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‘Unfixing knowledges’: Queering the literacy curriculum

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In the literacy classroom, students have few opportunities to use their literacy practices to contest narratives of race, class, gender and sexuality. Instead, extensive time is spent completing literacy activities associated with what “good” readers and writers do. Students’ literacy practices are often formulaic, repetitive, and serve classroom management strategies producing a mythic narrative of good literacy teaching. This paper introduces a queer literacy curriculum that poses pedagogy as a series of questions: What does being taught, what does knowledge do to students? How does knowledge become understood in the relationship between teacher/text and student? (Lusted, 1986) It emphasizes developing critical analyses of heterosexism, heteronormativity and normativity with the goal of helping students understand binary categories are not givens, rather social constructions we are often forced to perform (Butler, 1990) through available discourses. The paper highlights an interruption into the literacy curriculum where, through collective memory work, students investigated, analysed and contested the usually-not-noticed ways a small understanding of heterosexuality has come to structure their lives.

Introduction

When I first started teaching English at a large middle school in New York City’s Chinatown in the late 1990s, I was given Nancy Atwell’s book, *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading, and learning*. At school professional development day over the summer, we were told all English teachers had to use her teaching methodologies of the reading and writing workshop in our English classes. On the cover, Atwell was working with two well-dressed white kids sitting at a big table with a wall of books behind them. I turned around in my own classroom and looked at my meager library of two bookshelves somewhat dubious as to how *In the middle* was going to relate to my own urban context.

A week later, I was relieved to learn a staff developer was assigned to help me. I was already having trouble with my students who were struggling to read and write about their own topics. My classroom did not have enough books or spaces for the students to spread out and mini-lessons, where I was supposed to present myself as a grown-up who knows about reading and writing, were floundering because I was reading about critical literacy in my university classes. I did not think mini-lessons on “how to whisper,” “why we confer about

writing” and “goal setting in writing at the end of each semester,” were not going to help my students read the word and world. I believed the theory I was reading and I wanted to create contexts where students “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 1970, p 64). I was trying to figure out ways to teach students to name the ways public “education programs are designed to create individuals who operate in the interests of the state” (McLaren, 1998, p.1). I wanted my classroom to be a place where “the knowledge and skills acquired serve to prepare students to later develop and maintain those counterproductive spheres outside schools that are so vital for developing webs of solidarity in which democracy as a social movement operates as an active force” (Giroux, 1997, p.106). Atwell (1987) writes, “middle school students look for in school what matters in life; they don’t look at school as a place to get ready for what matters in life” (p.67). I found this notion troubling as it does not address or consider the broader social, cultural, and political aspects of the students’ present and future lives or the benefits that might come with helping them interrogate and criticize those aspects of their world. I was hoping the staff developer would help me address these concerns because my students—mostly second generation Chinese-Immigrants—were from a different socioeconomic class than the students in her book.

The staff developer was convinced many of the issues I wanted to address were already embedded in the students’ writing. She explained since they had been writing in their writers’ notebooks for three weeks—we just needed the opportunity—to help them find these issues. She quoted Calkins (1991):

The act of rereading our lives, like the act of rereading a text, propels us forward with a sense of direction and momentum. . .there is a storyline to our lives, that the moments of our lives fit together, that there is a movement forward, that the pieces add up to something satisfying and whole. (p. 167)

We had students go back and read their writing underlining those issues, ideas, or things that had come up more than once. We explained these issues must be the ones they cared about most because they appear multiple times. We asked them to gather into a circle and share the topics that appeared most often in their writers' notebooks. Some students with accents were laughed at when they spoke, others were talking when shy students were sharing, some were not reading seriously and no one was sharing anything "critical." Surprisingly, the staff developer jumped up and exclaimed, "this is ridiculous, I have never seen students behave this way in a writing share. You should be ashamed of yourselves!" and to everyone's astonishment, she stormed out of the room. Now, I was in the middle, embarrassed in front of my students and afraid I disappointed the staff developer who was friendly with the school's administration.

Progressive Literacy and Identity Production

Progressive literacy pedagogies—as well as the *balanced literacy* approaches being implemented today in New York City—assumed many things about me as an educator and the identities of my students *a priori*. A persistent assumption was adolescents would actually feel safe in sharing their personal writing. Atwell and Calkin's ideas about peers working together and helping each other reads well and likely worked outside of struggling urban centres where students did not worry about food, housing and gang recruitment.

The workshop model worked more to divide and subordinate certain students in my classroom than build community because many of the literacy practices ignored students' hybrid identities and the identity fluidity needed to survive in the post-modern world. Progressive literacy does not address issues of globalisation and the idea that adolescents live in a vastly different world from the ones their teachers inhabit. Progressive pedagogies required students to act and think in certain ways adopting prescribed identities that mirror what Lesko (2001) refers to as "prescribed by turn-of-the-century reformers" (p.172) who

ignore the unstable societal conditions produced by fluid global communication media that have transformed linear class and power structures .

My classroom and teaching looked engaging and impressive because most of the students were busy in some part of the reading-writing workshop. Many students adopted the prescriptive identities the curriculum demanded and were usually silently reading and/or writing while I was conferring with individual students or small groups. Students' literacy practices and identities emerged from a shared understanding between the teacher and students of content, and what kinds of language and behaviour were valued and accepted. But, eventually it grew monotonously the same; a 10-15 minute mini-lesson followed by 20-25 minutes of students working independently and wrapping it up with a 5-10 minute share. The progressive curriculum worked to shape student and teacher identities as passive, order-following automatons through the literacy practices they demanded. Students were not thinking critically about the texts they were reading and writing and I was busy using assessment kits to measure their proficiency.

The workshop approach, through the literacy practices it requires, prescribed me an identity as a dead/silenced teacher unable to apply the theory I was learning at the university to help students think critically about their subjectivity, thereby institutionalizing identities to produce subjects who act in particular ways. As time passed it became clear that we—albeit quietly—were starting to push against those structured identities . This acknowledgement, coupled with my queer identity, encouraged me to develop a series of substantial and sustained interruptions that explored students' knowledge of out-of- school literacies enabling me to outline new social, intellectual and discourse relations with the worlds where my adolescent students live and work.

Queering Progressive Literacy Curricula

Much of the theory I was reading outlined critical approaches to pedagogy and practices aimed at intervening in the reproduction of power dynamics to make learning part of a process of political empowerment and liberation for students. However attempting these practices within the progressive model I was embodying in the classroom consistently failed. I initiated curricular and instructional strategies aimed at creating more inclusive learning environments by rethinking both classroom discourse as well as social interactions between students and moved aspects of teaching and learning into spaces within the local community. I was obsessed with finding the right method or pedagogical skill necessary to incorporate critical literacy practices into my classroom, but this approach was largely ingrained within a transmission model of education where learning was relegated to my effort and teaching.

The progressive practices of the workshop classroom forced us to use language in normative ways to talk about school subjects, literature and experience. From the perspectives of feminist theorists who argue human experience is organized by patriarchy (Fuss, 1989; Grumet, 1988; Lather, 1991) and gay and lesbian theorists who have shown patriarchy is directly linked to heterosexism and heteronormativity (Sedgwick, 1990; Sumara, 2005), I saw my use of progressive pedagogies a silent participation in the politics and practices of discrimination. I wanted to interrupt the normalizing discourses instantiated within progressive pedagogical beliefs and practices that often separate discourses of experience from discourses of knowledge. I felt the normalizing of literacy practices in the context of my classroom was actually undermining more intended critical learning. I was not helping my students understand the relationships among language, forms of representation and human experience or how “narratives of race, class, gender, and sexuality participate in the creation of identity.” (Sumara, in press, p. 23)

I was driven to queering progressive literacy practices because in doing so I began to critique privilege, entitlement, and status that are obtained by obeying mandatory heterosexuality and other heteronormative behaviours. There is pleasure in this work because it inherently destabilizes discourses emerging from different texts within schools and the media. This queer focus in my research allows me to draw on the fluidity and complexities of my embodied queer knowledge and culture to bring heterosexualizing language, history and norms into question with adolescent youth examining how institutions and culture-language-power shape our lives in everyday life and work in classrooms. Progressive literacy practices forced upon me a certain subject position I did not get pleasure from and this led me to queer my literacy curriculum.

In queering the progressive literacy curriculum, I posed pedagogy as a series of questions: What does being taught, what does knowledge do to students? How does knowledge become understood in the relationship between teacher/text and student? (Lusted, 1986) I believed this act of queering—by posing pedagogy as questions—might allow students access to contradictory discourses to speak back to the curriculum by creating experiences where they come to see knowledge as something made and altered by relationships. Fighting same-sex oppression and discrimination my entire life, understandings from queer theory encouraged me to take on new stances, positions, and ways of being to craft a stronger identity by positioning myself as a new “queer” text within a normalizing institution. This shifted understanding of pedagogy “exceeds education’s traditional fixation on knowledge transmission and its wish for the teacher as master of knowledge” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 148). This understanding stemming from my own sexual desire, worked to be a powerful solvent of the more “stable” identity than the progressive workshops were forcing me to embody.

Later, I started teaching humanities in a small academy of technology in the same neighborhood just a few streets away. At this small school, teachers were trusted and granted more autonomy over the curriculum. Working with two other teachers who identified as queer, I “came out”—or rather was forced out of the closet—by a young African-American female student. The second day of school she just came up to me and asked, “Are you gay?” I said, “Yes,” and the walls of silence, oppression, fear, and risk collapsed. Finally, out in the open, I was able to shed my skin as a heterosexual.

Being “out of the closet” I felt more license to queer the progressive literacy curriculum by incorporating new literacy theories with the purpose of interrupting normative discourses:

Both Queer Theory and pedagogy argue that the process of making (sense) of selves relies on binaries such as homo-hetero, ignorance-knowledge, learner-teacher, reader-writer, and so on. Queer Theory and pedagogy place at stake the desire to deconstruct binaries central to Western modes of meaning making, learning, teaching and doing politics. Both desire to subvert the processes of normalization...Queer tries to interrupt these modes of making selves and making sense by refusing stable identities and by producing new identifications that lie outside binary models of gender and sexuality. (Luhmann, 1998, pp. 150-151)

Participation in discourses earlier unavailable renewed my energy and pushed me to “unskin” progressive literacy practices. “Unskinning” the progressive curricula involved what Sumara and Davis (1998) term:

a deliberate attempt to render problematic the beginnings and endings of objects and events—an effort we feel is demanded in the conventional schooling culture of rigid organization, unambiguous demarcation, and clear definition. These artificial structures and, supported by and contributing to the modernist conception of a coherent, unitary subject, are the very objects that we seek to “unskin” in our efforts to teach. (p.80)

I was in a context where I had more authority and felt empowerment—rather than fear—through my sexuality. Queer theory began to manifest itself as pedagogical practice that started to put into crisis what is known and how we come to know (Luhmann, 1998).

A Queer Literacy Pedagogy

In the workshop classroom, students have few opportunities to represent and meaningfully use their literacy responses/practices to contest narratives of race, class, gender and sexuality. Instead, extensive time is spent representing and practicing ideas and activities associated with what “good” readers and writers “do” (Atwell, 1987). In embodying progressive pedagogies, students’ literacy practices were formulaic, repetitive, and served classroom management strategies producing a mythic narrative of good literacy teaching primarily based on print texts.

As an “out” teacher in a new context, my sexuality—more so than ever before—played a large role in the construction of my curriculum as well as my understanding of how heteronormativity is socially produced and reinforced through language and literacy practices. Through my reading of queer theory, I was forced to work on myself to better understand my own identifications, experiences, beliefs and attitudes that were structuring and designing my identity. As a result, I began to see how I was socialized by heteronormativity to such a degree that I often unconsciously participated and supported discourses of sexism and homophobia in my teaching and life. I realized in keeping a secret about my sexual identity from colleagues and students, it made it possible for me to participate in discourses that were not healthy or productive and even negative in terms of my students’ identity production. In response I designed what I view as a queer literacy pedagogy to interrupt heteronormativity through the kinds of literacy practices it required of students. I saw this as a starting point for interrupting discourses of heterosexism and homophobia as well as other forms of discrimination rampant across textbooks, young adult fiction and popular media texts.

Working to create a queer literacy pedagogy in my middle school classroom, I focused on creating conditions where I could work openly as a gay man while focusing deliberate attention on providing students with opportunities to understand the complexity of

human identity and how it manifested itself through different discourses in the texts of our lives. While queer theory is similar to poststructuralist feminism and post-colonial theories in terms of their theoretical resources and their analytical tools, queer theory—realized as queer literacy pedagogy—focuses on queering heterosexuality and how categories like male/female, gay/straight or adolescent/adult have come to dominate the way students understand themselves and others and how these ideas can be contested in both the texts they read and write/design. A queer literacy pedagogy is also reflexively aware of the way it constitutes the object it is intended to teach, thereby not eluding the constitutive nature of knowledge production. These ideas distinguish this study from poststructural and feminist studies that do not take gender and sexuality into account. Because a queer literacy pedagogy is not gender and sexuality neutral, it does not reify particular notions of identity and subjectivity; rather it creates a space where we examine how gender and sexuality impact on literacy practices.

A queer literacy pedagogy emphasizes developing critical analyses of heterosexism, heteronormativity and normativity with the goal of helping students understand binary categories are not givens, rather social constructions we are often forced to perform (Butler, 1990) through available discourses. Bryson and De Castell (1990) used the term “queer pedagogy” and described it as “a radical form of praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of ‘normalcy’ in school subjects” (p. 286). They attempted to determine the relevance of postmodernist theorizing about difference and pedagogy in ways that re-vision and re-form praxis in a lesbian studies classroom. I also consider a queer literacy pedagogy a form of praxis that deliberately interferes with the production of normalcy because it requires the teachers and student to take on different literacy practices. Spurlin’s (2002) definition of queer pedagogy furthers this idea:

In one sense, a “queer” pedagogy would imply not only an analysis of (sexual) difference(s) in the classroom but of interrelated, broad-based

pedagogical commitments to free inquiry and expression, social equity, the development of more democratic institutional and pedagogical practices, and the broadening of dialogical spheres of public exchange within and beyond the classroom as sites for engaged analyses of social issues and collective struggles. (p. 10)

Both definitions offer interventions and commitments, but without dealing specifically with language and discourse, they lose transformative possibilities.

In this paper, queering the progressive literacy workshop acknowledges queer identity as demarcating not a positivity, but a positionality that is not restricted to gays and lesbians, but open to anyone who feels marginalized. From this perspective, it qualitatively accounts for its object of inquiry because any attempt to quantify different groups of people assumes a commonality between the individual's desires and lives that is suspect. Instead, a queer literacy pedagogy attempts to *not* socialize youth into a world that can be described by common sense. It hopes to help them understand they have choices and alternatives in how they learn to be adolescents or men/women and how they express their gendered and sexual identities through taking up or rejecting competing discourses in their lives.

Queering the Progressive Workshop through Collective Memory Work.

Through the method of collective memory work, I focused on the gendered nature of literacy practices and ways in which they are socially constructed and often reinforced/maintained by classroom teachers, myself included. In this paper, I argue that my initial position in beginning this research as a man—a man inscribed as queer—has made it possible for me to read my students' writing in ways that disrupted and challenged my common sense reading of their texts. The unchallenged and taken-for-granted assumptions foregrounded in my students' writing, the discourse of our classroom, and the texts we accessed were becoming more apparent in my teaching life and literacy practices. By using queer theory I was able to read my own discursive construction as both a queer and gendered

subject who is constantly and continually constituted and reconstituted through language and literacy practices. As Davies (1993) notes (quoted in Gilbert, 1997):

We not only read and write the stories but we also live the stories. Who we take ourselves to be at any one point in time depends on the available storylines we have to make sense out of the ebb and flow of being-in-the-world along with the legitimacy and status accorded those storylines by the others with whom we make up our lives at any one point in time. (p. 61)

If literacy teachers accept that the constructs of femininity and masculinity are constructed in and through literacy practices “that are both indeed “fictions”—but fictions lived, as Walkerdine (1990) reminds us, as if they are “real,” felt deeply as though they were universal truths of the psyche—then it becomes important to denaturalize and problematize these stories” (Gilbert, 1997, p. 61). Inspired by my reading of queer, post-structuralist and feminist theories, I found collective memory work a means by which I could do just that.

Collective Memory Work

Employing a social constructionist and feminist research method—collective memory work—provided me with a means by which to help students come to understand that they participate and maintain certain gendered discourses in the ways they write and position themselves. The method drew on students’ writing workshop experience and created a place where we collectively discussed and identified the common social implications of their different experiences. When they acknowledged the discourses operating in their school work, we collectively made these discourses visible, and thus interrupted them through re-writing the memories.

Interrupting the workshop with Collective Memory Work (Haug et al., 1987) brought about unstable relations as we collectively analysed transcripts of memories produced in the writing workshop. Through the analysis, students worked to make sense of the discourses in which they participated—with the goal of critiquing and somehow altering that participation. The literacy practices the progressive writing curriculum demanded of them did not give

them access to the tools needed to analyze this discourse or make possible on their own, some of the changes that this analysis demanded.

Wanting students to come to understand that they participated in and maintained a certain gendered discourse—a gendered normativity—in the ways they wrote and positioned themselves in the progressive workshop curriculum. Working in a context familiar to the students, I asked them to write memory pieces which we then collectively analysed. In phase one, students had to write six separate memories, most from when they were very young. In phase two, I analysed the memories collectively with the students, co-developing theories so students could come to some common understanding of the socially constructed aspects of the memories. In the third phase students re-wrote the memories after group discussions where they confronted and disputed some ‘common sense’ assumptions of the memories. This gave students a chance to rewrite outside of the discourse that was available at the time they wrote and lived out the conversations or experiences described by the memory work.

Memory-work (Haug, et al. 1987) foregrounds experience as the focus of research, in a process which works to bring to mind strong emotions and closely held interpretations of the students’ life stories. The methodology is powerful in uncovering memories, experiences and emotions ranging from the uncomplicated to the surprising, from daily acts of socialization to incidents of surprise; from shared histories to the never-before-spoken-about. Paramount to the methodology is the principle that students are subjects in the process, not objects, and that the teacher-researcher—as a social being and participant in socialization processes—cannot avoid being a subject as well. This is a list of guidelines I assigned for the collective memory work. I adapted this outline from the work of Haug, et al. (1987) as well as Onyx and Small’s (2001) descriptive piece on the method of memory work.

- Write 1 ½ to 2 pages about six separate memories.
- Write anonymously in the third person.

- Write in as much detail as possible recalling what people said, what they were wearing, where you were, the time of day, smells, even if it does not seem that important to you now.
- Only describe what happened; do not interpret or attempt to explain why certain things happened the way they did.

The memories were organized and printed in two books, one for each eighth grade class.

When the students finally received the books, they were excited about reading the texts because they were anonymous, about their lives, and in a published form.

The complete set of memories had considerable potential in terms of looking at gendered discourse. Here I discuss one example of a discourse analysis, around students' memories of their oldest recollection of what they wanted to be in the future. As the teacher I was able to see the students' desires about what they wanted to be as constructed out of particular gendered discourses. But the struggle was to try to figure out how to get the students to see the same thing. First, I gave them a handout that asked them to list the ideas males and females had about their futures, based on the memories they had read. They were also asked to answer what they noticed about the differences between males' and females' responses. On the second sheet, they pulled out direct quotes from different memories. Many boys wanted to be policemen, firemen, and superheroes, while girls wanted to be teachers, ballerinas, and other typically 'feminine' jobs. Looking closely at quotations from the male and female students' memories, side by side, made it apparent that their participation in particular discourses about what they wanted to be was a result of their being gendered subjects and using the normative language available.

Students agreed that it seemed like the 'boys were more interested in the exciting things' while girls were interested in 'less violent' and 'calm' jobs. A majority of students recognized that the responses were influenced by things they saw in the movies and on TV. I asked them to try to figure out specific reasons why boys and girls had different aspirations

for the future when they were younger. Then in mixed gender groups they shared what they wrote and responded in the following ways:

- girls see their mothers and learn from influence;
- girls are calm and peaceful;
- parents have different expectations of boys and girls;
- girls see role models like their mothers and teachers;
- girls think they can't do that kind of job;
- girls might think that boys are stronger;
- boys might think they are more aggressive than girls;
- girls like shopping so they need money to buy things;
- boys have to show power and be more active;
- boys can't show that they're punks, they need to be brave;
- girls like fame, money, and popularity;
- guys want to hurt people, get cute girlfriends, and get money.

I believe this reading activity helped them to 'recognize' that they were writing a certain memory because they were influenced by numerous external forces—such as the media, their parents and peers. Students were reading for 'alterity' because they became aware of how their memories were socially constructed, not just subjugated knowledge. I also saw this as a moment in the curriculum where their literacy practices shifted because we interrupted normative thinking around gender. My reading practices shifted here as well, I stopped reading and teaching "straight" by working with students to see what happens when they imagine something different—something "not so normal."

Thinking Outside of Gendered Discourse

As this discussion transpired, I was thinking about what I could do to help students examine the split between recognition and misrecognition so that the students could begin to think of ways to write outside of the gendered discourse that emerged from their analyses. I believe the normative writing practices of the writing workshop as it is enacted in classrooms by advocates of writing workshop approaches (Atwell, 1987, 1998; Calkins, 1986) produce normative subjectivities. I also believe this idea is explicated by the kinds of memories my students authored. With these memories, students expressed their work as writing to examine the split between writers and co-researchers in a larger sociopolitical linguistic project

(Kamler, 2001), which includes them, but will hopefully extend beyond them as they begin to break down and write against the binary oppositions of male/female. I was refusing to enact and embody a pedagogy that accepts normal practices and practices of normalcy because I was interested in my own critical literacy practices and what agendas they may have been promoting by my enacting them with my students. It was more about “risking the self, and about the attempt to exceed the injuries of discourse so that all bodies matter” (Britzman, 1998, p. 227).

In recent years literacy educators have begun to understand how reading and writing practices influence how people develop and enact identities in the world (Birr Moje & MuQaribu, 2003; Hagwood, 2002; McCarthy, 2001). I had to ask myself what the collective memories of my students had to do with issues of identity. Even though I, as the teacher, called attention to the realities presented in the memories in terms of how students participated and maintained a certain gendered discourse in their memories with the goal of somehow critiquing and altering their participation, I think it is also important to look at them as narratives produced within the progressive writing workshop (Atwell, 1988). I want to consider the kinds of identities students tended to construct when they are writing within the workshop environment. Because students have been well versed in the kinds of personal narrative writing required of the writing workshop from previous grades, I believe, students often do not think to write in ways that would construct their identities differently from ways they see adolescent identity constructed in the media texts of their everyday lives.

In much the same way my students did not question assumptions about gender and identity formation when they wrote their memories. Students’ participation in the writing workshop across other diverse contexts at times created or maintained particular heteronormative identity roles which were possibly disempowering—even dangerous—for adolescent girls and other youth struggling with issues of cultural, racial and sexual identity.

Rowe, Fitch, and Bass (2001) describe writing as both a cognitive and sociocultural activity in elementary classrooms:

When children write, they not only use cognitive strategies to make marks on paper, but also implicitly define themselves as particular kinds of writers who are entitled to specific roles in the social structure of the classroom. Children's understandings of literacy practices, their definitions of themselves as literacy learners, and their opportunities to experience and experiment with literacy are related to the social roles they are able to play in classroom literacy events (Lemke, 1995) and the ways others respond to them in these roles (Hodge & Kress, 1998). (p. 426)

I would argue the same is equally true with adolescents in the middle school classrooms who are overwhelmingly expected to rely on their own experiences when engaged in the writing workshop. Like children's view of themselves in the Rowe, Fitch, and Bass (2001) study adolescents' views of themselves and their opportunities for learning are implicitly related to issues of power in the classroom. Rowe, Fitch and Bass (2001) drawing on Lemke (1995) believe students' taken-for-granted understandings about literacy and literacy practices—within and outside the classroom—supports social structures that make different students more powerful than others.

Reflection

Our class discussion and analysis of the students' memories led to highly engaged discussions about whether or not their memories would have been different if they had access to different language or ways of talking about what they wanted to be in the future. When I asked them if they thought their memories about what they wanted to be in the future might be different if they knew they had more options open to them, fifty students (out of sixty) stated they probably would have desired to be something else. Out of twenty-eight girls who responded, twenty-four stated they probably would have chosen a different occupation while seven out of twenty-two boys said they would choose something different and fifteen boys said they would not change their minds.

In following the approach Britzman (1993) proposes, I asked the students to rewrite their memories outside the gendered discourses we had identified. I saw this as a chance for them to ‘create new storylines, new metaphors, which position women and men differently’ (Davies, 2000, p. 153). Students’ literacy practices shifted away from process writing towards a post-structuralist practice because they ‘examined the writing they produced, its process of production, and the possible reading positions it offered’ (Davies, 2000, p. 153). They also engaged in a dialogue with self and others where they began to question, via an argument or refusal, whether their intentions of the author were perhaps controlled or dictated by the discourse and influences available at the time the memory was written.

The subversive performance of dismissing pedagogy and theory that does nothing to extract cultural texts from under the unexamined personal story allowed me to make some sort of interruption, one I deemed necessary, into the texts students read and produced. Morris drawing heavily on poststructuralists such as Derrida and Foucault (2000) argues that identity is inscribed in the body and that subjects have been produced by language that must be examined and reinvented because schools strive to make students conform to heteronormative and sexist cultural forms:

Understanding that the self is a cultural product is the first step toward change and reinvention. Reinvention, however is not a transgressive movement. Transgression presupposes that the self can step outside of its culture and history and completely change. On the contrary, only slight change, slight movement is possible because the self is trapped in language, culture, history. Still, teachers might encourage students to do self-work, that is, to work on reinventing and recreating themselves (p.19)

Without looking beyond the personal story celebrated in the progressive workshop, how are the emotions of pain, oppression, pleasure, love, and discontent placed within historical and political contexts? Without coming to an understanding that together, large groups of people (many times those we have the most in common with) suffer the same pains, oppressions, and

hopes for a better future, talking and writing back is not as powerful. Queer theory allowed me to imagine a rethinking of pedagogy as something that disrupts normalization thereby “unfixing knowledges in a pedagogy that does not assume its subjects beforehand” (Talbert 2000, P.9). The Collective Memory Work was an interruption that investigated student memories to review and uncover the ways in which memories are gendered. I used the memories to review how gendered language and discourse operated in memories of lived experiences. My aim was to push students in ways that helped them come to understand how dominant discourses around gender (and other things), and their participation, have actually formed what they believe about themselves (past experience) to construct their identities and possible identities for their futures. I hoped the discourse analysis would allow them to see things differently, the “how” and “why” of their everyday lives in Chinatown and how they might “grow up” into or possibly work to transform the inequitable structures of society, and want to assume more control of their lives.

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