and I recognize each other through this conversation about acrostics in a way that we didn't before.

Like I Lost You
Don't wanna say the truth is
That I have really lost you,
Don't wanna get that stuff into my head,
'Cause if I really lost you,
That means that it's forever—
I'll say it's like I lost you instead.

Don't wanna say the truth is
That we can't be together,
Don't wanna think about it in that way,
'Cause if we're not together,
Then what's the use of trying,
So say we might be together today.

Sometimes I tell myself no truth,
Sometimes I tell it halfway,
But never can I tell the whole thing through,
'Cause if I were to say it,

And if you were to know it,
You'd figure out my feelings about you.

Don't wanna say the truth is
That really I do love you,
Don't wanna get that stuff into my head,
'Cause if I really love you,
I'm something that I can't be,
I'll say it's like I love you instead.
Yeah.
I'll say it's like I love you instead.
-GCN, 1996, age 14

Some of my Write It Out students have queer communities in their school experience, others less so. Quinn, for instance, joined our group through the outreach of her freshman-year English teacher, who was also the advisor of her school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), and has, as mentioned in Chapter 4, a friend group at school replete with queer people, many of whom came out at the same slumber party after Quinn accidentally outed herself via text. Kaia is at the opposite extreme—homeschooled her entire life in a community where many local homeschoolers are fundamentalist Christians (though she herself is not), and with a homophobic father who has virulently and vocally homophobic friends who often visit her family's home, she comes out to people only with extreme care and caution. (Like Quinn, Kaia has a mother tremendously supportive of her identity, a rapport she describes as comfortable, loving, and teasing—though her mother also implicitly supports Kaia's choice to avoid coming out to her father.) Quinn tells me in an interview that many to most of the kids who would be considered "popular" at her school are queer. This is clearly not the case for Lys, who explains the social mores and social landmines of their own high school experience: "Um, well, okay. For me as someone who's a biologically queer male, um, it's a party. That's for sure." I can't help laughing; their image is onscreen, and they respond

with finger guns, as if gesturing that they've hit their target, or that my response has.

They continue:

> Lys: I've learned, um, through—at least in high school, there's a long series of unspoken rules that you just kinda go in and you're expected to know or expected to learn really quickly … kind of for your own social and physical safety sometimes. Um, like using the bathroom—you never use the urinal, you always use the stall, regardless of how you have to use the bathroom. Um, who you can talk to. Things like that. It's—I don't know how it is for queer girls, but at least for me and other queer guys I've talked to, it's an—it's annoying, to be a queer high schooler now. At least for me—I don't know about people who live in like smaller towns, there are different ways—but where I go to school [in a suburb outside of a small Rust Belt city], there's a significantly large number of queer people, but the flak—you get a lot of it, still.

I entered the conversation thinking of teachers and teacher behavior, and though I shouldn't have been, I'm surprised that their immediate focus is student-to-student interactions. However, when they turn their focus to teachers, I am also surprised.

> Lys: And like, the barely passive-aggressive ways … even when you report it, teachers are like, "Oh, you know, boys being boys," etcetera, etcetera, or when things like—things that aren't okay, you know—happen to people who are queer, um, myself included, that … if they happened to a cis or a heterosexual person they'd get a lot of attention, it hasn't, you know? It's just like this underlying, not-really-noticing, passive-aggressive biases that I've faced a lot, and a lot of my friends have faced. Um, I'm sure it's better than it was years ago, ten, twenty, thirty years ago, but there's still a lotta crappy people in the world, I've learned. Um, especially in high school. High school are some of the worst years … especially with the pandemic, 'cause it seems like all of the fun people stay home and all of like the horrible people come to school. (Class recording, 5.15.21)

In initiating this conversation with my students, I've implicitly staked the claim that our out-of-school time space is distinct from schools and schooling, and thus, by extension, separated myself from teachers. Blackburn & Schey (2018) point out that:

> sometimes schools are too homophobic and transphobic to allow for the visibility of a full range of LGBTQ-themed literacy events and practices, whereas these events and practices flourish in queer-friendly contexts, which are often but not always outside of schools, particularly in spaces designed to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth. (p. 339)

However true this may be, it's also noteworthy as an instructional choice from me, an education scholar involved in the training of teachers. I've committed to saying that our queer community of writers, the practice of exploring our writing identity in what is already a shared queer community, is in part defined by its existence outside of school time and space. Could such a queer community of writers exist in schools?

According to Quinn, it can; in an interview, she tells me about her freshman-year English teacher's curricular choices:

> Quinn: One of the first things that she did was teach our class like how to write like a formal letter, and instead of just being like, writing it to "Mr. Blank, Mrs. Blank," she taught us like the importance of like Mrs. versus Miss versus Ms., and she taught us … Mx. … like M-X, and she taught us like neopronouns and stuff. And I was like, "Wow. That's impressive." (Interview, 8.5.2021)

This English teacher taught Quinn and her classmates—a large number of whom, in Quinn's telling, are also queer—to write formal letters in a manner inclusive anyone who might possibly participate in such a "formal" world, and in Quinn's telling, did so without parental objections, or objections so minimal as to be negligible. Even so, we see Quinn's teacher working steadily towards Perrotti & Westheimer's (2001) goal of "creating visibility" (or "countering invisibility") in making schools more welcoming and receptive for students (and adults) of wide-ranging gender and sexual identity.

Lys, though, tells a different story, and for students with both of these experiences, in different ways, this form of critical witness is essential. Lys tends, they say, only to make friends with queer people now, since in addition to the homophobia detailed above, they often feel fetishized by straight girls at school, people who cheer them with terms like "YAAAS QUEEN!" without really connecting to or understanding them (Class recording, 5.15.21). This history of hostility and confusion also goes back

further. In fourth grade, Lys tells us, they were making a movie with a group of fellow students, and Lys—then using the pronoun "he"—offered to take the leading male role.

> Lys: And this one girl … was like, "He can't be the lead role! He's—" a not-nice word that begins with an F. And I was eleven and I didn't even know what that meant, so I was asking my friend and I was like, "Hey, what's that mean?" And she was like, "Oh, it's just people who are different," and I was like, "Well, what do you mean, different?" And she was like, "Oh, just people who are like kinda girly," and I was like, "Oh!" … I remember feeling afraid because the girliness I could tell they were implying was something that I was like confused about as a kid. … But I remember after that … I kind of like pulled back ranks on my effeminacy and other things, 'cause even just the sound of that word without knowing the context beforehand, it's not a good one, you know? Not at all. (Class recording, 5.15.21)

Providing critical witness to Lys within our Zoom room means acknowledging the overlaps and the limits of our shared experience in this context. Some of us, like Lys, experienced explicit harassment directed at us; others, like Kaia and like me, were driven further into ourselves by constantly reading the coded messages of normativity in the people around us. Kaia, who has never been in a traditional "school space" but has been a member of a homeschool collective, explains this subtle pressure via reading an excerpt from her poem in response to the prompt:

I saw it when their eyes wouldn't snag on all the ones I did
when the conversations of representation would not [en]danger their thoughts of a book
when sexual education had to be searched instead of talked about or taught.
-K, 5.15.2021

Dutro (2019b) explains critical witness as the confluence of being present with an individual in the moment and engaging with the sociocultural context that brings about, bears upon, or exacerbates the challenges of that experience. To bring critical witness in this context is to bring our shared knowledge and experience of these painful sociocultural milieux and to voice, and write to, our recognition, our understanding, in writing, that we share it.

In addition, in a queer space, building writing community linked to our queerness allows us to "talk back" to these homophobic and transphobic societies and milieux in which we live and operate daily. In our discussion of schools and schooling, I bring two articles written by and for educators, but accessible to my students: "Strategies for Supporting LGBTQ Students," by Larry Ferlazzo (2021) and "Covering LGBT Issues in the Classroom" by Beth Hawkins (2018). The former interviews a wide range of educators to understand and disseminate the specific strategies they use to make LGBTQ+ students welcome in their classroom (2021); the latter covers journalistically the shift in California's curricular focus on queer historical figures and the accomplishments of its contemporary queer students (2018). While Lys has told us the most explicit stories of experiencing homophobia in a school space, all the Write It Out students have either seen homophobia from teachers or adult authority figures or been targeted by fellow students while wishing adults in authority would step in. I offer my students three possible prompts in response to these articles:

- A narrative that explores the enactment or absence of something from these articles
- An instruction manual for teachers about supporting LGBTQ+ students, maybe in humorous or poetic form
- A counterargument or deepening of the argument for one of these points or ideas

All three writers in class on this day—Kaia, Quinn, and Lys—use the second prompt. Kaia is the first reader:

Rainbows can disappear in moments,
the words you speak cannot.
Lights can burn sometimes

and the shadows can be home.
If corrected, apologize to the rainbow
but don't let the neighbors know for show.
If the rainbow speaks a question
answer.
Don't offend your unknown.
Let the rainbows know their present and their past and darling,
rainbows need to know how to stay well
just like the puddles do.
Thank you.
-K, 5.15.2021

"I liked how catty that was," Lys exclaims immediately.

For me, I counter, the poem was "a really interesting balance of catty and sincere … you know, the—the snarkiness of calling queer kids 'the rainbows,' but at the same time there were these like moments of actual generosity."

Kaia says, simply, "It sounded better when I said it aloud, so that's nice." (Class recording, 5.15.21) Although this is a common sentiment among writers, and particularly young writers, in my teaching experience, a writer's practice of reading their words aloud in a group is rife with affective intensity and affective resonance. A read-aloud, of course, always risks the sense of "writing shame" (Probyn, 2010); however, it also offers the opportunity, particularly in a community of preexisting support, to respond for the first time to one's own words, to experience a moment of a collectively visceral response. This seems to be the case for Kaia. The multiple and complex aspects of her piece have been heard: she responds to the sense of being "reduced" to her queerness, something she said she'd often seen in LGBTQ+ writing before she joined Write It Out, by using "the rainbows" as a tongue-in-cheek symbol for queer students. She takes the concept even further by making "the puddles" symbolize straight students. But she's also speaking with sincere profundity about the gravity of teachers outing students and a sense of safety that some students—perhaps including Kaia herself—feel

remaining on the margins ("Light can burn sometimes / and the shadows can be home").

Kaia's piece could also be seen as connected to Kaufman & Seidel (2012). Kaufman discusses seeing gay actor Harvey Fierstein's performance *Torch Song Trilogy* for the first time as a teenager and recognizing a place for his queer self. Seidel, an arts educator, reflecting on Kaufman's experience, wonders if perhaps queer students—and students from other marginalized or embattled groups—may remain at times on the margins because *the center is not safe for us*. These margins are Kaia's shadows, the double-edged sword Seidel explores clear in her clean and powerful line.

Is all of this conscious on Kaia's part? It doesn't matter. Sophisticated writing is multifaceted (Bazerman, 2016; Leu et al., 2016), but as Ehret (2018) points out, responding to the reflections of the fiction writer George Saunders, there's a significant element of writing in general, and creative writing in particular, that isn't consciously planned but remains profoundly connected to the writer, what the writer is thinking, feeling, and listening to. There is something beyond the logical, the major, the organized, in creative writing, says Ehret—"you can feel it." (2018, p. 565) In saying that her poem "sounded better when [she] read it aloud," Kaia is, with her classmates and me, meeting some elements of the piece she has just written for the first time. In queer community, she's experiencing these subtle elements of her writing being heard.

Quinn shares her instructions for teachers next:

Don't turn a blind eye when the kid with the red hat drops the f-slur,
but also don't turn a blind eye when the girl with the pride pin is sitting alone.
During Socratic seminars, please make the classroom a space for education and not an outlet for angry hypermasculine teens.
When I write about my queer experiences in a creative writing assignment, please do not leave comments that make me feel like more of an outcast than I already do.
You might be wondering what you can do.
Well, you can put up that little pride sticker on your door window,

and you can come to an occasional GSA meeting like the other teachers sometimes do.
You can compliment the pins on my backpack
and give reasonable punishments to the kid who runs down the hallway shouting slurs because he thinks he's so funny.
-Q, 5.15.2021

Quinn reveals here the possibility that her school experience hasn't been as rosy as she often paints it. She's of course mentioned traumatic experiences or struggles before, but they all seem to be set in the past, before her profound and explosive experience of coming out. This fear of feeling "like more of an outcast than I already do," though, is palpable. Again, perhaps there is no experience of queerness, even in what Quinn herself has called a "more progressive" time and place, without this fear, the palpable notion that even if we are supported and loved, what is normal and central will remain closed to us. But again, we run into the paradox Seidel (2012) articulates—has Quinn found a home on the margins, and even with that home, why does it still matter not to have access to the center?

"I liked how there is like specific things in that," Lys begins in response, naming the image of complimenting the pins. Quinn has also evoked something much deeper for them:

> Lys: [I also like] don't leave it as a double standard—like, oh, this person is punished for this, but this person shouldn't get away with that. Like call out the things that are wrong, but also help the people who look like they need help, look like they need someone to talk to, which I think is a really big thing—you know, some teachers think it's good enough just to call out hate, but then ignore the person who's being hated on when they're low, which I don't think is okay. I like that you put that in. (Class recording, 5.15.21)

In Quinn's writing, in this queer community of writers, Lys hears echoes of their own fears and trauma. They have told us stories of teachers ignoring the cruel behavior of their classmates, of the abuse levelled against Lys and their fellow queer students without any response or engagement from teachers even in the aftermath. Lys sees

themselves reflected in Quinn's writing in a novel way—even as Lys and Quinn have become friends outside of the program, Quinn has used writing to find a moment of queer solidarity that has heretofore gone unrecognized between them.

Lys is the last to share their piece.

You'll ask Michael if it's Michael or Mike.
You'll ask Jessica if it's Jessica or Jess.
You'll ask Michael if his dad can sign it because his mom can't.
You'll ask Jessica if her mom can sign it because her dad can't.
So it shouldn't be too hard to understand
when Mike asks to go by Jess
or Harry's dad is sick so his pops has to sign it.
Your job is to make it all as easy as possible for everyone,
including yourself and your students.
Yet you make it ten times more difficult for your own comfort.
Not all Michaels go by Mike,
and not all Jessicas have a mom and a dad.
The only thing that made Michael need to go by Mike with you
is because your own stubbornness is stronger than your respect for others.
You're a teacher.
Isn't that just practicing what you preach?
-L, 5.15.2021

Unlike Kaia's sly digs or Quinn's empathetic confessional, Lys's piece is a work of direct confrontation. A child of queer parents themself, Lys in 2021 carries a sense of affective threat to queer families in the United States. This proves perhaps-prescient and perhaps-simply wise in 2022, when multiple laws that could prevent students from discussing their LGBTQ+ families in schools have been proposed or passed (Freedom for All Americans, 2022). As a student whose gender may not be binary, who has asked us at least in this group to call them by a different name than the one their parents gave them at birth, they also have a visceral connection to the importance of agency over naming for trans students in particular. When they apologize for the "abruptness" of the piece's ending, I respond with great intensity, struck as I was by the affective force of the poem. "No, but that—that was the point! That was the tone you were using. It needed to

have that abrupt an ending, I think. It—it needed to end on that kind of aggression." (Class recording, 5.15.21)

This is a particular merit of both sharing a marginalized identity with my students and having significant agency in an out-of-school time space. I can recognize the power and necessity of Lys's anger and aggression. I receive it as an entirely reasonable response to the barrage of hurt they experience, and indeed have described to us in the past, at the hands of both students and teachers. Without a strict scholastic code of conduct or discipline to adhere to, I can praise the literary potency of their tone without reservation, without concern about how higher-ups might receive this written anger. As someone working in a shared community of practice with Lys, I can see this piece as the skilled channeling of affective experience into literary craftsmanship that it is. And as a practicing writer, I know that the connection between fierce emotion in writing and aggressive action is rarely so direct as those who are not writers imagine, or fear, it to be. Our existence outside of school spaces is key to the functioning of *our* queer community of writers, as it gives us permission both to define the space through our shared queer identities and to write without the interference of school or outside rules.

When I have complimented Lys for their skillful use of the same names throughout the poem and the impact that has on the reader, I reflect on the assignment with the students.

> Gemma: When we started talking [about queer experiences in schools], you all were talking so much about what's social between students. I wasn't sure an address to teachers was going to feel right or to click, so I'm interested to see that it did for everybody. In … those articles, would—would their suggestions, their content—do you think they would change how you felt in school spaces? If more teachers did things like that?

Their responses reveal a mistrust likely easier to share in an out-of-school space than even a GSA—again, our particular queer community of writers seems to need to claim space outside of school buildings and schooling cultures. Kaia, who has rarely been in a formal school space, has had enough friends and enough interactions to feel she has a clear bead on the possibilities, even as she struggles to put words to the exact feelings.

> Kaia: Not necessarily [would it change her feeling in school spaces], because for me it can feel like, "Oh, you're just doing this for show, and I don't necessarily want to interact with you" … I understand you want to show us that you're like that, that you're an ally, but you're not like—but to a certain point there's a safety thing, where if you're not part of that community I don't necessarily feel safe with you, as safe with you. … The thing—one of the things that one of them said [Jennica Leather as interviewed in Ferlazzo's article] was … apologizing or calling myself out … in appropriate situations, that that's important, like if someone comes to you after class and goes, "Hey, you know what, I'm not really comfortable with you saying that, can you use these pronouns," or whatever … apologizing then and not later on going in front of the class and going, "Oh, I'm sorry," and just—because that all just seems like it's for show. … I heard a story of a kid, he's trans and, um, his teacher messed —messed up his name and his pronouns. So he—he was waiting in line, got to her desk, gave her—gave her his homework, and she messed it up. So he said, relatively quiet, "Hey, please sort it out," and she—she did it so loudly that everyone else in the line could hear? So that is like performative. (Class recording, 5.15.21)

Kaia is, of course, using the conversational form of "performative" here—that the teacher is making a performance of her contrition without any real substance behind it. Looking at the academic version of the word "performative" (Austin, 1987), we see the inverse here—as Ahmed (2006) says of declaring antiracism, the teacher's apology in fact functions as the inverse of an apology.

In Write It Out, we have come together, connecting to each other's experiences as queer people in conversation and acknowledged understanding, but sharing our writing, and sharing our understandings with each other through writing, brings about the relational transformations that make us a community of queer writers.

Becoming a Community of Queer Writing Practice

I begin a class meeting with the quickwrite prompt, "How were you taught to understand LGBTQ+ identities—not necessarily your own, but LGBTQ+ identities in general? How might that have been tied to the place or society in which you lived?"

Quinn, who has long talked about her penchant for and investment in writing persuasive essays, reads us the following response:

> Growing up in a rural area is accompanied by a subtle notion that queerness is a negative aspect of one's identity. Oftentimes those who claim to support the LGBTQ community only demonstrate support to gay- and lesbian-identifying people. It seems to be educational disparities between neighboring towns that causes a lack of support and understanding for and of queer communities. June, in a town like [my town] that has a university, is a beautiful month for queer people. Going for a walk and seeing the updated pride flag illustrates a welcoming community for those who fall under any letter of L-G-B-T-Q+. But when visiting a town just ten minutes away, there is a stark difference in the understanding of queer communities. Just visiting my friends' campgrounds, I learned to hear the word 'queer' as an insult instead of an identity. Instead of rainbows, I see Confederate flags and large displays for Trump. This is not to say that one's politics determines their opinions on a group of people, but it demonstrates their priorities. For those who outwardly support Trump, their priorities are clearly not to openly support queer identities, as their support is given to someone who continuously attempted to take the rights of the LGBTQ community away. Queer identity is seen as a sin or a symbol of courage in [our geographical region]. But it is difficult to be courageous when one can never fully comprehend if they are safe or not.
> -Q, 6.12.2021

My students and I have experienced navigating the world as queer people in different spaces and at different times—from the 1990s' false sense of cultural security to the height of the 2020s' global pandemic, from cosmopolitan urban centers to rural college towns. We find ourselves now in this place, this shared space of the United States in a global pandemic, soon after the advent of vaccines against it, meeting in a virtual shared space based on two elements of affinity: queerness and an investment in writing.

Bop Together at the Edges
Did 12th-century hermits know what it means
to be alone? Ascending Montserrat you stumble on
their huts, stone foundation after stone foundation,
barely minutes apart. You can't determine what
isolation they lived in, millennia of footpaths
overrun by hikers and by growth

connected to nothing is connected to everything

For three months we imagined we'd composed a world
entirely of hermitage. It was always a lie. Still I crouched
in my corner of disaster made from the outlines
of lungs and intestines and brachioles, epithelial tissue
shrinking not to touch the air. Pretending there weren't
a thousand footprints just because they were so long established
they were homes for overgrowth. Everything fragmented into
wrecked huts, a thousand refusals to understand

connected to nothing is connected to everything

Before and any after I've hiked peripheries, clung
to the edges of ancient huts or spread
my arms triumphantly at cliffside, watching a distant city glow.
I can still see by it. I am desperate not
to be alone, but shut doors. I am desperate
to be alone, but always touching

connected to nothing is connected to everything.
-GCN, 2022

Queer community—one in which we all know ourselves to share an identity—allows us to recognize ourselves in a novel way. Specifically as writers in queer community, we have, as a community of practice, devoted ourselves to becoming better at the human endeavor of *writing as queer people*. We are finding "the joys of gender dissidence, of willfully making one's own way against the stream of a crushing heteronormative tide" (Muñoz et al., 2009, p. 74). We share painful experiences through our writing as well as joyful, but per Muñoz et al. (2009), "the pleasure and pain of queerness are not a strict binary" (p. 74). In forming community, we live in shared queerness in a world that often doesn't welcome that queerness—an act of commitment and an act of faith.

CHAPTER 7
"More Personal If You Write It Down": Discussion

There are so many queer histories. So many queer losses. So many queer ways of seeing.
-Memo, 5.29.2021

This dissertation follows Ehret's (2018) call to attend to the minor in literacy education. Outside of Write It Out, my students, like almost all students in the United States, are analyzed by, in, and with the major every day: Quinn, for instance, is engaged in constant academic competition to be her class valedictorian, to which her writing and writing practices contribute significantly; Kaia is learning to operate in a conventional school environment for the first time in her life as she takes community college classes. I've worked for many years as a writing coach, supporting writers struggling to navigate the structural writing requirements of jobs, tests, and academic programs, by all of which they are judged and assessed. These practices and spaces are part of the "major" of writing and literacy education. Myriad research has been and will continue to be written on precisely such subjects. However, Ehret asks, "*How might literacy events be conceptualized in a minor key in order to better know and feel them as they happen?*" (2018, p. 565, emphasis mine) That is to say, we know, and I hope the last several chapters have demonstrated, that those literacy activities and learnings and transitions that occur in a major key are not complete descriptions of literacy as event—as embodied experience, as transformation, as memory. Attending to the minor offers us a distinct and deep channel for understanding writing and literacies.

Write It Out was scheduled to meet for ten weeks, several of which fell to scheduling errors (in one case, I'd accidentally printed a Sunday date instead of

Saturday's on the syllabus, confusing the students; in others, two students were absent, and our parent organization's regulations precluded my remaining alone in a Zoom room with one student). That is, this dissertation focuses on approximately twelve hours of class meetings that took place over the course of three months. Yet our experiences there were profound and shared enough to justify these two hundred-plus pages of writing. This in and of itself is a manifestation of Ehret's (2018) *event-time*—that is, our experiences of time in the space did not follow the constraints of linear time as I have just described it, but instead took on distinctive dimensions, swelling and reshaping with intensities, with shared immediacies. While my twenty years of experience as an arts educator make me confident that this is often true of short-term intensive artistic OST programming, it is nonetheless noteworthy and one of many elements underdiscussed in educational literature about OST arts spaces through an affective lens.

The last several chapters explored the significance of generation gaps in Write It Out, as manifested through technologies, advocacies, and landmarking processes (Chapter 4); the role that queer histories, both personal and global, held affective resonance for our group (Chapter 5); and how different facets of our identities—queerness, writer-ness, Whiteness, geography—came together in our creation of a queer community of writers (Chapter 6). In this chapter, I will use theoretical and affective tools—primarily those of Ehret (2018) and Dutro (2019a & 2019b)—to once again frame these experiences in Write It Out through my research questions:

1) How do LGBTQ+ teenagers' experiences and identities manifest in a queer virtual OST community of writers?

2) How did these LGBTQ+ teenagers' affective experiences meet those of their instructor, a queer writer and educator, in this community of writers?
3) What does it mean for me, a teacher-researcher, to capture these experiences affectively in writing?

Specifically, per Ehret's call, I address our literacy events in Write It Out in a minor key, considering how my findings look and feel through the kaleidoscopic lenses of affective literacies.

Student Experiences and Identities

In this section, I use Ehret's (2018) tenets for feeling literacy through the event to respond to my first research question: "How do LGBTQ+ teenagers' experiences and identities manifest in a queer virtual OST community of writers?"

My students and I, even in a space focused around shared identities and practices, would always be operating across significant generation gaps. Certainly these manifested in the major key—when Lys listed all of the music- and social-media-based cues that queer teenage students use to identify each other (e.g. "Do you listen to Girl in Red?" [Class recording, 5.15.21]), it was clear that I could not be recognized via those cues and nor could their queer teachers—but they were more nuanced and fragmented in the minor. That is, a minor-key analysis of generation gaps interweaves our commonalities as well. Consider Ehret's analytical tool of *desire*. It is the desire for shared community, the desire to write and to move and change and understand through writing, that pulls us into the space across and through generations and generational experiences of living as a queer writer. Ehret's *desire* works in concert with, even if it is not precisely equivalent to, Sappho's notion of desire (see Chapter 5)—"before all else."

To enter an out-of-school queer writing space, we must feel a pull to be there, which comes before any and all events through which to feel literacy; to write in an out-of-school space can be driven by nothing but that desire, the pull to write. "Desiring literacies," says Ehret, "create their own value through the qualitative felt-sense of their searching." (2018, p. 573) The desiring literacies in Write It Out are the meetings of *queer* and *writer,* and what the intersections of the two feel and mean to the students and to me.

Ars Poetica – III
This is not a love song anymore. It's
a different kind of song, the kind that keeps
singing after you've left. The kind
that you didn't realize was a secret until
they asked about it. The kind where
you memorized the lyrics wrong and thought
it was about something different and now
it's about that for you, always. It's a love
song long after you fell, written
when you can stand up after landing, brushing
dust from your elbows and knees.
-GCN, 2022

In most out-of-school time spaces, and particularly most out-of-school time arts-based spaces, affiliation is entirely voluntary. There's no monetary or grade-based reward for joining Write It Out; it carries the possible social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) of being a "résumé builder," as Quinn described it in our interview, but hardly goes further than that. However, as Quinn said, the students' and my experiences in Write It Out "became so much more than a résumé builder." For Quinn, the power of the work was in its intimacy—being part of Write It Out, she says, "made me happy that it was something like personal to me." (Interview, 8.5.21) For Kaia, the prospect of Write It Out contained the equally novel proposition of "figur[ing] out how to introduce *queer* with *writer*" but ended with a new sense of queer connection. Having a group of queer

teenage writers as colleagues, she articulated, was "having a safety blanket of people who actually know what you're talking about … and people who you feel comfortable to … show parts of yourself that most people don't necessarily feel comfortable [with]." (Interview, 8.5.21)

Both of these point to the *relational transformations* that Ehret (2018) discusses. That is, in moving through the ongoing literacy events of Write It Out meetings—each conversation, each writing prompt, each sharing of work—we are all "constantly becoming," changing with each other through the literacy events with which we interweave. "What is at stake coming to know desire through literacy events," says Ehret, "is the meaningfulness of the life of literacy teaching and learning." (2018, p. 574) In and through experiencing these relational transformations, the literacy events of Write It Out both are and are becoming more meaningful. The feeling of queer community, Kaia says in an interview, helps her "know exactly that you're not necessarily a hundred percent safe with them, but you're at least quite a bit safer with them," *them* referring to her Write It Out colleagues, "a safety blanket of people who know what you're talking about." (Interview, 8.5.21) The affective tonality of our classes is for her a dramatic shift, because she can speak freely about her identity and experiences, about the role of her queerness in her writing, and "not necessarily be looked at like a freak or whatever … not having to misstep because you're afraid of something bad—that something bad might happen to you?" This is a theme that comes up in class as well: Lys tells the group that because at school they so frequently face either aggressive homophobia or, from certain cis and straight girls, exaggerated fetishization of the "YAAS QUEEN!" variety, they tend only to make friends with queer people now. Given Quinn's friend group, many of whom have come out in the last year,

and Kaia's extreme caution with her own friends from her homeschool cooperative, this sits heavily, shifting the group's affective tonality. And when Lys continues to talk about their own objectification in school beside that of girls, and how teachers eager to demonstrate their "acceptance" of queer students will allow Lys to get away with wearing a mesh shirt while sending a cis girl to the office for a "dress code violation" when her bra strap shows, the event-time shifts for Kaia (Class recording, 5.15.21). For her, the fact that Lys, assigned male at birth, not only advocates openly for feminist causes but also understands the complex politics that feed into Kaia's experiences, will glow like a beacon across the subsequent months.

The profound truth of Ehret's tools for "feeling literacy through the event" is that all four are interconnected—when we come to a writing space through desire, our relational transformations further that desire; shifting affective tonality reshapes event-time; event-time expands to hold the moments when we recognize relational transformation. All of these tools are necessary for understanding—and feeling—how spaces like Write It Out become meaningful in LGBTQ+ teenagers' lives.

Critical Witness: A Meeting of Affects

In this section, I use Dutro's (2019b) concept and tenets of critical witness to respond to my second research question: "How did these LGBTQ+ teenagers' affective experiences meet those of their instructor, a queer writer and educator, in this community of writers?"

Primarily, what allowed the students and myself to meet across the complex fragments of queer generation gaps was our practices of bearing critical witness to and for each other's losses, complexities, and experiences as queer writers. As Dutro (2019b)

notes, these very practices of critical witness were *woven into the fabric* of our writing and discussion practices in Write It Out. We recognized implicitly what Quinn and Kaia would later both articulate in interviews: that in seeing each other's writing, we were seeing each other in ways that few were allowed to see. This was true even when we made the work public—for instance, when the students read at the Pride reading hosted by the CYW's parent organization, or when Quinn and Kaia published poems in a local literary journal that set aside a section for the CYW's writing students (Interview, 8.5.21). The presentation of the writing in and of itself was an incomplete component of critical witness; responding in community, in an atmosphere of reciprocal trust, made the difference.

We shared different dimensionalities of the identities of *queer* and *writer*. Lammers & Marsh (2018) consider how their focal teenage writer Laura views her identity as *position*—that she "takes up and rejects, in part or in entirety, the identities offered in different time-space contexts." (p. 94) This overlaps with Lammers & Marsh's engagement with Lewis & del Valle's (2009) framing of identities as *fixed, situated,* and *mobile*. For me, *writer* and *queer* feel more fixed and integrated than any other nominally fixed identities in my experience, be they *White* or *female* or *disabled* or *American.* But my students did not share this intimacy between the two identities, making them more situated—for Kaia, for instance, entering Write It Out was an experiment in seeing how "queer" (a new and fixed identity term, though often frightening) fit with "writer" (a practice that only in some situations morphed into an identity for her, sometimes dependent, reluctant though she was to admit it, on "being appreciated and being recognized for what you can do … like, praise, I guess." [Interview, 8.5.21]) Equally, although *queer* had long been fixedly central to Lys's

identity, *writer* was new and potent, and situated in a social sphere. They enjoyed our conversations at least as much as they enjoy writing and sharing their written work. But that we came to all of these different experiences of shared identity in one virtual space and one time, together, meant that we were able to bear reciprocal critical witness.

The fact that we shared the identities of *queer* and *writer* within our space—however differently we each experienced them outside of it—meant that our practices of witnessing took on a different relationship to power. Dutro mandates that processes of critical witness are reciprocal in large part to preclude a teacher asking students to be vulnerable when that teacher feels mandated to maintain a staid or distant "professionalism" themself. Although I often struggled with the balance, my concern faced in the opposite direction—was I being overfamiliar with my students? What would constitute overfamiliar? I felt a consistent sense of affective vulnerability with such uncertainties. Being a teacher-researcher and an immunocompromised person whose social and professional interactions had taken place exclusively on Zoom for over a year only compounded these feelings. In an early memo I note, "I still don't know how to handle the fact that I'm teacher first, queer elder second, researcher third in that space, and that I'm so burned out on Zoom by the end I don't even know what to do." (Memo, 3.20.2021)

The notion of being a *queer elder* was key to how my affective experiences met my students'. For Dutro, *action and advocacy* are a tenet of critical witness, not simply comforting a vulnerable student in the moment of the classroom but taking on in some form the sociocultural events and forces that contribute to that student's vulnerability. Reaching across our generation gaps with queer history—both my own personal experiences and my knowledge of events that, by virtue of my particular connections,

exceeded my students' knowledge on some of these points—became a key part of that for me. That I, a queer person in the room with them, had been a child in New York City at the peak of the AIDS crisis in the United States, that I had reacted to the Pulse massacre as an adult who had been to nightclubs (as Quinn said, "when you're an adult you have those experiences, like [dancing at a queer nightclub is] supposed to be a positive thing" [Class recording, 6.12.21]), that I had published my own queer writing, and that I was open to talking about all of that, was (I hope and I believe) part of my action in support of my students' vulnerabilities. I, in a manner different from the LGBTQ+ writings and histories they had read, connected them to a thread of a queer past. I could tell them, from my own experience, "what recognizing your queerness and not being able to bring it to a space in the '90s felt like." (Class recording, 5.8.21) My students' connection to the stories I told, and the poems in which I occasionally conveyed them, meant that I felt encouraged to bring in more of my own experiences and memories, going back to my own adolescence.

Crush
I didn't know I
wanted you,
I knew I wanted
to know you everywhere,
I knew I wanted you
to know everything,
I know I thought
you did.
You didn't
make everyone want you,
but everybody
wanted you,
and I didn't make
you want me,
I made you want
to impress me,
and I don't know if
you knew you did
already,
and if

you ever so much
as touched me,
I don't know what I
would have known,
I only know I
would have woken
up everywhere,
alight.
-GCN, 2014

This in turn led us to meet Dutro's third tenet of critical witness—that it is woven consistently into the curriculum, that there is no literacy teaching and learning that can be separated out from the practice. I couldn't only be vulnerable or witness my students' vulnerabilities for a moment and then "return" to the lesson plan, the content, the curriculum. Rather, those reciprocal practices of critical witness *built* the curriculum. This was true when, at the end of the winter session, my students shared the aspects of queer experience they wanted to focus on in the spring (e.g. LGBTQ+ experiences throughout history, trans issues, the differences between queer experiences in the U.S. and those in other countries or regions) and thus guided me in creating the spring syllabus. This was true when I shared my own writing with the group and when I chose not to in order to give more space to their work. This was true when I forgot that June 12th was the fifth anniversary of the Pulse massacre and planned another lesson, and upon realizing gave the students the choice of whether to continue with my plan or move into a quickly-created alternative Pulse plan. It was true when I found myself profoundly moved by my students' relationship to the horrors at Pulse on that day, at a level I hadn't realized I would or could be.

The ways that my affective experiences met my students'—through the three essential tenets of critical witness—in a way gave rise to our work in Write It Out as a *community of writing practice*. We entered the space via Wenger's (1998) shared

domain of interest—that is, in writing with our identities as queer people. We created this shared *community* in the space via Wenger's criteria: we worked together in the joint activities of reading, discussion, and writing; we provided mutual support through the practices of critical witness described above; and we built relationships—and relational transformations (Ehret, 2018)—around our writing, experiences, and interests. Finally, we engaged in shared *practice* as we bore witness to each other's writing and offered ongoing responses and feedback, each of us with the equal potential to hear and be heard, to move and be moved, to change and be changed.

Writing As Affective Teacher Research Methodology

This section uses Richardson's (e.g. 2003) frameworks of writing as methodology to respond to my third research question: "What does it mean for a teacher-researcher to capture these experiences affectively in writing?"

As Richardson (2003) takes pains to clarify, writing is "not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of 'knowing'—a method of discovery and analysis." (p. 499) Although Richardson's work with writing has little to no "formal" overlap with affect theory, her framing dovetails with Stewart's (2018) picture of the potent affective experience of writing in "Writing, Life." Stewart explains that "if you let it, writing pushes everything (writer in tow) into an energetic state." (2018, p. 186)

Every caring teacher knows the potent energetic states that can arise in a classroom, and Mockler (2013) notes that in teacher research, teaching practice and research practice have the potential to "shape and be shaped by each other" (p. 146) I have long noted, with Richardson (2003) and the students and colleagues she describes,

that it's rare for the excitement of any research to be captured in prose in a way that helps a reader to *feel* it (p. 501). Given that affect theory centers on felt, embodied, shared intensities (e.g. Massumi, 2003; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), I consider it a profound responsibility of researchers who engage with affect to not simply describe, but *evoke* those intensities for the reader, yet I find this no more common to writing about affect than Richardson does to the general body of qualitative social science research.

As affect theory becomes more significant in the body of literacy teaching research (Ehret & Leander, 2019; Ehret & Roswell, 2020), I feel even more that it is incumbent upon me and researchers like me—conducting literacy teacher research through an affective lens—to capture affect in, through, with writing. I am attempting not to convey major-key *results*, but minor-key *events* and *experiences* (Ehret, 2018). Teacher research is not, and should not be, limited to the technical and nominally replicable elements of the profession. Per Ehret (2018), again, these technical elements are not all that draw us to teaching or keep us in the classroom. You can feel it. "Writing," says Stewart (2018), "makes things feel full—at once actual and potential." (p. 187) I remember the experiences in Write It Out through writing; simultaneously, I experience them anew in writing them. Given Niccolini's (2016) connection between the affective and the queer, and Richardson's (2003) observation that those academics driven to use writing as a method of inquiry are often those—like queer people—minoritized within academic spaces (p. 523), I offer that in using my writing to capture our experiences in Write It Out affectively, I am moving closer towards *capturing the queerness of the experience*.

In attending to the minor of literacy education in an OST space (Ehret, 2018), in bearing critical witness to and for each other (Dutro, 2019b), my students and I were able to form a flawed but significant queer community of writing practice (Wenger, 1998; Johnson & Eubanks, 2015). In entering the hall of mirrors and angles that is attempting to write powerfully, but alone, about the power of shared experiences of writing, I aim to open new pathways for connection between narrative inquiry, affect theory, and practitioner research, as the shared experiences of teachers and students are always embodied, always visceral, always interwoven.

CHAPTER 8

"By the Side of the Water Ready to Jump": Conclusions

"It's … [an] honor and it's fun—like writing with queer people."
-Lys, 6.19.2021

Two weeks after the spring session has ended, at the end of Pride Month, we have gathered on Zoom to do a Pride reading for the CYW's parent organization. Our rehearsal was chaotic—Quinn's internet connection was spotty and eventually prevented her from having her image up on the Zoom call; Lys, who is not using the name Lys with their parents and thus asked me to announce them as Vincent, was unable to attend—but tonight Lys, Kaia, and Quinn have all brought sets of their work. Kaia was the first to agree to the reading when I brought the parent organization's request to the group—"I think that would be amazingly fun" —and her investment in learning from the work has led her colleagues (Class recording, 5.29.2021). When the events coordinator asked if she could record the reading, Kaia said, "I would actually love that, um, because I would like to see myself read and see everything that I need to work on, so." (Rehearsal recording, 6.30.2021) Her comfort in joining a reading that was publicly announced has not escaped me, nor has the fact that she will not have invited her father to hear this work.

Nonetheless I worried about anticlimax. After more than a year of Zoom events, few people had registered to attend the reading, and I was concerned a reading with a small audience wouldn't offer enough triumph or sense of culmination to the group. Indeed the audience is small, consisting mainly of Helene, a few of the students' family members, and Kim, the parent organization's events coordinator—but even among this small group there's an affective glow, a sense that what happens in this room matters.

What has been private is becoming public, given over to a less certain audience; my students are no longer only "writing with queer people," but presenting what they've created in a queer environment, attuned to queer generation gaps, histories, and community building, to an unknown audience.

The students are presenting their greatest hits: Lys reads their "I am a homosexual" poem; Kaia reads her thank-you note. Quinn is our last reader. I've heard her set before, as I have Kaia's—heard the poems as she wrote them during Write It Out meetings, heard the full set in rehearsal a few days before—but in the glow of performance, even online performance, it hits differently. She's steady in a way she isn't always, sparkling with the sense of delight that is her trademark in any interaction. Her set includes this poem, which she wrote during the winter session in response to Ocean Vuong's "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong" (Vuong, 2017):

Someday
Someday I'll surprise myself
I will open my eyes and feel the same way I do
when I'm jumping into cold water to avoid the pain of slowly getting in
For once I will not focus on my future, but I will deeply appreciate the present
Someday as I break through the surface tension I will be shocked at how far I've come
and how much progress I have made
I won't expect it because I will have spent my whole life enjoying the moment, instead of thinking what the future might be
Someday the ripple of the splash I created will slowly fade out
But someday somebody new will be waiting by the side of the water ready to jump
-Q, 2021

Watching the recordings of rehearsal and performance months later, I cannot but think back to my interview with Quinn, in which she told me that Write It Out was originally intended to be a resume builder. Instead, she says, "it made me happy that it was something like personal to me." In the face of struggles, she explains, "writing like makes me come back to the world." (Interview, 8.5.21)

Queer youth (and particularly trans youth) in the United States today are facing sheafs of destructive legislation that create an ongoing affective threat to their well-being. Like all contemporary teenagers, they face a frightening and uncertain future, but in their present queer teenagers are often caught in the vortex of Kaia's theoretical question—"if I say something [about my identity], will I die?" (Class recording, 5.8.21) Even as the youth in my study are privileged among LGBTQ+ young people in the United States in many ways—all of them are White; all of them have homes with at least one parent supportive enough to sign their permission form to join a queer writing group—they cannot escape this affective threat. And yet in writing, they find themselves with some profound sense of agency in the moment. This is generated not simply from their individual writing, but by the sense of being in community with each other and each other's work. They've had the communal space to share them with each other, a space that Kaia considers "safe from judgment of most things … especially about your queer identity." (Interview, 8.5.21) This safety gives them a way to respond to each other's work in a way that gives rise to an orientation of growth. Quinn says that she often felt a certain envy of Kaia and Lys's facility with "analogies and metaphors and stuff," but she also considers, "I wouldn't be who I am if I didn't have [my] own writing voice, and that own writing voice is shaped because of who I am." (Interview, 8.5.21)

> Community is an agreement to care about our mutual well-being—whether we Love each other or not, whether we were structurally or genetically bound to each other already. I take being a community member seriously, or at least I try to, because really it means we're contributing, always contributing, to building something that exceeds us but can hold us.
> -GCN, Write It Out response to the quickwrite "How do you define community?" 3.27.2021

I, too, feel tremendous power in being part of a community of queer writing practice with my students. I've never had the opportunity to feel the identities of *queer*, *writer*,

and *educator* come together in my experience in so precise a way. All of the young people in Write It Out—no one more explicitly than Quinn—have shown me new dimensions of my work as an educator: what it means to students, and to me, to carry the myriad complexities of my identities and experiences with me into the classroom while engaging in, and pedagogically centering, the reciprocal practice of critical witness. (Dutro, 2019b)

Significance of This Work

When I began working with my students, I was as caught as Quinn in what is now clearly the myth that we are living a "more progressive time" in relationship to queer lives and identities. As I write, bills that threaten queer and/or trans youth and educators permeate the United States and the world, amplified and encouraged by, among others, one of the most successful writers with one of the largest platforms in the world, someone in whose stories myriad queer and trans readers once found a lodestar. Two of the most populous states in the country now by law forbid any mention of queer identities, experiences, or families in the classroom and cast parenting and psychological and medical care that supports transgender youth as "abusive." The embers of a loving, affirming, and potent queer future to which Quinn, Kaia, and Lys were born, into which I have been stunned to stumble as an adult, already seem on the verge of being legally and practically extinguished. Living and telling complex stories with, of, and about queer youth and queer educators is one way to stoke our flames.

In such times, where U.S. schools as an institution are both under existential threat and often compelled to ignore, embattle, or overwrite queer students, studies of out-of-school time teaching, learning, and community building are also needed. OST

programs tend to be researched in isolation or in comparison to schools, rather than as parts of a constellation of compelling OST work worldwide. I worked as a teaching artist for many years, so it is particularly important to me to create research that supports OST work as intrinsically valuable. I write for teaching and community artists at least as much as I do for classroom teachers, for students like Kaia and Lys who often find their most powerful axes of community in spaces outside of schools and formal education.

I hope, too, that hybridized narrative inquiry can offer the opportunity to make academic research accessible to a wider audience of educators—again, particularly OST educators, who might not spend the same amount of time on professional development or at conferences as in-school educators. At the last academic conference I attended in person before the pandemic, I went to a panel on nontraditional dissertations and was startled, when I left the room, to find myself in tears. Always I have felt a deeper connection to writing work I deem "creative" than work I deem "academic," but I had considered that an aesthetic difference—that I simply prefer my poetry or fiction to my academic prose. The affective overwhelm I experienced in that room made it clear to me that the distinction exceeded the aesthetic to the epistemological, even the ontological. These nontraditional dissertation forms were manifestations of *different ways of knowing* and *different ways of being*, ways that it has long been incumbent upon the academy to learn how to value. As my students found new ways of seeing themselves in society through writing in Write It Out, so I found new ways of understanding academic research in the creation and revision of this dissertation.

An anchoring tool of those new ways of understanding was affect theory, to my mind so frequently the missing piece of how we talk about writing. The visceral is real and needs to be understood, and that understanding will take a different form from the

quantitative or even the traditionally qualitative, from work in the major key. Emotion and what comes before it, the out-of-control, preverbal, embodied elements, Ehret (2018) says, have

> been analyzed primarily as mediator[s] or … mediational means, turning feeling into a representation that can be analyzed outside of immediate, embodied experience. Feeling, emotion, and bodies become representations, mere resemblances of their living moments. Although these are the primary theoretic tools literacy researchers have developed thus far to describe [literacy] events, they certainly are not all events are. You can feel it. (p. 565)

Since I was a teenage writer myself, writing for me has been a process of *understanding through feeling*, of trusting the synaptic processes and visceral connections I felt to ideas, events, characters, conflicts, imaginings in the world around me, trusting that through writing towards them I would reach a more profound and complex understanding. Writers we call "scholars" deserve that same practice of trust and opportunity.

Limitations of the Study

This dissertation contains the stories from one very specific period of time, with one small group of White queer youth led by one White queer writing instructor who made herself, for these purposes, the narrator of our affective experiences and literacy events—our relational transformations, our ever-shifting affective tonality, our expansive and luminous event-time, our potent literacy desires. Still, I echo Lammers & Marsh's (2018) concern that

> celebrations of the agentic moves youth make, while important to legitimize and expand the field's consideration for a wider array of literacies, may overstate young people's agentic possibilities without fully considering constraints they face in many social spaces. (p. 92)

This is doubly true for queer youth. I write this piece in honor and celebration of my time as Kaia, Lys, Hart, and Quinn's writing instructor in a virtual queer OST writing space, a space where I endeavored to maintain and expand our "agentic possibilities" while building knowledge, engagement, discipline and skill relating to our queer writing practices. But in the face of profound obstacles and fears that LGBTQ+ youth in the United States and elsewhere face today, it is important to note the ways they are structurally denied agency and self-determination alongside the opportunities that writing offers them therefor. I fear my study has been limited in that regard, and it offers fruitful trajectories for further research.

Out
Crack the chrysalis, unfold limbs, start, reach.
Crack wrists and ankles; wonder if you'll ever touch what you reach.

You enter these hours like they're smoother than water
in the pools your swim team moves through, reach.

Even when stretching arms across the table means
every piece of flatware gets knocked askew, reach.

I've dreamed I fell through the center of a staircase onto a mattress
more times than I've dreamed I flew. Reach.

A flag in the air that waits for someone to take it
constitutes an untrue reach.

I don't know what to want, fear, obey, destroy, reject, embrace,
create, overturn, touch, connect, ignore, eschew, reach.

Writing your name in sand, no matter how close
or far the waves, could end up being a way to reach.
-GCN, 2022

To say that this research makes no claim to "universality," in the traditional interpretation of the term, would be an understatement. However, theater director Peter Brook (1998) cites Luis Valdez of the Chicano theater group El Teatro Campesino's challenge to the term "universal": "'Universal' does not mean pretending to be like

everyone else. 'Universal' simply means related to the universe." (p. 167) What is needed, what is imperative, is more research that expands LGBTQ+ teenagers' relations to the universe—in their own eyes, in the eyes of the teachers tasked with helping them navigate the world, in the eyes of the families and communities on whom it is incumbent to help them survive and thrive. Complex and multifaceted research and storytelling offers new avenues for relating and being related to the universe.

Final Thoughts

It is my profound hope that this study may help to move writing instructors—both in and out of school—to a deeper understanding of the experiences and felt intensities of LGBTQ+ adolescent writers, and the ways that their multiple identities—both as writer and as queer, among many others—may meet and intersect in their practice. This is particularly significant in relating to out-of-school time programming.

Indeed, given that more and more American schools face legal penalties should they attempt to support queer students, a study focused on what queer adolescents find in an out-of-school time space can offer novel tools. Some truths about what queer youth are saying, and what they want to say, are available in these pages. Since OST programs often, for better and for worse, have limited oversight, they may provide a new kind of oasis for queer youth in the not-too-distant future. This study explores one way it is possible to create kind and nurturing spaces for queer adolescent writers, and the power they can gain with support for their voices.

Attending to the visceral relationships that marginalized youth have with acts of creation, with compositions in the development of which they have near-unfettered

agency, can open wider our understanding of, to use Dutro's phrase, "visceral literacies." Dutro (2019a) says of affective analysis:

> There is potential for fueling empathy, advocacy and political commitment towards justice, and the potential for pity, antipathy and political commitment towards injustice. Yet, in the not-yet-named space of such an encounter lies, in these theories, a suspended pre-meaning space where the direction it goes is not yet determined and, thus, open to rerouting. (Dutro, 2019a, p. 78)

I believe, more deeply than I can articulate, in the power and purpose of writing. What is written can be heard in a way that even speech cannot. "Writing is something that can be so crafted to your own liking," says Lys—it can be harder to voice vocally "because your mind is … always moving, and sometimes you can let that get ahead of you." (Class recording, 5.8.21) Once written, writing also has the concrete potential to echo across generations—as Quinn says, to "connect through words and written artifact," allowing for the "knowing and safety that's incredibly important to queer people, especially when we're young." (Class recording, 5.8.21)

As my students make clear, this means access to quality writing instruction is a justice issue—who has the tools to connect with their own voices, and whose voices are heard by the societies around them as a result? Every writing space, then, has the potential to fuel a commitment towards justice, to use Dutro's words (2019b); so does every piece of research relating to writing and writers. By portraying the affective experiences and understandings of a group of queer adolescent writers guided by a queer adult writer, it's my hope that this dissertation moves towards rerouting scholars' and teachers' assumptions about the inclusivity of a writing space or a writing curriculum, and helps them to consider more deeply how to fuel empathy and justice in their work.

Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Lesson Plan

Week 5: Considering and Reflecting
Queerness in history

Quickwrite: How do you understand queer history/queer histories? What do they mean to you?

Share

Discuss: What do you feel is missing from your own engagement with LGBTQ+ histories? What would help you to fill in the blanks?

Read Sappho XII: https://poets.org/poem/xii
Discuss: immediate responses
what we know of Sappho
Write: Most of Sappho's poems do not exist in their original, complete forms, but are "fragments." Write into a space you see left in this poem, a question it leaves unanswered or a thought it leaves unfinished.

Share

Listen to three Tchaikovsky movements and do quickwrite responses to them—anything they bring to mind, anything you see

Then spend 10 minutes trying to make two merge into a longer or more cohesive piece

Share

Appendix B: Page from "The [Write It Out] Document"

RESOURCE LIST!

Share exciting queer media here--use one of the existing headers or add a category!

Books

Movies
Love Simon
Call Me By Your Name

TV shows

Songs/Musicians
- Dorian Electra (E)

Games

Twitch streams
Nihachu
Colinsmoke
justaminx
antfrost

Content Warnings
Electric Chairs
Gun Control

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me about how you first started writing?
2. Do you feel that you are a writer—does calling yourself that feel right to you? If so, do you know why? If not, why not?
3. What does writing have to do with your identity in the world?
4. What do you feel when you write?
5. What did you feel when you were writing [a particular piece from this week or the prior week]?
6. How do you get your ideas for writing?
7. How is your writing connected to (or not connected to) other parts of your life and your identity?
8. How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation?
9. How do you identify in terms of gender?
10. How did it feel to say that just now?
11. How do you feel when you think about writing?
12. How do you feel when you talk about writing, or say you are a writer?
13. How do you feel when you write in a group like at YAA, and how do you feel when you write alone? Are those feelings similar or different?
14. What do you share with other writers?
15. What do you share with other people who have the same sexual orientation you do? The same gender identity? Are those similar to or different from what you share with other writers?
16. What makes you want to write?
17. How do you feel about what you've written? How do you know how you feel?

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school students with autism who type to communicate (Order No. 10126782). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ Syracuse University. (1816204715). https://libezproxy-syr-edu.libezproxy2.syr.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/dissertations-theses/blazing-trails-being-us-narrative-inquiry-with/docview/1816204715/se-2?accountid=14214

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Woods, N., Gale, E., & Scalettar, P.J. (2014-2021). *Bachelor in paradise* [TV series]. Next Entertainment; Warner Brothers Television; Warner Horizon Television.

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Yagelski, R.P. (2012). Writing as praxis. *English Education, 44*(2), 188-204.

Yosso, T.J. (2006). Critical race counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano educational pipeline. New York: Routledge.

Zecca, L., & Cotza, V. Distance relationships and educational fragilities: A Student Voice research in digital third spaces. *Research on Education and Media*, *12*(1), 34-41.

Zemelman, S., & Daniels, H. (1988). *A Community of Writers: Teaching Writing in the Junior and Senior High School*. Heinemann.

Index of New Poems

By Quinn

Vita

Gemma Cooper-Novack
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Education

Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Ph.D.: Literacy Education, expected 2022
Dissertation (in progress): A Sense of Safe Connection: An Affective Narrative Exploration of Queer Teenagers in an Out-of-School Time Writing Program
Advisor: Dr. Marcelle Haddix, Syracuse University
Committee Members: Dr. Kelly Chandler-Olcott, Syracuse University; Dr. Elizabeth Dutro, University of Colorado – Boulder

Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA
Ed.M.: Arts in Education, 2010
Coursework in arts integration, youth and technology, organizational leadership, and adolescent ethical development

University of Chicago, Chicago, IL
A.B. (with honors)**: Anthropology**, 2004 (with special honors)
Honors thesis in theater anthropology

Teaching Experience

Syracuse University

RED 615 – Teaching Academic Writing 2020, 2021
Instructor of Record
Developed new syllabus with greater focus on justice-based pedagogies • Created, structured, and implemented class meetings for 2020 and 2021, both face-to-face and virtual • Created, implemented, and built rubrics for assignments • Implemented labor-based contract grading in 2021 while supporting rigorous and engaged work • Met with individual students to support and plan student facilitation

RED 326/625 – Literacy Across the Curriculum 2018, 2020-2022
Placement Supervisor for Dr. Heather Waymouth and Dr. Bong Gee Jang
Communicated with teachers, students, school administrators, and PSTs • Reviewed PSTs' portfolios and lesson plans • Conducted breakout sessions on specialized subjects for PSTs

RED 614 – Teaching 21st Century Writers In and Out of School 2016, 2018-2020
Co-Instructor with Dr. Marcelle Haddix and Dr. Janine Nieroda-Madden
Developed presentations on different writing genres that offered the master's students different methods of developing lessons • Supported students in creating and revising lesson plans, developing their own writing, and engaging with a new educational space

EED 443 – Literacy Methods for Grades 4-6 2017-2019
Teaching Assistant to Dr. Bong Gee Jang and Dr. Zaline Roy-Campbell
Prepare PSTs for Mediated Field Experience, observing PSTs preparing and conducting English Language Arts lessons in fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms • Supported PSTs' creation of writing curricula for "advisory" period • Responded to lesson plans and lessons

RED 615 – Teaching Academic Writing 2018-2019
Teaching Assistant to Dr. Rachel Brown
Developed lectures and handouts on writing pedagogy and the writing process • Developed discussion questions and assignments for master's-level students

Other Teaching and Education Experience

Program Coordinator 2019-present
Narratio Fellowship, Syracuse, NY
Support the ongoing development of arts fellowship for refugee youth at educational transitions as founding program coordinator, collaborating with Dr. Brice Nordquist and Ahmed Badr • Arrange public presentations of youth poetry, filmmaking, and photography • Collaborate in recruitment and hiring of teaching artists • Plan summer intensive programming and curricula and teach writing workshops during summer intensive

Writing Instructor 2017–present
Downtown Writer's Center at the YMCA/Young Authors Academy, Syracuse, NY
Create, develop, and implement writing curricula for both teenage and adult students • Founded and lead "Speaking Out" program for LGBTQ+ adolescent writers

Theater and Writing Teaching Artist 2000–Present
Various Organizations, Chicago, IL, New York, NY, Boston, MA, & Syracuse, NY
Breadcrumbs Productions, Syracuse, NY (2021, forthcoming)
North Side Learning Center, Syracuse, NY (2018–2019)
Gardner Pilot Academy, Allston, MA (2011–2015)
Gan Israel Shaloh House Summer Camp, Brighton, MA (culinary arts; 2012-2016)
The Theater Offensive, Boston, MA (2013)

Chelsea Community Schools, Chelsea, MA (2012–2013)
Saint Ann's School, Brooklyn, NY (2008)
Anshe Emet Synagogue, Chicago, IL (2005–2008)
Barrel of Monkeys, Chicago, IL (2004–2007)
After School Matters at Michele Clark High School, Chicago, IL (2004–2006)
Neighborhood Schools Program at the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL (2003 2004)
University Theater School Partnership Program at the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL (2000–2004)
Created and taught theater curricula for elementary, middle, and high school students • Instructed students in nuances of playwriting and the writing process • Produced student showcase performances and arranged out-of-school tours and trips • Created original children's script • Coordinated final performances with students and theater professionals

Writing Coach 2009–present
GemmaCooperNovack.com, Boston, MA and Syracuse, NY (2011–present)
Harvard Grad. School of Ed. Disabilities Services, Cambridge, MA (2009–2014)
Boston Teacher Residency, Boston, MA (2013–2014)
Coach students (including those served by institutional Disabilities Services offices) and other writers in academic writing and systems for working, creating and managing work plans • Pilot and document new model for disability accommodation • Provide developmental editing for academic and professional written work

Writing Instructor
Brookline Adult and Community Education, Brookline, MA 2014–2016
Taught courses to wide-ranging adult learners in the writing process, developing long work, revision, job applications, and building fictional worlds • Engaged with students and administrators to develop courses

Writing Rights Instructor
Dudley Promise Corps, Boston Plan for Excellence, Boston, MA 2013–2014
Co-created, developed, and implemented curriculum and lesson plans in writing and social justice for members of AmeriCorps program in its pilot year • Supported individual students in writing development

Founding Program Director, Theater and Performance Club
Ghana Literacy Project, Pokuase, Ghana 2008–2009
Created and developed theater curriculum for Ghanaian elementary & junior high students • Taught drama classes, focusing on ensemble creation & critical thinking • Produced final student-generated performance for local audience • Trained local teachers in theater education and program management

Adult Education Instructor

Truman College/Association House of Chicago, Chicago, IL 2007–2008

Instructed adult learners in reading, writing, mathematics, and test-taking skills • Created and developed syllabi and lesson plans for the Vocational Bridge Academy • Coordinated presentation of student research projects at the end of the session

Jeff Metcalf Fellow, Arts Initiatives

United Neighborhood Houses of New York, New York, NY 2003

Produced Bridging the Hoods*, a celebration of international diversity, with young performers • Wrote and coordinated arts correspondence for UNH*

Scholarship & Writing

Honors, Awards, and Fellowships: Academic

William D. Sheldon Fellowship, Reading & Language Arts (2020-2021)
Public Humanities Fellow, Humanities New York (2018–2019)
Spector-Warren Fellow in Holocaust Education (2018, 2019)
Merit Scholarship, Harvard Graduate School of Education (2009)

Publications: Academic Articles, Chapters, and Poems

Coleman, J. J., Schey, R., Blackburn, M. V., Brochin, C., **Cooper-Novack, G**., Crawley,S. A., Cruz, C., Dutro, E., Helton, L., Islam, A., Jiménez, I., Lizárraga, J. R., Shrodes, A., Simon, R., Wickens, C., & Young, C. A. (2022, forthcoming). Intergenerational queer method(odologie)s: Dialogues in literacy research. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*.

Cooper-Novack, G. & Jones, K. (2022, forthcoming). Creative writing as a way of knowing ourselves and each other in digital spaces: Supporting marginalized youth in virtual creative writing programs. In Hodges, T., ed. *Handbook of research on writing practices for equitable and effective teaching*. IGI Global.

Cooper-Novack, G. & Nordquist, B. (2022, forthcoming). Unsettling community and university: Finding fluidity in community literacies and the academy. In Henry, L., & Stahl, N., eds. *A field guide to community literacy: Case studies and tools for praxis, evaluation, and research*. Taylor & Francis.

Cooper-Novack, G. (2021). Curation. *English Journal*, *110*(3), 47.

Cooper-Novack, G. (2020). Sonnet for Sixth Grade. *English Journal*, *110*(1), 105.

Vaughn, M., Jang, B.G., Sotirovska, V., & **Cooper-Novack, G.** (2020). Student agency in literacy: A systematic review of the literature. *Reading Psychology, 41*(7), 712-734.

Berger, E. & **Cooper-Novack, G.** (2013). Inclusive practices for graduate students with disabilities: A writing coach model. *NASPA Knowledge Communities*.

Conference Presentations and Workshops

Cooper-Novack, G. & Jones, K. (2022). Creative writing as a way of knowing each other in digital spaces. American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

Cooper-Novack, G. (2022). New self-portraits: Deep dialogue to create poetic texts. Central New York Reading Council Conference (virtual).

Cooper-Novack, G., & Johnson, L.P. (2021). Dialogue on intergenerational queer methods. Literacy Research Association (virtual).

Cooper-Novack, G., Nordquist, B., Laila, A., Mohamed, K., & Mohamed, R. (2021). Creating sustainable arts literacy programming for refugee youth through partnership. Conference on Community Writing (virtual).

Storm, S., **Cooper-Novack, G.**, Lund, V.K., & Starling-Davis, E. (2020). Agency and justice through creative writing in and out of school. Literacy Research Association. (*accepted, not presented due to COVID-19*)

Cooper-Novack, G. (2020). Multiliteracies in a shared language of US-based out-of-school time programs. American Educational Research Association Conference, San Francisco, CA. (*accepted, not presented due to COVID-19)*

Cooper-Novack, G. (2020). Collective writing exercises to build relationships in literacy classrooms. Central New York Reading Council Conference, Syracuse, NY.

Cooper-Novack, G. (2019). Creating collaborative writing with refugee-background youth. National Council of Teachers of English Conference, Baltimore, MD.

Nordquist, B., **Cooper-Novack, G.**, Robinson, M.J., & Farah, H. (2019). Community literacy and superdiversity: Doing the work across time, space, and culture. Conference on Community Writing, Philadelphia, PA.

Cooper-Novack, G. (2019). How critical audience shapes authorship: The resuscitation of the author. Conference on College Composition and Communication, Pittsburgh, PA.

Cooper-Novack, G. (2019). Why fiction? A systematic literature review of fiction writing pedagogy in secondary school curricula. American Educational Research Association, Toronto, ON, CA.

Jang, B.G. & **Cooper-Novack, G.** (2019). How preservice teachers exercise agency in planning and executing two distinct ELA lessons in a mediated field experience. American Educational Research Association, Toronto, ON, CA.

Jang, B.G., Roy-Campbell, Z., & **Cooper-Novack, G.** (2018). Bridging the gap between preservice teachers' coursework and fieldwork: Mediated field experience (MFE) in an elementary ELA methods course. Literacy Research Association, Palm Springs, CA.

Berger, E.C., **Cooper-Novack, G.,** & Hussein, Y. (2014). More time is not enough: Supporting graduate students with learning disabilities using a writing coach model, a case study. Conference on Equity and Social Justice, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.

Abdel Ghani, K., **Cooper-Novack, G.,** Gill, M.F. & Kittredge, S. (2014). The Brighton Word Factory: Fun collaborative writing exercises. Massachusetts Poetry Festival, Salem, MA.

Honors, Awards, and Fellowships: Other Writing

Artist's Residency, Bethany Arts Center (2022)
Highly Commended, Bridport Prize, Fiction (2021)
Artist's Residency, Bethany Arts Center (2021; *accepted but did not attend due to COVID-19*)
Finalist, Breakwater Review Peseroff Poetry Prize (2019)
Finalist, Breakwater Review Fiction Contest (2018)
Finalist, Central New York Book Award (2017)
Artist's Residency, Millay Colony for the Arts (2017)
Best of the Net Nominations (2017, 2018)
Runner-Up, James Jones First Novel Fellowship (2016)
Grantee, Barbara Deming Fund for Women Writers (2016)
Artist's Residency, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (2016)
Artist's Residency (with Rasha Abdulhadi), Sundress Academy for the Arts, Knoxville, TN (2015)
Artists' Residency (with Rasha Abdulhadi), Wildacres, Little Switzerland, NC (2015)
Artist's Residency, betterArts, Redwood, NY (2015)
OUTSpoken Poetry Contest Winner, Sundress Publications (2014)
Writer's Residency, Writers' Room at the Betsy Hotel, Miami Beach, FL (2014)
Artist's Residency, Can Serrat Centro de Actividades Artísticas, El Bruc, Catalonia, Spain (2014)
Pushcart Prize Nominations (2013, 2015, 2017)

Publications: Books

"Bedside Manner" (chapbook, The Head & the Hand Press, 2020)
We Might as Well Be Underwater (Unsolicited Press, 2017)
Too Much Like a Landscape (chapbook), with Warren Tales (2014)

Journal Publications: Poetry

"I Dreamed You Were In an Open Marriage," *Limp Wrist* (2022, forthcoming)
"Securities Against Aging," *Ethel* (2022)
"The Marriages: The ghoul," *Bennington Review* (2022, forthcoming)
"What You Want Is What You Get" and "Broccoli Daikon Spinach Mustard," *Paramanu Pentaquark* (2022, forthcoming)
"MRI Lovepoem," *The Ending Hasn't Happened Yet* (anthology, 2022)
"The Marriages: The catfish," "The Marriages: The pigeon," & "The Marriages: The stray," *K'in Literary Journal* (2021)
"The Marriages: The camel," *Claw & Blossom* (2021)
"Once on a Ghost Ship [14]," *Rough Cut Press* (2021)
"Antisocial Media," *Gingerbread Ritual* (2021)
"Someday Olivia Will See You," *Angel Rust* (2021)
"She's on the aisle this time" & "*Peculiar Journal* (2021)
"She takes a Lyft or something," *House Mountain Review* (2021)
"Once on a Ghost Ship [13]," "Once on a Ghost Ship [3]," and "Once on a Ghost Ship [5]," *Sinister Wisdom* (2020)
"Wealth of Nations," *Writers Resist* (2020)

"The Marriages: The park," *What Are Birds?* (2020)
"Once on a Ghost Ship [7]," *Human/Kind Journal* (2020)
"She walks behind the theater," *8 Poems* (2020)
"Mane," *Stone Canoe* (2020)
"She takes a taxi," *PanoplyZine* (2020)
"Vesuvius," *SWWIM* (2019)
"The Marriages: The remains," *Breakwater Review* (2019)
"Once on a Ghost Ship [8]," *Stirring* 20th Anniversary Edition (2019)
"She finds another country," "Oceanpurian" (solicited submission), & "Endings," *Glass Poetry* (2019, 2018, & 2016)
"What We Wore," *Rogue Agent Journal* (2019)
"Once on a Ghost Ship [6]," *Lavender Review* (2018)
"Patterns of Attraction," *I Can Count to 10* (2018)
"The Marriages: The tumors," "The Marriages: The deer," and "Lycanopterror," *Curious Specimens* (anthology), Sundress Publications (2017)
"Vertex," *Lambda Literary Poetry Spotlight* (2017)
"The Marriages: The selkie," "The Marriages: The bear," and "The Marriages: The marionette," (Pushcart Prize & Best of the Net nominations), *Midway Journal* (2017)
"Dislodged" & "That's Not Why," *Amethyst Arsenic* (2016 & 2014)
"Cicadas" & "Tulsa," *Cider Press Review* (2016 & 2014)
"Protocol," "Asbestosis," "The Ventriloquist Poems," "Not Going to Khayelitsha," *The Saint Ann's Review* (2016, 2009, 2006, & 2004)
"Ghost Stories" and "Barbara," *Iron Horse Literary Review* (2016)
"Searchlight," "All Creatures," "My Cabin Never Leaks When It Doesn't Rain," and "Wanderings," *Maps for Teeth* (2015)
"After coffee," *Incessant Pipe* (2015)
"Bruised," *Sharkpack Poetry Review Annual* (2015)
"Privacy," *Bellevue Literary Review* (2015)
"Stand Up Eight," *Jabberwock Review* (2014)
"Straight Girls," *Stirring* (2014)
"Thaw," "Heat," "Aubade," & "Yesterday and Australia," *Hanging Loose* (2014 & 2011)
"Make No Bones" & "Landscaping," *Belleville Park Pages* (2013)
"I Don't Belong Here," "It Isn't Stillness," "Luxury," *Tampa Review Online* (2013)
"Mulberries" and "Round," *Construction* (2013)
"Thresh" (Pushcart Prize nomination), "Float," *Ballard Street Poetry Journal* (2013)
"Like His Hand," "Three Sheets to the Wind," "Later," "In the Bedroom," *PressBoardPress* (2013)
"All This," *Spry Literary Journal* (2013)
"Considerations," "Migration," *Lyre Lyre* (2013)
"Ben and Andrew, 1992," *Blast Furnace Review* (2012)
"Anaconda Sunrise," *Rufous City Review* (2012)
"Shooting the Rat," "Porn," "As the Child Prodigy Grows Up," *Shooting the Rat* (anthology), Hanging Loose Press (2002)
"Sometimes She Dissolves," *Euphony* (2002)

Publications: Fiction

"Mission Accomplished," *Bridport Prize Anthology* (Highly Commended) (2021)
"Skin in the Game," *Breakwater Review* (fiction contest finalist, Best of the Net nomination) (2018)
"Devil's Thumb," *Santa Fe Writers Project* (2014)
"Mars" (from *Go Home Faster*), *Elsewhere* (2014)
"Home Repair" (from *Go Home Faster*), *Printer's Devil Review* (2013)

Produced Plays

This Not That, workshopped at the Depot for New Play Readings, Hampton, CT (2021)
Once I Was a Kingdom, Zoom performance for Women+ in Theatre Conference, Howard Community College, Columbia, MD (2020)
You Want Them to Look Away, workshopped at Breadcrumbs Productions' Scratch Series, Syracuse, NY (2020)
Break, workshopped at About Face Theatre, Chicago, IL (2018)
Through the Glory Hole and What We Found There, commission for The Theater Offensive's Creative Action Crew (True Colors Out Youth Theater) (2016)
Reporting Live from Under the Rainbow, commission for The Theater Offensive's Creative Action Crew (True Colors Out Youth Theater) (2015)
The Dating Game, SLAM Boston, Open Theater Project, Boston, MA (2015)
Watch, One Acts and Snacks, read at Casa de Beverley, New York, NY (2015)
Sense and Sensibility: A Comic Opera (librettist/lyricist, with composer/lyricist Joshua Tyra), workshopped at Trinity International University, Deerfield, IL (2012); excerpts workshopped at "Inspired by Austen" Conference, Manhattanville College, White Plains, NY (2010)
Blindside, produced by Stockyards Theatre Project, Chicago, IL (2008); workshopped at Stage Left Theatre, Chicago, IL (2005)
Chicago Chronicle #1 (co-author), American Theatre Company, Chicago, IL (2008)
The Book of Esther, Anshe Emet Synagogue, Chicago, IL (2007–08)
Set (co-author), workshopped in Stockyards Theatre Project's Play for Keeps (2006)
I'm Coming In Soon, produced by Young Playwrights, Inc., New York, NY (2000)

Professional Writing Employment

Curriculum Writer and Editor**,** GradeSaver (2013–Present)
Create lesson plans on great literary works for high school teachers • Edit lesson plans for publication • Work with authors to generate stronger educational material

Grant Writer, Boston Debate League, Boston, MA (2009–2010)
Researched, coordinated and wrote grant proposals for educational nonprofit • Created fundraising calendar • Landed more than $200,000 in ongoing support

Editorial Assistant, McDougal Littell Educational Publishing Company, Evanston, IL (2005–2006)
Assisted the Language Arts department • Wrote and edited copy for middle and high school literature textbooks • Conducted research for textbook background

and content • Organized departmental permissions for use of copyrighted works

Service

University Service

President, Open Doors LGBTQ+ Grad Students Organization, Syracuse University (2017–2022)
Organized education and community development for LGBTQ+ students in SU graduate schools • Founded the Early Queer Scholarship Series, which showcases the early research of LGBTQ+ scholars

Student Representative, School of Education Assembly, Syracuse University (2018-2019)
Collaborated with faculty and staff on governance of School of Education

Teaching Mentor, The Graduate School, Syracuse University (2018–2021)
Guide new Teaching Assistants at Syracuse University through orientation and microteaching exercises • Present comprehensive introductions to TA work in the school of education and other survival tools for TAs

Service to the Academic Community

Graduate Committee Member / New Media Scholarship Co-Chair, Writing and Literacies SIG, American Educational Research Association (2020–2022)
Co-chair a group of graduate scholars to produce video podcasts on subjects germane to Writing and Literacies scholars

Reviewer (2021). Writing Spaces Textbooks.

Chair & Discussant (2019). Perceptions and questions of self-motivation and self efficacy. Roundtable discussion, Literacy Research Association, Tampa, FL.

Discussant (2019). Advocacy and identity development in teacher education. Panel discussion, Literacy Research Association, Tampa, FL.

Chair (2019). Pre-service teachers engaging in perspective-taking through Literature. Panel discussion, Literacy Research Association, Tampa, FL.

Chair (2019). Fiction writing as inquiry. Panel discussion, National Council of Teachers of English, Baltimore, MD.

Reviewer (2019). Literacy Research Association Conference.

Volunteer Experience

Juror, Bethany Arts Center Residency (2021)

Theater and Writing Teacher, North Side Learning Center, Syracuse, NY (2017–2019)
Created, developed, and implemented theater programming for teenagers who are refugees and/or recent immigrants to the United States

Teacher Coordinator, Syracuse University Partnership for Refugee Assistance (2017)
Coordinate volunteer educators who support English instruction for refugees, primarily from Somalia, Syria, and Burma, living in the United States; teach the same student

CityLinks Mentor, Cambridge Community Services, Cambridge, MA (2014–2016)
Supported high school student, a recent immigrant, with schoolwork, social engagement, and planning for the future

Mentor ("DramaMama"), Dramagirls, Chicago, IL (2007–2008)
Worked with middle-school "little sister" on arts, performance, and community development

ESL Tutor, Interfaith Refugee & Immigration Ministries, Chicago, IL (2004–2005)
Tutored children ages 5–12, refugees from Somalia, in English language

Professional Affiliations

American Educational Research Association (AERA)
Literacy Research Association (LRA)
Coalition for Community Writing (CCW)
Dramatists Guild of America

Languages

Proficient in French: writing, speaking, reading
Familiar with Italian, Ancient Greek, Latin, Xhosa, Twi