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Disrupting Dichotomies for Social Change: A Review of, Critique of, and Complement to Current Educational Literacy Scholarship on Gender

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A few years ago, I attended a round-table discussion on girls, literacies, and identities. The presenter drew from the work of Judith Butler to analyze data that represented girls engaging in electronic literacies to interact with peers. Consistently, the presenter interpreted their social dynamics in heterosexist ways, arguing that the girls were making particular moves for the purpose of instigating or developing romantic relationships with boys. The possibility that any of the girls (or boys) may have experienced same-sex desire was not considered. More specifically, there was a situation in which a girl electronically represented herself as a boy and entered a boys' chat room. The presenter interpreted this move as being a way for this girl to gain access to what the boys thought about the girls; she was cast as a sort of spy in a girl-boy game. This interpretation troubled me: not because I understood it to be an improbable interpretation, but because in coming to this analysis, the presenter drew from the work of Butler—who is not only a feminist but also a queer theorist—and because it seemed to dismiss other possibilities completely. For example, I wondered whether the girl's representation of herself as a boy and entrance into the boys' chat room could also be interpreted as electronic cross-dressing and what difference such an interpretation would make for the implications of the research. However, it seemed to me that in this discussion, such an interpretation was impossible. It felt as if I, as a lesbian—and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth with whom I work—were *im*possibilities.

Unfortunately, the impossibilities of LGBTQ youth in educational scholarship around gender and literacy are not limited to this single study. Queer youth are routinely ignored in this literature and in classrooms. In this conceptual essay, I draw on my firsthand experiences with queer youth to illustrate the significance of understanding gender and sexual identities in complicated ways in order to meet the needs of queer students as well as all students who are confined by dichotomous, heterosexist, and homophobic understandings of gender. I begin by

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reviewing the ways in which literacy scholars conceptualize both gender and literacy; I then identify purposes for critically examining gender and literacy. I describe my experiences initiating and facilitating a literacy group for queer youth, focusing on one reading of one short story and, more specifically, two particular youths. I examine the ways in which these youths police and cross gender lines as they engage with literature. Finally, I assert that making "gender trouble" (Butler, 1990/1999) in literacy teaching and research can work against the violence caused by dichotomous notions of gender.

Literacy Scholars on Gender and Gender Signifiers

Literacy scholars who focus on gender conceptualize gender in a range of ways. While some literacy scholars understand gender to be a dualistic and stable identity marker, others have come to understand gender to be more complicated (Davies, 1997, 2003; Dutro, 2001/2002, 2003; Orellana, 1995; Rice, 2002; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002). They understand gender to be variable and "constructed and performed rather than natural or biological" (Dutro, 2001/2002, p. 377). These scholars make explicit power dynamics that use dichotomous notions of gender to privilege some people, mainly men, and stigmatize others, particularly women and feminine men. Some literacy scholars even recognize the impact heterosexism and homophobia have on these dynamics (Davies, 1997, 2003; Dutro, 2001/2002, 2003; Maynard, 2002; Rowan et al., 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), and a few go so far as to conceptualize gender as multiple rather than dual, and fluid rather than static (Davies, 1997, 2003; Dutro, 2001/2002, 2003; Rowan et al., 2002).

Like gender, femininity and masculinity are taken up differently by various literacy scholars. Femininity and masculinity are, according to Davies (2003), "signifiers of maleness and femaleness" (p. 114). Some educational literacy scholars (Brozo, 2002; Young & Brozo, 2001) understand this to mean that femininity is limited to females and masculinity to males. These scholars are interested in broadening that which is associated with masculinity, for example. Brozo (2002) accomplishes this by drawing on Jungian archetypes to offer ten ways for boys to be masculine, or, in his words, to be "real men." Smith and Wilhelm (2002) actively work against essentializing boys by deliberately focusing on individuals within their large group of participants and recognizing those who "defy conventional categories" (p. xvi). Young (2000) is also interested in broadening that which is associated with masculinity, adding marginalized and stigmatized notions of masculinity to existing hegemonic notions. That is to say, Young argues that nerds and gay men are just as masculine as straight jocks (Young & Brozo, 2001). These scholars advocate for "multiple and contradictory masculinities [that] exist side by side, without one being pitched in competition with the other" (Davies, 1997, p. 19).

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However, other scholars (Davies, 2003; Dutro, 2001/2002, 2003; Rowan et al., 2002) are more interested in disrupting the idea that gender is synonymous with gender signifiers. Davies argues that men "have the capacity to experience femininity just as women can experience masculinity" (p. 113). Similarly, Dutro (2001/2002) claims that "we all integrate traits and behaviors that may traditionally, or stereotypically, be associated with femininity or masculinity" (p. 377). Rowan et al. (2002) advocate for what they call a "rhizomatic notion of gender," in which there are many ways to be a girl or boy, and in which girls are not limited to femininity and boys are not limited to masculinity (p. 74).

Dichotomies and Complexities of Gender

In this essay, I conceptualize gender as multiple and fluid and work with this "rhizomatic notion of gender." However, I also use terms that reify dichotomous notions of gender (such as female and male, girl and boy, woman and man, feminine and masculine, lesbian and gay) as well as those that reify dichotomous notions of sexuality (such as gay and straight). In part, I use these terms because I am limited to and by the English language, although there are available words that disrupt gender and sexual dichotomies. Some of these words suggest a midpoint between the two ends of a continuum, for example, androgynous and bisexual. Few suggest a suspension of classification, like transgender and queer. It is tempting to use only such suspending words in order to evade contributing to the reification of gender and sexual dichotomies, but such a linguistic decision comes at a cost. That is, if I refused to use words such as female and male, feminine and masculine, gay and straight, I would fail to capture the ways in which gender and sexuality are often interpreted by those who experience gender dichotomously and imposed on those who don't (indeed, on all of us). There are times when these details are inappropriate or irrelevant, at which points I use the suspending terms, but there are other times when naming those details is precisely what allows me to trouble the dichotomies they suggest.

In order to capture the interpretation and imposition of dichotomous notions of gender and sexuality as well as the complexities of these aspects of identity, I use a variety of terms that point to different ways of experiencing gender and sexuality, although my focus is gender. Quite conventionally, I use *female* and *male* to name one's gender, but I also use *transgender* to describe someone whose experiences of gender do not fit into this dichotomous notion of gender. Again, conventionally, I use *girl* and *boy* and *woman* and *man* to refer to people's gender and general age. I use *lesbian* and *gay* to describe the gender and sexuality of people, including myself, but I also use *queer* to describe a person or group of people who identify as decidedly not heterosexual but not necessarily one single other sexual identity. For example, I self-identify as lesbian at the start of this essay, but I more often refer to myself as gay, and when among people who are discussing the subtle

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distinctions among sexual identities, I tend to identify as queer. The term queer allows for such variation and advocates for the suspension of such classifications (Jagose, 1996).

I use *femininity* and *masculinity* as well as *female-ness* and *male-ness* in ways that allow me to convey important distinctions in experiences of gender. Like Davies (2003), Dutro (2001/2002, 2003), and Rowan et al. (2002), I use femininity and masculinity to describe behaviors typically associated with women and men respectively. These behaviors signify gender but are not, necessarily, synonymous with gender. I use female-ness and male-ness to describe something different from either gender or gender signifiers. I use these terms to describe *performances* of gender (Butler, 1990/1999). For example, when RuPaul, an anatomical male, wears a dress, high-heeled shoes, make-up, and jewelry, she is not merely feminine, although she certainly is that, but she is performing female-ness, that is, she is presenting herself as female. This is quite different from when Jack on *Will and Grace* sashays and purses his lips, in which case he is an anatomical male, performing male-ness, but exhibiting feminine behavior; that is, he is a feminine male. Identifying such distinctions among experiences of gender can complicate and thus improve our understandings of literacy and gender.

Critical and Inclusive Approaches to Literacy

Literacy scholars who focus on gender conceptualize literacy in diverse ways as well. While these scholars seem to share a commitment to critical notions of literacy, what this means varies widely. Scholars who are interested in getting readers to think critically are more focused on readers being able to look closely at a traditional, alphabetic text and make sense of and use of that text (Brozo, 2002; Brozo, Walter, & Placker, 2002). They accentuate the cognitive aspects of literacy. These tend to be the scholars who understand gender as dualistic and stable.

However, many scholars, particularly those who understand gender in more complicated ways, emphasize social, cultural, and political aspects of literacy. They disrupt dichotomies in literacy education, for example, between naming people as literate or illiterate (Street, 1999). Rather, they understand "literacy not as singular or monolithic, but as literac*ies* which are variously embedded and situated within diverse institutional and cultural practices within formal and non-formal settings" (Rowan et al., 2002, p. 92). As such, they include music, videogames, Web-based texts, as well as other kinds of texts in their studies of literacies. Moreover, these scholars make it their work to explore the relationships among literacies and inequitable power dynamics; in other words, they are critical. They assert that literacies are politically powerful, and as such, can be one way of getting at social change, which these scholars explicitly articulate as their goal. These critical literacy scholars who focus on gender are particularly interested in working against sexist or misogynist power dynamics, that is, power dynamics that privilege men

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and subordinate women (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Davies, 1997, 2003; Dutro, 2001/2002, 2003; Maynard, 2002; Rowan et al., 2002; Young, 2000, 2001). Young (2000, 2001), for example, focuses on critical literacy activities and discussions that were designed to help boys examine their privilege and to question the monolithic nature of masculinity. Only some of the critical literacy scholars interested in gender, however, make the connection in their work between misogyny and homophobia (Davies, 1997, 2003; Dutro, 2001/2002, 2003; Maynard, 2002; Rowan et al., 2002). As Epstein (1997) argues, "misogyny and homophobia are not merely linked but are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable: misogyny is homophobic and homophobia is misogynist" (p. 113).

Purposes for Critically Examining Gender and Literacies

Thus, scholars engaged in work on literacy and gender have complicated dual and stable notions of gender, challenged the boundaries of what is appropriately male or female, disrupted dichotomies in literacy education, broadened ideas of what counts as texts, and revealed misogynistic power dynamics at play; but they have rarely paid attention to the role of heterosexism and homophobia in these dynamics, and they have all but ignored people who do not experience gender in neatly compartmentalized ways, such as transgender people. (For a notable exception, see the work of Davies, 1997, 2003.) This neglect is understandable. As I mentioned earlier, the English language both reflects and fosters it.

Still, such neglect has hindered our understandings of literacy and gender. For example, Brozo's (2002) theoretical framework for analyzing boys' literacy relies heavily on the work of psychologist C. G. Jung. This is a problematic foundation because, while Jung was generally tolerant of homosexuality relative to his era (that is, he did not believe that homosexuality should be considered criminal or that it was simply a sickness, as were common beliefs of the time), he did regard homosexuality as evidence of psychological immaturity, a notion that has been empirically and theoretically interrogated (Hopcke, 1992). Relying heavily on Jung without identifying the homophobic pitfalls of doing so allows Brozo to fall into them. Not only is Brozo's foundation troubling, but so too is his interpretation of Jung. Brozo interprets Jung's archetypes as distinctively masculine and male, terms he uses synonymously. At first glance, this interpretation is understandable in that Jung "refers to the masculine and feminine as two great archetypal principles" that, according to Jungian scholar Stevens (2001), "provide the foundations on which masculine and feminine stereotypes begin to do their work" (p. 68). But a further reading of Jung troubles this interpretation in that Jung, again according to Stevens (2001), "advanced the deeply subversive idea that inside every man was an intact female personality, and a male personality inside every woman, which ought to be made conscious, integrated, and lived" (p. 146). Brozo ignores this particular aspect of Jungian theory and, as a consequence, misogynistic and ho-

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mophobic data go uninterrogated. For example, Brozo, Walter, and Placker (2002) quote a participant as saying, "'[boys] look more stupid when they act like girls'" (p. 534) as a way of supporting boys to act like boys in their reading. While this is important work, the authors seemingly disregard what such a quotation suggests about girls (that they are "more stupid" than boys), and about feminine boys (that they also are "more stupid," thus perpetuating misogynist and homophobic assumptions).

Of course, Brozo and his colleagues are neither alone among literacy scholars in their lack of attention to issues of non-heterosexual identities and non-dichotomous gender identities, nor more guilty of this than others. For example, in Finders' (1997) work with girls and literacy, she describes a conversation among the "social queens," one of the two groups of girls she studies, in which they report writing graffiti such as: "'Nan and Leslie are lessies,' 'Nathan R. has no balls,' 'Mr. Anson is a fagget'" (p. 69). Finders interprets the graffiti to be "almost exclusively sexual in nature" (p. 71), rather than hateful in nature. In other words, she recognizes the messages as related to sexuality but neglects to recognize them as related to homophobia. Thus, she dismisses the possibility of LGBTQ people and ignores the impact of heterosexism and homophobia in and beyond classrooms and schools.

This essay works not only to critique but also to complement current scholarship on literacy related to gender dynamics by drawing on the scholarship of the feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler in order to deconstruct the concept of gender as dichotomous. According to Butler (1990/1999), when scholars accept dichotomous notions of gender, they dismiss the experiences of queer people (pp. 84-85). In contrast, Butler looks intently at the experiences of queer people with the belief that such experiences offer opportunities for "intervention, exposure, and displacement" of "power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentricism" (p. 42). Drawing from the experiences of queer people, she offers an alternative understanding of gender as a fundamentally unnatural (p. 190) "identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (p. 179). Following her lead, I, too, draw from the experiences of queer people to trouble dichotomous notions of gender. Furthermore, I challenge literacy scholars, perhaps many of whom have rejected dichotomous notions of literacy for broader notions of literacies and texts, to reject dichotomous notions of gender and sexuality, in favor of a more inclusive conception of who our students are and can be.

A Literacy Group for Queer Youth

Although I taught language arts in public middle and high schools for six years, I draw primarily from the most recent six years, in which I have worked in various capacities in centers for LGBTQ youth. During three of these years, I facilitated a

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literacy group called Story Time in a center called The Attic, which is located in Center City, Philadelphia, because, as Cherland (1992) claims, "[l]iterature study groups can provide an arena for... confronting messages of the culture at large" (p. 195). Since my purpose is to confront cultural messages about gender, looking at the only literacy group in the youth centers where I have worked seems appropriate.

My partner and I initiated and facilitated Story Time in response to youths' requests to facilitate a recreational group rather than a support group. We tried several groups, but Story Time is the group that lasted. Story Time began meeting for approximately two hours once per week in the fall of 1998 and continued while I was there, through August of 2001. After that, it was and continues to be facilitated by a youth who was an active participant. During one of my years with Story Time, July 1999 through July 2000, I conducted a literacy ethnography (Street, 1995) in which I explored the ways in which LGBTQ youth use reading and writing for social change (Blackburn, 2001).

During this year, the group met 45 times; 93 youths attended at least once. Because the group was open, youths came and went as they chose, so that attendance was quite varied. A meeting of Story Time could include two young people or 18, but an average of nine came to each meeting: some quite regularly, others sporadically, and still others only once. The most regular participants were four youths who came to more than half of the meetings, and six more who came to over a quarter of the meetings. Of these, six self-identified as African American male, three as African American female, and one as White female.

Story Time participants and I conceptualized literacies quite broadly, to include a wide range of alphabetic texts—such as poems, journal entries, short stories, articles, letters, novels, vignettes, 'zines, picture books, and graphic novels—as well as texts of other media—including songs, audiotapes, videotapes, e-mails, art work, and photographs. Typically, I began meetings by inviting the young people to share any texts they had brought. Over the year of formal data collection, the youths shared texts at almost half of the meetings. If they had not brought texts, I described the texts that I had brought and asked the group whether they would like to read any of them. If the group seemed uninterested in reading the texts I had brought, I suggested that the group talk or use a book of questions to serve as a catalyst for conversation. At three of the meetings, we shared no texts other than the stories we told about our lives.

Queer Youth and Queer-Inclusive Literature

The session I highlight in this essay was the first meeting of Story Time, in which gender play in the text, the reading of the text, and the lives of the participating youths were quite prominent. I focus particularly on two youths: Katrina and Trey[1].

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Katrina is a young African American male-to-female transgender person. For the three years that I knew Katrina, from 1998 until 2001, I saw her perform not only femininity but also female-ness. That is, she lived her life as a woman, a feminine woman. I also only knew her to be romantically involved with men. She physically presented herself as a straight feminine woman, but in this meeting she verbally referred to herself as a gay or bisexual man. Thus, Katrina lives a life in which gender is multiple and fluid.

Trey is a young African American gay man who at the time was out as gay at home but not at school. Over the three years that I knew Trey, I sometimes saw him perform masculinity and other times saw him perform femininity, but I only saw him perform male-ness. That is to say, even during his most feminine performance, I never questioned whether he identified as a man, and I never heard him self-identify in any way that contradicted this interpretation of his gender. Thus, Trey lives a life in which gender is rhizomatic, that is, he is a male who is confined neither to masculinity or femininity.

In this meeting, we read a short story entitled "Am I Blue?" by Bruce Coville (1994), which is the title story in an anthology of queer-inclusive young adult literature (Bauer, 1994). Trousdale (1995) found that girls reading feminist literature as they developed "ideas of themselves and of the possible roles they may take in the world" were provoked to counter, broaden, and offer alternative models of "what it means to be female . . . in the patriarchal tradition" (p. 178). Applying her work with girls to mine with LGBTQ youth, I assert that reading and discussing queer-inclusive texts in a center for LGBTQ youth could incite these young people to challenge heterosexism and homophobia. Thus, this text positioned these readers well to do the work advocated for by critical literacy scholars.

I dramatized "Am I Blue?" by reading it in an adaptation of Readers' Theatre (see Tierney & Readence, 2000, pp. 250-255); that is, we invited people in the group to volunteer to assume the roles of characters in the story and read the appropriate dialogue. Harding (1962) asserts that fiction and drama may "give expression to interests and attitudes that are partially checked (perhaps even repressed) in ordinary social intercourse" (p. 143). Furthermore, Rice (2002) claims that reading and dramatically representing a text "provides students with opportunities to reflect consciously on concepts" (p. 33). Therefore, dramatizing fiction also positioned these readers well to engage in critical literacy work.

The story begins just after Vincent, who is the main character and narrator of the story, is physically abused by Butch, one of Vincent's classmates, because Butch perceives Vincent as gay. At this point, Melvin appears and introduces himself as Vincent's fairy godfather. The two go to a café where Melvin explains to Vincent that he was killed in a homophobic hate crime and now he has been sent from heaven to earth to "'watch over [him], advise [him], guide [him]'" until things get "'on track'" (p. 8). In addition to offering him three wishes, one of which Vincent

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wastes on turning his coffee into hot chocolate, Melvin also offers to provide Vincent with gaydar, or the ability to detect gay people; in this case, all gay people appear blue to the person with the vision. Melvin explains that

> The dark blues are pretty much exclusively queer, while the lighter ones are less committed—or ... trying to make up their minds ... [There is] at least a hint of blue on anyone who has had a gay experience. (p. 12)

With this version of gaydar, the two walk around Vincent's community and to the library. Vincent is surprised to see people he assumed were straight to be blue and vice versa. He is slightly blue, which Melvin explains as, "The Magic Eight Ball says, 'Signs Are Mixed'" (p. 13).

Vincent is particularly stunned by a blue congressman on the news who is a "notorious Republican homophobe" (p. 13). It is the congressman who brings him to use his second wish: that everyone in the United States be granted gaydar for one day. Then comes his third wish: that Butch be blue. The story ends with Vincent still having a third wish because Butch is already blue, meaning Butch is gay. He decides to save his remaining wish for when he "meet[s] the girl of [his] dreams. Or Prince Charming. Whichever" (p. 16).

Certainly this is not the short story that Butler would have written. There is no ambiguity around the characters' genders; for example, Melvin, while feminine, is male. There is some ambiguity around sexual identities, particularly Vincent's, but it is assumed that this will eventually clear itself up. Still, it is this queer-inclusive short story and the dramatization of this fiction that positioned Story Time participants to interrogate gender rules and regulations and to trouble inequitable power dynamics, particularly those defined by heterosexism and homophobia, that is, to engage in critical literacy work.

Highlighting Gender Lines through Literacy

The gender lines that separate female and male, feminine and masculine, girl and boy, and woman and man in "Am I Blue?" are certainly no more rigid than those in classrooms and schools where gender lines are heavily policed and crossing them usually comes with severe punishment (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Blackburn, in review; Cherland, 1994; Davies, 2003; Dutro, 2001/2002; Epstein, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Young, 2001; Young & Brozo, 2001). This is particularly the case for boys and men (Dutro, 2001/2002; Epstein, 1997; Orellana, 1995; Rowan et al., 2002).

Girls cross these gender lines more than boys; they do so by being tomboys (Davies, 2003) or, with respect to literacy, by selecting books about sports (Dutro, 2001/2002) and by valuing nontraditional aspects of female characters, for example, physical superiority (Rice, 2000). Davies asserts that girls regard them-

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selves as free to be feminine or "like a boy" (p. 78), and Dutro states that girls cross this line eagerly and proudly. Still, girls recognize and even rely on the boundaries between girls and boys (Dutro, 2001/2002), and excessive transgressions are penalized with homophobic accusations (Davies, 2003).

In contrast, boys tend to emphasize the lines between "themselves and femininities in their reading practices . . . defining themselves against feminine fiction" (Dutro, 2003, pp. 486, 490). This is particularly the case for boys who are less secure in their masculinity. More masculine boys and boys with more social capital have more freedom to cross the boundaries between girls and boys by choosing to read a book with a female protagonist, for example (Dutro, 2003; Epstein, 1997). It is the boys who are not hyper-masculine who are most penalized by dichotomous notions of gender. Davies (2003) describes one such boy named Sam:

> [He is an] all too familiar example of the pain that is involved in squeezing each child into being one and only one of the oppositional, hierarchical categories of male and female. He spills over, is restrained, becomes desperate. And we are afraid to name what we see. Children like Sam give us a clue about where the fissures lie, and about how to break open the relentless and apparently intractable polar division of the social world into male and female. (p. 112)

It is with children like Sam in mind, it is with Katrina and Trey in mind, that I, like Davies (2003), work to

> open up the possibility of multiple genders, of fluidity between gender categories, of movement in and out of range of ways of being which were not limited by the binary categories of maleness and femaleness (p. xi).

Policing and Crossing Gender Lines

Butler (1990/1999) understands dichotomous notions of gender (and sex) to be "regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression" (p. 44). In fact, she argues that the "category of sex belongs to a system of compulsory heterosexuality that clearly operates through a system of compulsory sexual reproduction" (p. 141). And here Butler points to Wittig, who writes, "'masculine' and 'feminine,' 'male' and 'female' exist *only* within the heterosexual matrix; indeed, they are the naturalized terms that keep the matrix concealed and, hence, protected" (p. 141). Thus, Butler asserts that dichotomous notions of gender are not only cultural fictions, but insidious fictions in that they work to exert control over people, forcing them into the confines of what she calls the heterosexual matrix, which assures privileges for straight men in particular. Katrina and Trey's gender performances draw attention to the fictional nature of dichotomous notions of gender.

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In the meeting of Story Time in which we read "Am I Blue?," Katrina crossed gender lines as she read the part of Melvin the fairy godfather, and Trey emphasized gender lines as he read the part of Butch the abuser. Melvin is portrayed as a man, but at different times in the story he performs femininity. For example, he insists on being a "fairy godfather," an adaptation of a typically female role, rather than being a "guardian angel" (p. 6). He also walks in a way that Vincent describes as "swishy" (p. 5). At other times, however, Melvin performs masculinity. For example, he says that he can turn off his feminine performance, and, as evidence, he moves in his seat such that Vincent notes that, "he suddenly looked more masculine, less . . . swishy" (p. 10). Melvin describes the move as "protective coloration" (p. 10). In other words, when Melvin feels confident and secure, he performs femininity, but when he feels vulnerable, as if he needs protection, he instead performs masculinity. These alternative feminine and masculine performances illustrate the ways in which masculinity, as performed by a man, serves as protection while femininity does not. More specifically, masculinity is protection against feeling vulnerable as a result of homophobia.

Butch, however, consistently performs masculinity in the story. For example, he asserts his masculine strength by slamming Vincent's face into a mud puddle. If, like Melvin, Butch performs masculinity to protect himself, then the question of what it is that makes him feel vulnerable is raised. This question is answered at the end of the story, when we learn that Butch is gay. So, like Melvin, Butch performs masculinity in order to protect himself from homophobia. For Butch, this is complicated by the fact that he not only locates himself in a crowd that is homophobic, but he himself is also homophobic. While he may not be able to protect himself from his internalized homophobia, he can protect himself from the homophobia of others by performing masculinity. That is not enough for Butch; he also performs homophobia. It is as if as long as he points to other people who could be perceived as gay, then that homophobic gaze remains off of him; and further, as long as he espouses homophobic values, others will assume that he is not gay, making him even less vulnerable to homophobia. When Butch protects himself from homophobia with these performances, masculinity and homophobia become conflated.

This conflation is not unique to this short story (Maynard, 2002; Rowan et al., 2002). In fact, following the reading of this story, participants discussed the Butches in their lives, as the work of Cherland (1992), Harding (1962), Trousdale (1995), and Rice (2002) suggest would happen. Three of the four readers in the group talked about young men at their schools who had made homophobic comments about them and who they believed to be gay. Take, for example, this interaction between Trey and Katrina[2]:

TREY: There's this guy at school that bothers me. Remember, I told you. He's always saying something smart to me.

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KATRINA: People who do that are really gay themselves.

TREY: How does he know [that I'm gay]? No one else ever suspected me in school.

KATRINA: You know why? Because, I mean, if they weren't gay, the people who are not gay, they don't worry about you. They don't care.

TREY: They don't say that. They don't care.

KATRINA: It's always, another homosexual always, they are like, 'He's gay. He is so gay. He's so gay.' And then later on you find them doing—

TREY: All kinds of stuff.

Here, Trey connected the character of Butch to a guy he knew at school who bothered him because he perceived Trey to be gay, just as Butch bothers Vincent based on the same perception. Immediately, Trey wondered aloud how the guy knew he was gay since he had never been perceived as such by anyone else at school. The assumption here was that at school Trey did not perform a gay identity. Perhaps he performed straight identities, or perhaps he performed masculinity. In fact, the two may be very much alike. Regardless, Trey was very clear in communicating that he did not perform gay identities at school. Through these straight or masculine performances, Trey believed himself to be safe from, rather than vulnerable to, homophobia. Generally, this was the case—homophobia was not usually directed at him at school, but in this situation, when it was, Trey seemed bothered primarily by how the guy had come to know that he was gay. He seemed never to consider possibilities such as the guy *didn't* know and had just selected someone to abuse, or that he knew because he had seen or heard about Trey with his boyfriend, for example. Instead, he assumed that the guy knew and wondered what it was about his performance at school that informed him. Trey was focused on the role *he* had played in communicating to the guy that he was gay rather than acknowledging what the guy brought with him into the interaction.

Katrina, however, shifted Trey's focus away from what Trey's experiences revealed about what the guy knew about *Trey's* sexuality, and how he knew it, to what these experiences revealed about the *guy's* sexuality. Here, Katrina seemed to argue that people who are aggressively homophobic must have something to hide, that is, they must be gay. However, soon after, she altered her argument. Rather than arguing that aggressively homophobic people *must* be gay, she argued that aggressively homophobic people *may* be gay:

> It's always the ones that bothered you. It's always the ones that were so fucking rude. You know why? They wanted to make you feel uncomfortable because it made them feel better, even if they are gay or bisexual. It makes them feel better.

Here she suggested that people who feel bad make other people feel bad to make themselves feel better, and that some of those people are gay. Her point here was

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that gay people are not exempt from performing homophobia, but rather, because they are particularly vulnerable to that form of hatred, they are sometimes pushed to perform it in order to protect themselves from it. In other words, when performing masculinity proves to be inadequate protection from homophobia, then performing homophobia can be invoked for protection, even by gay people and maybe particularly by gay people.

Still, in the situation Trey described, Trey and Katrina merely *suspected* that the guy at school was gay, but they did not get the opportunity to see whether he would be blue if viewed through Melvin's gaydar. However, Katrina went on to share a story that explained the history behind her assumptions about the guy at Trey's school:

> I'm not going to lie, I did it too. Before I came out. I used to pick on people who were flamey, I used to pick on them. No fucking lie. It was this boy named Jon. This boy was so fucking flaming I used to pick on him all the time. [I'd say,] "Oh, he a faggot."... He walks around like, "Oh child. Girl, whatever, yeah. Oh my god, and he is so," and I used to pick on him just because it was so hard for me to come out.

Here, Katrina confessed that she verbally abused a young man in her school by pointing to his performances of femininity, that is, how he walked and talked, and interpreting them as performances of homosexuality, that she understood him to be a "faggot."

This confession is particularly interesting considering Katrina's gender and sexual performances. Although I had only known Katrina to represent herself as a straight woman, in her report of her interaction with Jon, she described herself as a person who performed masculinity, male-ness, and homophobia. Thus, the relationship between Katrina, Butch, and the guy at Trey's school was explicit. Katrina used the story about Butch to explain her own behavior as a homophobic male student in school and, in turn, to interpret the behavior of Trey's classmate. Whether any of the three of them performed repressed homosexuality or bisexuality seemed irrelevant to her, as evidenced by her talking generically about "gay and bisexual" people who abuse effeminate young men to shield themselves. What was important, according to Katrina, was that all three performed homophobia in order to conceal their same-sex desires and protect themselves. Thus, Katrina reminded us of her possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which included male, female, transgender, masculine, feminine, straight, gay, and bisexual.

While all of these performances of gender and sexual identities were possibilities for Katrina, they were not possibilities for her in high school. Instead, in high school, where she needed protection from homophobia and transphobia, she engaged in performances that positioned her with decidedly more power—that is, she performed as a straight man, sometimes even a homophobic straight man. At The Attic, however, her gender and sexual performances seemed, at least

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to me, limitless, particularly in this meeting of Story Time, where Katrina, one of two in the group performing female-ness, elected to read the lines of one of the all-male characters. In particular, she selected the part of Melvin, the only part that decidedly performs femininity, although not female-ness. In her reading, she played the part thoroughly. That is, much to the amusement of those in the group, she, an anatomical male, layered her regular daily performance of female-ness and femininity, as Katrina, with a distinct performance of male-ness and femininity, as Melvin. This performance was different from either her typical performances in The Attic or her descriptions of her performances at school, but it was in this meeting of Story Time that Katrina made "gender trouble" (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 44).

Making "Gender Trouble"

Scholars who focus on literacy and gender in ways that work for social change recognize the invisibility of the practices that are privileged (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1997; Finders, 1996; Young, 2000) as opposed to the visibility of those behaviors that are not privileged (Davies, 2003). Some literacy scholars argue that classrooms can be the kinds of spaces in which gender-based privileges are made visible and binary notions of gender are disrupted (Dutro, 2001/2002; Gilbert, 1992; Orellana, 1995). However, conceptions vary concerning how to accomplish this kind of work. For example, Dutro (2001/2002, 2003) argues that the spaces need to be safe in order for young people to take gender risks, and Young (2001) points to discomfort and disruption as integral to disrupting gender norms. These claims are not mutually exclusive, that is to say that in some contexts at some times people feel safe enough to take risks that work for change, and in other contexts at other times people feel uncomfortable or even threatened enough to demand change (Fecho, 2001). However, perhaps it is more useful to examine the more specific kinds of classroom work that disrupt binary notions of gender.

Teachers and students need to engage in discussions about gender from the very beginning of students' schooling (Rice, 2002). Teachers need to make the disruption of the male-female binary "visibly practicable" (Davies, 2003, p. 80), as documented in Dutro's (2001/2002, 2003) work, where boys were required to read and discuss a book they perceived as a girls' book, challenging them to cross gender lines and supporting them in their crossing, thus allowing them to make "less self-conscious" reading choices (Dutro, 2001/2002, p. 383). Furthermore, texts that "break the silences" and "say the unsayable" (Davies, 2003, p. 160) need to be read in classrooms so that students can envision and experience alternative possibilities. In reading such texts, students need to be able to understand characters by drawing from their own experiences in the world; in other words, they need to be able to "position themselves as characters in the text" (Davies, 2003, p. 175). In

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order to foster conscious reflection, Rice (2002) advocates Eisner's process of "transmediation," in which "meanings initiated in one communication system are moved to an alternate communication system," such as from reading to drama or peer discussion. Together, students and teachers can work in mixed-gender groups to deconstruct representations of gender in texts (Cherland, 1992; Davies, 2003; Dutro, 2003; Epstein, 1997).

However, according to Guzzetti, Young, Gritsavage, Fyfe, and Hardenbrook's (2002) review of research on literacy and gender, "simply reading and talking about gendered texts and talk was insufficient to change ingrained, gendered language behaviors" (p. 3). This is evident in Orellana's (1995) study of gender in two bilingual elementary classrooms in a working-class Latino community, where, even when children read feminist texts, they were drawn toward more dominant interpretations. Young (2000) found in her research that the White, middle-class, homeschooled boys with whom she worked tended to accept rather than critique the gender-based stereotypes that they identified. Rice (2000) found that when sixth-grade boys and girls read a feminist folktale, the boys tended to recall characters who exhibited nontraditional gender traits about half as often as the girls did. In Dutro's (2001/2002, 2003) study of African American fifth-grade boys, she found that while she worked with boys around texts to "disrupt a particular hegemonic performance of masculinity. . .some boys attempted to restore hegemonic performances of masculinity to the group" (p. 472). All of this is to say that

> until we have invented new storylines, new discourses, we are still enmeshed in the old. And even when we invent the new, the old can still claim us, draw us in with their familiarity and the hooks of our old and current unsatisfied desires. (Davies, 2003, p. 199)

In other words, scholars who focus on literacy and gender in ways that work for social change cannot underestimate the incredible endurance of inequitable power dynamics, which leaves us with the question of what can we, as literacy scholars and educators, can do to work for social change with respect to gender.

Working for Change

In answering this question, I return to Butler (1990/1999), who promotes thinking through the "possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power," or, in other words, the making what she calls "gender trouble" (p. 44), as exhibited by Katrina in Story Time. Butler argues for this kind of trouble making because, according to her, it works to "expose the tenuousness of gender 'reality' in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms" (p. xxiv). Certainly working to understand Katrina as Melvin challenges me to subvert and displace "naturalized

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and reified notions of gender" (p. 44), and this work helps me to trouble the notion of gender. But can such an understanding of gender counter the "violence performed by gender norms" (p. xxiv)?

First, let's consider what "the violence performed by gender norms" looks like. Some images I have conjured of violence performed by gender norms are Katrina calling Jon a faggot, Trey being outed by a guy at school, Butch slamming Vincent into a puddle, and Melvin being murdered by homophobes. Can disrupting dichotomous notions of gender counter such violence? I believe that it can. If a male could perform femininity without fear of homophobia, then Katrina would not have had to protect herself from homophobia and transphobia by calling Jon a faggot, the guy at Trey's school would not have had to protect himself by outing Trey, and perhaps the Vincents and the Melvins in this world would be spared from the Butches. Perhaps.

By dichotomizing gender and sexuality, we produce and reproduce what Rowan et al. (2002, p. 66) call "dangerous gender patterns," and thus, we perpetuate sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia. We allow for a norm and the opposite of that norm—the norms being male, masculine, and heterosexual, and the opposites, the not-normal, being female, feminine, and homosexual. In short, we perpetuate the violence.

Literacy educators can work to "counter the violence" the dichotomies provoke in two ways, each of which relies on the other: We must foster multiple and variable performances of gender and sexuality while creating, indeed insisting on, a context where such performances do not come with violent consequences. Making gender trouble in educational contexts demands both of these efforts simultaneously. Katrina could make gender trouble in Story Time both because we read a queer-inclusive text that fostered multiple and variable performances of gender and sexuality and because we did so in a center that defines itself as a safe place for LGBTQ youth. One could not have happened without the other. This is not to say that queer-inclusive texts must be used in making gender trouble or that gender trouble can only be made in a place like The Attic. To use a queer-inclusive text in a context that is hostile to queer people would only make those people more vulnerable. To read a text that reifies gender norms without discussing those norms in a queer-friendly environment would accomplish nothing in terms of countering violence imposed by gender norms. But any text read, discussed, or written in ways that interrogate dichotomous notions of gender in any context committed to being safe for queer readers and writers will help make gender trouble.

Both literacy educators and scholars can work to "counter the violence" by being more sensitive to gender and sexual diversity in our teaching and research. We must not assume that all of our boys desire to perform masculinity or that all of our girls desire to perform femininity. We must neither ignore the possibility that some of the youth with whom we work are homosexual nor pretend that

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none of them are homophobic. This demands self-consciousness regarding our own prejudices against LGBTQ people.

Literacy scholars can also work to "counter the violence" by actively seeking opportunities, perhaps even creating opportunities, to document educational situations in which teachers and students make "gender trouble." Although Davies (2003) and Dutro (2001/2002) have begun such work, there is more to do before we see students in schools making gender trouble as Katrina did in Story Time. Documenting such work will require activist research that works against homophobia in schools.

By making "gender trouble" in our literacy teaching and research, we reject the reification of categories based on fictions that perpetuate inequitable power dynamics, and we accept people in all of their diversity, multiplicity, variability, and complexity.

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ENDNOTES

1. Participants' names are pseudonyms.
2. Quoted passages are transcribed from the audiotaped Story Time session.

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