

## **Being, Becoming, and Belonging as a Queer Citizen Educator: The Places of Queer Autobiography, Queer Culture as Community, and Fugitive Knowledge**

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**Abstract:** This essay explores personal, political, and pedagogical dimensions of bringing queer culture as community and the fugitive knowledge it generates to bear on academic culture as knowledge. In doing so, it takes up issues of being, becoming, and belonging as a queer person and citizen.

In 1973 in an essay entitled *Relentless Verity*, J. Roby Kidd accentuated the importance of education for being, becoming, and belonging. In this essay I explore his theme from queer perspectives. First, I engage the theme in terms of my own autobiography as a queer person and citizen educator in post-millennial Canadian education. I link my queer life narrative, which I describe as a situated social and cultural text, to my political and pedagogical task to build inclusive educational practices that confront the dominant culture-language-power mix that still disparages queer identities and assaults queer integrity. Second, I speak to the theme in terms of revising academic culture as knowledge so that it recognizes, inserts, respects, and values queer culture as community and its fugitive knowledge base. I consider Canadian legal and legislative change processes that represent slow and incremental support for queer inclusion and, in this light, I discuss the need for citizen educators to engage issues of sexual orientation and the politics of culture-language-power in a revised inclusive education for citizenship.

### **Autobiographical Queer Life Narrative as a Social and Cultural Text**

For me, autobiographical queer life-narrative research is a critical engagement with the queer self that investigates the personal and difficult journey to be, become, belong, act, speak, and represent oneself as a queer person, citizen, and educator in diverse cultural and social spaces. This journey, which is always caught up in the interplay of epistemologies, contexts, relationships of power, and ethical and moral attitudes and values, takes place in the intersection of the personal and professional. Here identities, identifications, socialities, disposition, history, culture, and politics shape, mark, and position the queer self (Grace & Benson, 2000). From this perspective, autobiographical queer life-narrative research is a social and cultural text that is dramatized in life spaces amid inevitable tensions and conflicts (Grace, forthcoming). It is in these spaces that our civil rights movement to attain the rights and privileges of full citizenship takes place. Its aim is to subvert a heterosexualizing culture and society that deprecates us in a defaming, exclusionary litany: outsiders, outlaws, deviants, and sinners.

*Vignette 1 – Nailed to a Faggot Cross: Yet Another Encounter with No-Heart “Christians”*

Let me preface my story with remarks about diversity in the context of the broad Christian community. There are many kinds of Christians, but here I will mention two groups. I call the first group *brave-heart* Christians. I’ve encountered them, for example, in my work in Edmonton with Diversity Conferences of Alberta. These Christians from different faith groups engage in political and pedagogical community work to achieve space and place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) persons in church and other sociocultural contexts. They respect and honor me, and I respect and honor them.

I call the second group *no-heart* “Christians.” Here I italicize the term to indicate the un-*Jesus* like cultural politics of this group. Epitomized perhaps most notoriously by followers of Pastor Fred Phelps, this small but determined group assaults the integrity of LGBT persons in word and action. For example, Pastor Phelps’s Westboro Baptist Church congregation in Topeka, Kansas regularly engages in anti-queer picketing. They demonstrated at the October, 1998 funeral of Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old gay man who was savagely beaten to death in a Wyoming hate crime. Their “bible” is the hate literature spewed at websites operated by the “family” of Pastor Phelps: [www.godhatesfags.com](http://www.godhatesfags.com) and [www.godhatesamerica.com](http://www.godhatesamerica.com).

I encountered no-heart “Christians” once again on the weekend of March 17, 2001, when more than one hundred queer persons and straight allies came together for the 4<sup>th</sup> annual *Breaking the Silence* Conference at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. We assembled in the Quance Lecture Theatre in the College of Education to share, dialogue, and deliberate as a spectral community of LGBT and straight citizen educators who work in the intersection of sexual orientation, culture, and education. Each time we entered the building we had to run the gauntlet of a small group of no-heart “Christians” who provided us with one more experience of hell on earth. They carried placards that slandered us with such phrases as “Sodomy will destroy our school systems;” “Jesus Christ can heal the homosexual;” and “Don’t let sodomy ruin our children.” Maligning phrases like these demonize queer persons in a scourging, exclusionary, no-heart “Christian” language that suggests that we are sick, deviant, and disgusting perpetrators of abomination. Inspired by Old Testament narratives like Romans I, such scurrilous, heteronormalized “Christian” language is the abomination.

When faced with such encounters, I no longer turn the other cheek. I confront culturally myopic, no-heart “Christians.” I express my anger, disgust, and hurt, and then I move on to continue the struggle in community with other queer persons and straight allies. These days we can be heartened by the fact that we are knee deep in a *fags-in-your-face* civil rights movement that has made incremental progress in this country, especially since 1969 when the government of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau decriminalized “homosexuality.” However, that year remains bittersweet in my memory. I spent 1969 in the hell of Grade IX in a Catholic high school where I was taunted, stalked, and otherwise abused in a series of sexist and heterosexist violences that mark the life of a young person already labeled a sissy-boy fag.

Today I use *queer* and *fag* as part of my vocabulary of written and spoken words. I am unapologetic when I use them in both queer and straight company. I use these terms that jerk the body instead of the saccharine term *gay*, even though I know that term is also often used with defaming homophobic intent. For me, using queer and fag is a sanguine inversion of terms that

puts the language of heterosexual oppressors back in their faces. I see these faces as I negotiate my everyday, and I see them in my troubled dreams. Lines of homophobic determination contort these faces; the lines are made deep by hate, fear, and ignorance of queerness.

Maybe someday conferences like *Breaking the Silence* won't have to exist as a social and cultural oasis for queer Canadians and citizen educators. Maybe someday I'll be safe from no-heart "Christians" who fuel a queer/straight binary of indifference with their dismissal, denial, or disregard of those they other as deviant fags. Maybe someday I'll be considered a full citizen, a whole person, a real Canadian. I am hopeful. I witnessed the power of queer people and straight allies in Saskatoon. I witnessed people in community engaged in a civil rights movement. I saw people smiling, hugging, speaking out, and creating dialogic and deliberative spaces. I heard them talking about inclusive education that transgresses heteronormativity. I heard them commit to taking incremental actions to raise queer visibility in homes, schools, shopping malls, and other sociocultural sites where heterosexism is visible in word, action, and representation. I reveled to be there in this sharing and nurturing space, a space where I was one proud queer person and citizen educator.

Autobiographical life-narrative vignettes such as this one are integral to my educational and larger cultural project aimed at pronouncing *queerness* as a natural and normal and affirming that *queerness is*. They contribute to a pedagogy of visibility that focuses on queer knowledge and culture as it brings heterosexualizing language, history, and norms into question. This critical questioning is a political and pedagogical task in which I struggle with issues of naming, representing, and making meaning and sense of my queer identity-difference and positionality. Through this struggle I come to terms with ways to see, remember, speak, act, imagine, and resist as a queer person. This work is central to inclusive education and queer cultural politics that invert the normal by exploring how queer thinking and acting disrupt heteronormative epistemological, linguistic, existential, and strategic conventions and constructs (Tierney, 1997).

### **Inserting Queer Culture as Community, Fracturing Academic Culture as Knowledge**

Raymond Williams's search for a lived or knowable community in the struggle to move within British class structures became an exploration of culture as community versus culture as knowledge (Grossberg, 1997). For Williams, to know community was an intensely personal experience that involved a struggle between these two cultures. Culture as community is socially formed, lived, and represented in sociocultural spaces like home places and workplaces, and through the attachments developed there. Culture as knowledge derives from formalized knowledge that is associated with the intellectual world and the culture of academe. It tends to dismiss culture as community as popular (and hence a lesser form of) culture. Thus, while culture as community is itself culture as a kind of knowledge, it is often devalued.

This cultural divide, at least from queer perspectives, is still apparent in Canadian academic adult education. Popular queer knowledge, which Hill (1996) calls fugitive knowledge, and queer culture as community have been barely recognized in mainstream practice's culture as knowledge. (See, for example, *Learning for Life: Canadian Readings in Adult Education*, which was published in 1998). The following narrative vignette provides some examples of Canadian queer culture as community and fugitive knowledge. It is pedagogically useful to academic adult educators who engage in inclusive education and transgressive forms of education for citizenship.

*Vignette 2 – Paying Taxes, Paying the Price to Live a Taxing Life: Please Invert the Normal*

Queer persons are treated as lesser persons and citizens in Canada. We have never known critical citizenship that attends to democracy, freedom, equity, and social justice in ways that we can be, become, and belong as visible and vocal queer persons who live and walk unafraid. Instead, we experience social limits and cultural barriers to living in our everyday. We live, learn, and work in an uncivil culture and society where we monitor our appearance, action, and speech for safety and security reasons. However, plaid shirts, blue jeans, boots, and a John Wayne swagger don't always prevent the verbal assaults – *You fucking faggot!* – or the physical threats – *Run you faggot while your blood is still inside your body!* – that I've experienced on the streets of St. John's, Halifax, or Edmonton, which are all cities that I've called "home" over the years. Such is my experience of heterosexist civility. Such is what I still know.

While discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation is prohibited by provincial human rights legislation in Alberta, my current "home" province still has one of the worst records on queer civil rights and the extension of benefits in our country. In its summary of how provinces treat LGBT citizens, EGALE (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere), a Canadian national organization committed to achieving equality and justice for queer persons, relates that Alberta did not move on its own to extend provincial human rights legislation to prohibit discrimination against queer persons. The move only followed a long-awaited unanimous decision of the Supreme Court of Canada on April 2, 1998 in the Delwin Vriend case. Vriend, an educator at Kings College, Edmonton had been dismissed in 1991 on the pretext that his employment violated the institution's anti-queer religious policy. When the Supreme Court decided in Vriend's favor in his legal challenge to have sexual orientation read into the Alberta Individual Rights Protection Act, the government of Alberta chose to put up with the decision.

A late 1998 EGALE document entitled *Canada Watch: Who's Doing What* records these life-and-work realities that deny queer Albertans the supports for partnership and family in a traditional heteronormative context. Equal workplace benefits are not available to partners of queer government employees. Equal pension benefits are not available to queer employees. A queer person cannot make medical decisions on behalf of an incapacitated life partner. Queer couples cannot adopt or foster children. Child and spousal support provisions are not extended to queer couples. In this dim light, queer Albertans can certainly describe their status as uncitizens in a heterosexualizing uncivil culture and society. Reprieve comes only from Ottawa with the federal government decision in 1999 to overhaul many pieces of legislation that have disenfranchised queer citizens, especially in regard to partner benefits. However, institutional and political self-preservation prompts Ottawa's decision. Over the last decade, legislative changes have been instigated by court challenges, challenges the government of Canada knows it is likely to lose in cases where federal laws treat queer and straight persons and couples unequally. Any unequal treatment, of course, violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The 1999 federal government decision follows other changes in federal legislation during the 1990s that demonstrate a trend of slow, incremental progress in our queer civil rights movement. Significant changes include those that allow queer persons to serve in the military (1992), amend the Criminal Code to provide increased penalties for hate crimes on grounds that include sexual orientation (1995), and amend the Canadian Human Rights Act to prohibit

discrimination against queer persons and citizens (1996). These changes do not constitute special rights for us. Instead, they represent long overdue recognition of the need to undo the damage of heterosexualizing societal and systemic structures that relegate queer persons to status as uncitizens. As EGALE (1998) asserts, "Government benefits should not be a 'moral reward' for being in a relationship of which the State approves, but should be tailored to meet the needs of all members of society."

While queer Canadians have gained increased civil rights in legal and legislative arenas, queerness has still not been substantially and pervasively affirmed as a normal way to be, become, and belong in the larger Canadian sociocultural arena and its tributaries like the mainstream practice of adult education. Thus central to my political and pedagogical project to invert the normal are explorations of the relationships between queerness and culture, and queerness and adult education. Here I engage queer autobiography, queer culture as community, and fugitive knowledge in my work. They add valuable insights to dialogic and deliberative teaching-learning interactions that I design to revise education for citizenship as an inclusive cultural practice. They assist me in my efforts to build civic community from cultural, political, and personal perspectives.

When inclusive academic adult educators walk the line between academic culture as knowledge and queer culture as community, we negotiate our way in an unsettled border zone that exposes the problems of living in the spaces in between what Freire (1998) calls the word and the world. From Williams's perspective, the uneasy task of the educator in this in-between space is to transgress traditional academic culture as knowledge, which has historically denied culture as community (Grossberg, 1997). From a queer perspective, this means working to raise the value of ways of knowing and understanding associated with sexual orientation and queer history, culture, and community attachments. In other words, this means working to raise the value of queer culture as community and fugitive knowledge. Of course, revising what knowledges have worth in academic adult education is difficult work. It situates the field of study as a site of cultural struggle where queer culture as community and fugitive knowledge have to fight for space and place in an academic culture-power nexus that values culture as knowledge. Historically, academic adult education has tied adult learning and development to traditional understandings of self-direction, individualism, family, and community that are acceptable within the exclusionary confines of a heterosexualizing culture and society. Of course, this is problematic for me. I have primarily learned to be, become, and belong in queer culture as community. This is counter-learning to what one learns in mainstream practice. In a reflection inspired by Williams's predicament of living between cultures, Grossberg (1997) captures the reality of trying to live, learn, and work across such a cultural divide:

Culture then defined a problem of place and belonging or participation. ... Power was not seen as something external, eliminatable, a mere interruption of some idealized image of cultural processes. Instead, [the link between culture and power] ... began with an assumed distance between culture [as knowledge] and [culture as] community, with the notion that power always fractures culture. Hence culture was always more than just a process, for it involved struggles between competing sets of practices and relations, and that sense of struggle meant that it was inevitably tied up with relations of power. (p. 249)

If inclusive academic educators are to make meaning and sense of living and learning between cultures, then a critical queer pedagogy might help in the mediation between queer culture as community and academic culture as knowledge. This insurgent pedagogy could help to expose and ascertain why the dominant culture-language-power mix continues to violate queer identities and assault queer integrity in everyday life, learning, and work despite the progress that queer Canadians have made in legal and legislative arenas. It could locate inclusive educators in an evolving dialogical and deliberative project in which social transformation and the advancement of cultural democracy are key goals of communicative learning and inclusive pedagogical practices. In building a critical queer pedagogy, I start by turning to the history and culture of critical pedagogy and its emancipatory educational project. Of course, I recognize the historical failure of critical pedagogy to address adequately issues and concerns raised in the intersection of sexual orientation, culture, and schooling. Nevertheless, critical pedagogy provides a set of principles that can help developers of a critical queer pedagogy to begin “thinking [about] the practice” (Freire, 1998, p. 77).

For example, in his important text *Teaching Against the Grain: Texts for a Pedagogy of Possibility*, Canadian academic educator Roger Simon (1992) asserts that a turn to critical pedagogy is a reflexive way to assess and challenge traditions, conventions, fixed thinking, and relationships of power. His critical pedagogical project is to place the teaching-learning interaction within new, workable social and cultural structures that enhance possibilities for education for citizenship. This means paying “attention to what one might call the ‘social imaginary,’ the way of naming, ordering, and representing social and physical reality whose effects simultaneously enable and constrain a set of options for practical action in the world” (p. 37). Using this principle, a critical queer pedagogy inserts the social imaginary of the spectral community of LGBT persons and citizens into a dialogic and deliberative teaching-learning interaction as a cultural practice of power. In this encounter, educators and learners think about possibilities and constraints on queer pedagogical practices in terms of big social and cultural pictures that affect productive power, queer educator and learner positionality, queer cultural representation, and possible transgressive action. Simon asserts that the creation, distribution, and display of such a cultural practice of power are central to meaning making, imagination, and revising what is valuable, significant, and desirable.

For this reason, the production of ... [queer] forms of image, text, gesture, and talk – as well as their ordered presentation and effects to influence their mediation – have to be understood as integral to the possibility of ... the transformation of any social order. In other words, cultural practices matter, and the modes and conditions of their production deserve close attention. (Simon, 1992, p. 37)

From this perspective, cultural practices are political and pedagogical acts. In a critical queer pedagogical practice, they become part of teaching and learning to transgress in insurgent ways that aid and abet cultural change and inclusive education.

### Concluding Perspective

Mainstream academic adult education has been remote from the struggle of LGBT persons to attain the rights and privileges of full citizenship accorded the majority of persons whose sexual orientation is unquestioned (Hill, 1995). If we are to be inclusive academic adult educators, then we have to change this and let queer individuals be, become, and belong as educators, learners, persons, and citizens.

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