

Getting to know you?: LGBT teachers and the epistemological prospects of  
coming out versus being a sexual stranger

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After a particularly bad day student teaching at Middletown High School, Lee Swain had a dream.

...I showed up at school and there were signs on all the doors that asked students to boycott the school because I was gay. There were not many students in [the] school, but my class was there. They asked me if it was true. I could not respond before one student claimed I had molested him. The students all started accusing me and left the room. The teachers would not speak to me and before I knew it, school administrators came with the police to arrest me. They took DNA evidence. No one believed me. I had no one to turn to. That was how the dream ended.

Bad dreams are nothing new for student teachers, who struggle to act out teacher identities that have only begun to form, and try to confidently present subjects that are still more like passing acquaintances than old friends. But Lee's anxieties went deeper. His worries were not only about being a new teacher taking on unfamiliar roles and responsibilities, they were also about how to make sense of himself and his sexuality in relation to cultural norms, his students, and to biology, the subject he was learning to teach.

Lee's dream illustrates how dominant cultural storylines and the values, beliefs, and images they contain can shape the sense we make of ourselves and how we imagine others see us. Lee conjured up a familiar cultural image of gay teachers as sexual predators lurking among their prey—the pernicious equation, homosexual + children = danger (Evans, 1999). On this particularly bad night, heterosexist cultural debris obscured Lee's view of other possibilities for what it might mean to be a gay teacher. Lee saw himself labeled a child molester and abandoned by his colleagues, his identity out of his control, determined instead by others' misperceptions. The police sought evidence of his crime, perhaps even of his sexual identity, in his DNA.

Dreaming or awake, Lee was an active sense maker, but he was not autonomous. His ability to define himself to himself, and to others, was constrained by social relationships and meanings and ways of knowing that circulate in schools and broader culture. I'm interested in this relationship of identity and knowledge, of being and knowing, of becoming and learning. Today I'll try to illustrate the complementary nature

of identity and knowledge to show how their close relationship can both impoverish and enrich ways of thinking and being in classrooms and beyond.

I'll draw on Lee's experiences as a gay student teacher to illustrate how ways of being and ways of knowing enable and constrain each other. We'll see how Lee's real or perceived status as an outsider to heterosexuality—as a 'sexual stranger' (Phelan, 2001)—ran up against cultural norms of heterosexuality that acted to limit who it was possible to be and what it was possible to know in his classroom. Heteronormativity conditioned Lee's and his students' knowledge of bodies, and their bodies of knowledge. But we'll also see that Lee's ongoing effort to understand his identity as a gay man and a teacher profoundly transformed the sense he made of biology. His process of coming to understand himself was also one of coming to new understandings of the school subject he taught.

I use Lee's story to examine the relationship between knowledge and identity from two interpretive orientations that seem to me to offer different prospects for knowing and being as a gay teacher. The first orientation calls for gay teachers to 'come out of the closet' – to defy shame, ignorance, and intolerance and to live out their true identities as fully normal human beings. The second reading, applies Shane Phelan's (2001) notion of the 'sexual stranger' to challenge the determinism, essentialism, and desire for normality that infuse coming out stories, and to wonder instead about the epistemological prospects of strangeness. My hope is that reading Lee's story in two ways will help us see further possibilities for how the differences that teachers and students bring to classrooms can be valued as evolving standpoints for knowing and being (Phelan, 2001).

### **Stories from Student Teaching**

Lee Swain was a student in the first class I taught at the University of Delaware (UD) in 1998. He enrolled in my science education methods course in the fall, and the following semester he was a student teacher at Middletown High School.

Lee first came out as gay to a few friends and to his parents during the fall semester prior to student teaching. He was selective and cautious in coming out and he had plenty of issues to work through. A few weeks before he came out to his parents he ended a serious relationship with his girlfriend. He also struggled to reconcile his deeply held religious beliefs with his sexuality. I wasn't in contact with Lee when he was student teaching, until one evening when he walked into a campus talk group for LGBT students that I sometimes attended. Shortly after that unexpected meeting Lee and I began to talk and write together about our experiences as gay teachers (Fifield and Swain, 2002).

My analysis of Lee's experiences as a gay teacher examines how norms of heterosexuality shape the possibilities for identity and knowledge (Nobles and Letts, 2000). Writers in gay and lesbian studies and queer theory see these norms as heteronormative, "the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements" (Ingraham, 1994, p. 204). In other words, in a heteronormative culture, heterosexuality is typically taken-for-granted as normal, natural, and proper. A paradox in this pervasive, ambient heterosexuality is that the mechanisms by which it shapes how we think and live can easily fade from our awareness (Murray, 1995). But in the lives of those who resist or refuse or just don't fit the norms (or who are perceived by others to not fit in) cultural practices that establish, maintain, and defend heteronormativity come sharply into view. By looking at episodes of transgression, when the rules of heterosexuality are bent or broken, we can see the disciplining effects of heteronormativity, *and* how individuals who refuse the norms can create new identities and ways of knowing.

### *Classroom Language & the Weak Boundaries of Personal and Professional Life*

A double standard of heteronormativity is that while school cultures, for example, are already heterosexed, behaviors that make additional sexual identities visible are criticized for inappropriately sexualizing classrooms. As he looked ahead to student teaching, Lee wanted to follow the rules and keep his emerging, but still mostly private, gay life out of the classroom. He understood himself to be a biology teacher, not a *gay*

biology teacher. Looking back on his early feelings he wrote: “Before student teaching I did not think that [being gay] would really matter; that somehow my personal life could easily be kept separate from my professional life.” But his mother worried about what he would face being a gay teacher. “Kids can be so mean,” she said. He shrugged off her concern. He didn't plan on telling anybody, so he figured it wouldn't be an issue.

Lee discovered that it was an issue. In ordinary classroom interactions heteronormativity closed the distance he tried to maintain between his personal and professional lives. For instance, his students' everyday language resisted his efforts to create a classroom space, and a teacher identity in that space, that was cleanly separated from ways of knowing and being outside the classroom. His students expressed disapproval with comments like “Oh, that's so gay!”, and casually hurled “fag” at each another. One of ways that sexual and gender borders are kept well-marked is by using terms for stigmatized sexual practices and identities as *general* markers of disapproval and disdain (Nayak and Kehily, 1997; Steinberg et al, 1997). Lee soon realized that classroom relationships were shaped by language beyond the vocabulary of the prescribed science curriculum. Coming out (just a little, and outside of school) made him more sensitive to homophobic language, and this awareness sharpened his concern about the risks of challenging homophobic language in his classroom:

I never confronted this [language] because...I was paranoid that they would pick up on my defensiveness or [my] personal investment in the issue. It was always easy to confront racist or sexist comments or cursing. These types of statements are different. It's obvious that they are offensive to certain groups, and groups that are represented in the room. It is also the norm to confront these comments. But confronting heterosexism or homophobia was different. I felt as if I could not do so without implicating myself or revealing a piece of me I was not ready to reveal.

He later regretted the double standard of calling students on racist and sexist comments, while letting homophobic language go unchallenged. He knew that he was probably not the only one in the classroom who was stung by those words, and he feared that his inaction left some students "more alone and more fearful than they were previously."

*Girlfriends and Poop Chute Raiders: More Heteronormative Border Patrols*

Lisa Weems (1999) observes that “heteronormativity operates to police the boundaries between normal and pathological forms of desire” (p. 34). Heteronormativity does more than passively mark a border beyond which the straight dare not go. To a teacher in the closet, otherwise innocuous and even endearing encounters with students and colleagues can seem, as in Lee’s dream, like midnight raids by the hetero border police. Like most student teachers, Lee quickly learned that his students were interested in his personal life. They wanted to know where he was from, what kind of car he drove, and what he did for fun. Two girls asked him to the school prom—invitations that he declined. Students grilled him on his dating history, and were concerned that he didn’t have a girlfriend. They wondered if he wanted to have kids and reminded him that he was getting old and needed to find a wife. In the tradition of closeted teachers, Lee did his best to bob and weave around these questions.

Lee wasn’t sure what tipped them off, but some of his students decided he was inadequately heterosexual. Some of them reacted by producing a more complete heterosexual biography for Lee. They saw him at a shopping mall with a female friend and playfully decided that she must be his secret girlfriend. Students wrote notes to him from his girlfriend, complete with pictures of her clipped from magazines, and left them around the room for him to discover. Lee failed to produce a suitably heterosexual life story, so his students invented one for him. He thought all this was a sign of affection for him, which it may well have been. But it was also a clear statement of the norms that would set Lee straight.

A small group of 10<sup>th</sup>-grade boys took a different approach by drawing on dominant cultural images of gay men to mark and distance Lee as a repulsive and threatening Other (Redman, 1997). Here’s how Lee described the incident:

I was teaching one day and one student, Jim, stopped me and said “Mr. Swain, what's that on the board?” I hadn't noticed anything previously, but I looked and it said “Poop Chute Raider.” I had actually seen this comment scrawled on a desk a few days before, but had just cleaned it up and not thought much about it. I told the class that someone in 2nd period probably wrote it and proceeded to erase it off. He asked me

what it said and at this point [my] paranoia is kicking in again...well not even paranoia, because at this point, I am sure they know. I read it and the class giggled. And I smiled. It pissed me off that I was smiling, but once again I didn't want to show my disdain for the comment because of how it might affect me. He asked what it meant and I responded with "I don't pretend to know what the student who wrote this was thinking." A few of the guys in the class continued to giggle here and there.

Later in the class, one of the antagonists asked me a question. As I walked up behind him to help, he cringed and smirked at his friends, as if I were going to engage in anal sex with him. This made me very angry. I helped him with his question, but I am sure the whole class could sense the change in my mood... I wanted nothing more than to get out of there at that point. ...

Throughout the rest of the semester, occasionally students would yell out "poop chute raider" or make other comments. It was always the same few and I found myself becoming biased against these students. I didn't screw with their grades or anything, but I found that my tolerance became smaller and smaller for these students. It probably affected the quality of education the whole class received, because I dreaded starting the 3rd period class every day, and had little motivation to plan anything new for them. I found that I preferred to have them work quietly on worksheets or simply stick to lecture rather than...discussion[s] or interactive activities. I felt no obligation to the small group of students who tormented me, but my reaction to these students adversely affected the whole class.

In reaction to harassment from a few students, Lee adopted teaching techniques that gave him more control over his interactions with students, and so, more control over his identity. But pedagogical strategies that constrain classroom social relationships also constrain the understandings of subject matter that students and teachers create together. We see in this episode of students behaving badly how cultural norms that discipline teachers' sexual identities can affect classroom social relationships in ways that shape pedagogies, subject matters, and students' opportunities to learn.

### *Sex, God, & the Natural Way of Things*

Heterosexual norms denied the separation Lee wanted to maintain between his personal and professional lives, troubled his relationships with students, and shaped his classroom teaching practices. Still, when it comes to the actual content of what he taught, can't we expect a subject like biology to be free of this cultural baggage? By sticking to

the facts of life (science), perhaps Lee could keep the spotlight on what he taught, and off of who he was. But the sciences are human activities, and the understandings that scientists produce reflect the assumptions, values, interests, and beliefs of the broader cultures in which science and scientists are immersed. The links between popular and scientific understandings are particularly intimate in schools, institutions that reproduce both science and broader cultures.

Lee's students used the cultural resources they had at hand to construct their understandings of nature. For instance, during a unit on genetics he asked students to pair off as hypothetical parents, and to flip coins to determine the genes they would pass along to their offspring. There were more girls than boys in the class, so some girls paired-up as parents. According to Lee, some students "had a fit, and said that two women can't have a kid." His students' resistance to transgressing the rules of heterosexuality heightened a growing tension in his understanding of biology, his identity in science, and the roots of his sexual identity.

Throughout the genetics unit I stated that males paired with females, as if that's what nature dictates. That did not feel natural to me, and it was where the scientist in me conflicted with my personal feelings. The natural "laws" I had learned and was teaching about conflicted with what I felt about myself. I had learned that homosexuality is not natural, yet it is one of the most natural feelings to me. Teaching about the 'natural' way of things forced me to consider whether I was somehow flawed or a genetic reject. I wondered if my homosexuality was a choice, rather than something I have no control over.

Later in the genetics unit, Lee asked his students to read an article from *Life* magazine about genetic and environmental influences on characteristics like shyness, thrill-seeking, obesity, and homosexuality (Colt, 1998). Most of the students were willing to accept that genes can have far-reaching effects on personal characteristics, but they weren't eager to talk about homosexuality. The few who spoke up favored some sort of environmental cause for homosexuality, rather than a genetic foundation. Some students added that the Bible says homosexuality is wrong. God, they said, would not give humans an immoral genetic trait.



The students' selective and strategic application of nature (i.e., genetics) versus nurture (i.e., environment) pressed Lee to confront his own uncertainties about what science and religion had to say about him as a gay man. Neither biology or religion, as he understood them, regarded homosexuality as natural. But homosexuality *felt* natural to him. Genetic explanations appealed to him because, he said, "then I have to deal with it, rather than try to change it." To embrace the notion that his genes made him gay seemed to Lee to make his feelings more natural and to justify his recent decision to "deal with" his sexuality, instead of resisting it. Like his students, he also tried to reconcile the power of genetics with the word of God. "I have read and reread those scriptures," he said, "yet it is still an area of uncertainty that bothers me. It was hard for me to concentrate on teaching the lesson because my thoughts were on other matters."

In Lee's class discussion, there were no clear boundaries between science and religion, nature and culture, knowing and being. Lee was faced with a quandary familiar to those who are strangers in their own cultures: How do we understand ourselves when the cultural norms that seek to define us, meanings we internalize as members of the culture, fail to capture our lived experiences? The students, too, worked with cultural norms that shaped the sense they made of human reproduction and genetics. Some of them read heterosexuality as a moral code that God built into our genetic code. Heteronormativity disciplined students' understandings of science and nature and God, which speaks to its powerful influence on beliefs about what is normal and natural and right.

While some of his students naturalized (and deified) heterosexuality, Lee also tried to reconcile his knowledge of self and his knowledge of nature. Was he a genetic reject because being gay felt natural, or was that natural feeling a normal consequence of his genetics? As a biologist he knew that reducing the complexity of who he was to a question of nature versus nurture was bound to produce simplistic explanations. Nevertheless, in genetics he found grounds for a self-affirming understanding of himself as a gay man. In this he joined many other gays and lesbians, not to mention most straight folks, who invoke genetics, or simply 'nature,' to legitimize their sexualities as grounds for civil rights and privileges (Rosario, 1997). Genetics also provided Lee with

some cover from Biblical assaults on his identity. He was bothered that he couldn't find clear affirmation of his sexuality in the Bible, but he understood his genetic self, his gay self, all of who he was, as part of God's creation.

### **Two Readings: Coming Out vs. Being a Sexual Stranger**

From Lee's story, what can we say about the epistemological prospects of gay teachers, and about the relations of identity and knowledge in classrooms in general? In what sense was Lee's sexuality relevant to his teaching? And how might we imagine relationships between knowing and being that create new possibilities for gay (and straight) teachers and their students? The analytical perspectives we bring to bear will shape our answers to these questions. So let's examine two readings from distinct interpretive stances. The first reading is an account of the hardships of being a closeted gay or lesbian teacher, and how by coming out teachers can live more authentic and fulfilling lives as normal members of society. In the second reading, we will imagine gay teachers as 'sexual strangers' (Phelan, 2001), ambiguous figures whose epistemological prospects are rich because they transgress normal ways of being and knowing. The 'strangeness' of gay teachers is an issue in both accounts, but the fate of strangeness differs.

#### *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet*

The first reading of Lee's story follows a familiar narrative of being gay as being subject to social stigma and internalized shame; seeking shelter in the closet; and when the denial and deception finally become too much to stand, personally accepting and publicly proclaiming one's real identity in an act of self-disclosure called coming out. Life stories that are read through the metaphors of the closet and coming out are in books like *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers and Curriculum* (Harbeck, 1992), *One Teacher in 10: Gay and Lesbian Educators Tell their Stories* (Jennings, 1994), *The Last Closet: The Real Lives of Lesbian and Gay Teachers*

(Kissen, 1996), and *Poisoned Ivy: Lesbian and Gay Academics Confronting Homophobia* (McNaron, 1997).

Reading Lee's experiences as a coming out story, we can see how homophobia in classrooms pressed Lee back into the closet, just as he was inclined to cautiously open the door. Life in the classroom closet takes a tremendous physical and psychological toll on teachers' lives. Lies, cover stories, and evasions mediate relationships with colleagues and students. Staying in the closet demands that teachers maintain an artificial distance from their students. But teachers who withhold important parts of who they are can find it more difficult to develop trusting relationships in which students are willing to share their vulnerabilities and needs as learners. In the midst of this silence and deception, stereotypes and homophobia flourish unchecked, while gay and lesbian teachers, whose real lives would powerfully counter those stereotypes, struggle to teach from the confines of the closet. Lee's experiences illustrate how stereotypes and prejudices go unchallenged when gay and lesbian teachers remain invisible and silent.

Accounts of the plight of gay teachers then turn to the transformative potential of coming out of the closet. By coming out, gay and lesbian teachers can reclaim their real voices, embrace their true identities, counter stereotypes, serve as role models, and build more sustainable and fulfilling lives in and out of the classroom. Advocates of coming out acknowledge its personal risks, but see each individual act of courage as a step toward creating the social and institutional conditions in which the potential benefits of coming out far outweigh its risks. In *One Teacher in 10*, Kevin Jennings (1994), describes what's at stake:

A school with an openly lesbian or gay teacher is a better school. It is a school where truth prevails over lies; it is a school where isolated students at last have a place to turn to for support; it is a school where our nation's rhetoric about equality moves one step closer to becoming a reality. As gay and lesbian teachers win our freedom, we help to free our students, our colleagues, and our communities of the burden of bigotry that has, for so long, taught some members of families to hate their own sisters,

brothers, mothers, and fathers. We are the true upholders of “family values.”(p.14)

The closet hides the truth about gay and lesbian teachers, and they remain strangers to others and in some ways to themselves. When gay teachers come out of the classroom closet stereotypes dissolve in the face of the reality that gay and lesbian teachers are pretty much like everyone else. Coming out transforms gay and lesbian teachers from strangers into normal people who are just a little different. Paradoxically, while coming out brings teachers’ sexual identities to the foreground, it also promises to clear the air and let teachers get on with the business of teaching. By dealing more honestly with sexuality as a normal part of who we are, we move beyond it. Rather than a strange aberration, homosexuality becomes a natural, and so less remarkable, complement to heterosexuality. Coming out helps gay and lesbian teachers to fit in. In a more tolerant institutional climate, Lee would perhaps have felt safe enough to come out. By coming out he would have given his students the chance to come to know a real gay man, not the stranger of cultural stereotypes.

### *Gay Teachers as Sexual Strangers*

For an alternative to this coming out narrative, I turn to queer theory, an eclectic collection of approaches that examine how sexualities and genders are constructed and regulated, and how they shape and are shaped by intersecting identities, social relationships, and cultural institutions (Sullivan, 2003). I use queer as a verb, not as a catchall category for LGBT identities. Queer theory queers by casting a skeptical eye on apparently natural, fixed, and transcendental categories like male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and self and other. It is a tool to excavate the historical and cultural processes by which ways of knowing and being come to be seen as ‘natural’ or ‘unnatural,’ ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal,’ ‘moral’ or ‘immoral,’ ‘just’ or ‘unjust.’ My aim is to offer a different, and I think more fruitful, account of Lee’s story by challenging

what coming out narratives take-for-granted about knowing oneself, being known, and strangeness.

The first step in re-reading Lee's story is to imagine 'strangers' not as those in relation to whom we have little prospect for knowledge, but as those who might share critical insights based on life experiences and standpoints that are unfamiliar to us. This move plays on the paradoxical nature of strangers as "neither us nor clearly them, not friend and not enemy, but a figure of ambivalence who troubles the border between us and them" (Phelan, 2001, pp. 4-5). The sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman (1988, 1991), developed the 'stranger' as an analytical concept in his study of the historical position of Jews in social and political systems in Europe. Jews who were native borne, life-long residents, and next-door neighbors, were not regarded as full members of society and they were not afforded the full rights and privileges of citizenship. In her book, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship*, Shane Phelan (2001) argues that in the United States gays and lesbians and other sexual minorities are *sexual* strangers, because they are not citizens in the "full political sense" (p. 5). To the extent that their differences from the straight norm remain intact, they are denied acknowledgement as equal members of the political community. Sexual strangers live and work among the majority, but do not fully belong to the majority. They are troubling because they are close at hand and often hard to distinguish from non-strangers. Phelan writes that they "disrupt seemingly natural boundaries and borders" (p. 29), and "undermine and crack open from inside all polar categories of social order" (pp. 29-30). But Phelan (2001) argues that "the position of the stranger is not only difficult, it is rewarding" (p. 8). Sexual strangers can act from positions of difference to critically challenge current social, political, and sexual relations, and "offer one another and others new ways of questioning the current tight fabric of citizenship and national identity" (p. 8).

Like Phelan (2001), I think of sexual strangers within a conception of identity (and knowledge) as relational and so fluid, which challenges the tale of autonomous self-disclosure of fixed identities in coming out stories. Teachers who come out are said to counter distorted images of gays and lesbians by revealing their authentic selves to

students. It is as if one's gay self pre-exists, bound up within, homunculus-like, pressing against the constraints of personal shame and social stigma until, finally, they fall away and one's true, gay self expands to life size. But as anyone who has ever come out knows, you never do it just once, and you are never entirely certain what you and others will make of these moment(s) of truth. As Phelan (1994) says, coming out "is a project rather than an event" (p. 52). Coming out as a singular, seminal moment of revelation here breaks down in favor of a historically and culturally situated process of "(be)coming out" (Phelan, 1994, p. 51), "lifelong learning of how to become and of inventing the meaning of being a lesbian or gay man in this historical moment" (Blasius, 1992, p. 655). Across this lifelong process, we are neither pawns of some pre-ordained identity, nor fully autonomous to become whatever we wish. Being gay, being straight, just being, is a communal process that draws upon ways of being that are culturally and historically available to us (Tierney, 1997). This 'labor of identification,' as William Pinar (2001) calls it, remains in process lifelong, undone, and so we are always to some extent strangers to ourselves and others. We never know ourselves completely, which is as much an opportunity for boundless inquiry as it is a limit to knowing and being.

Lee, like the rest of us, participated in the production of his identity, but he could not freely determine his identities as a teacher and a gay man. In classrooms, as elsewhere, identities are collectively constructed as teachers project qualities that students read, re-interpret, and project back upon their teachers, who continue the cycle of interpretation with their own readings of students' readings (Talbert, 2000). As much as (be)coming out is an act of self-determination, it also entails opening one's self to communal re-construction with limited capacity for quality control. The understandings that others develop of gay and lesbian teachers might not resemble the 'authentic' selves that teachers hope to reveal (Talbert, 2000). As such, coming out has a more complex and ambiguous relationship to individual empowerment and cultural change than is usually acknowledged.

But let's leave this criticism aside for the moment and grant coming out its due. Coming out is celebrated in gay and lesbian communities because it often does allow people to publicly present themselves in ways that they feel are more genuine. The act of

self-disclosure can clarify and so dissipate the vague strangeness that so often surrounds those in the closet. Gay teachers who come out (or wish they could) commonly say that they want their students (and colleagues) to see them, and by extension other gay people, as normal, not as figures clouded by deception or by cultural stereotypes and prejudice (Kissen 1996). They want to remove any misguided motivations for intolerance that their students may hold toward gays and lesbians, and be held to ordinary standards of judgment, just like a regular people.

This is a compelling vision that is difficult to resist, which is why the potential pedagogical and epistemological costs of exchanging strangeness for normalcy are so rarely explored. If the price of including gay teachers in the ‘normal’ is an identity that is seen to differ from heterosexuality only by a relatively inconsequential variation in sexual practice, then the pedagogical and cultural effects of coming out are being oversold. If the result of coming out is to fix gays and lesbians as natural complements to heterosexuals, then it serves more to silence difference than to voice it. If we seek equality by dissolving difference, we end up with neither. If coming out in the classroom dissolves strangeness into a novelty that is easily accommodated by a liberal recasting of hetero & homo, then the epistemological prospects of strangeness have been forfeited with little to show for the loss.

Let me take one more analytical step and shift perspectives from coming out and being a sexual stranger as ways of being, to ways of knowing about oneself, others, and the world (including school subjects). As an orientation to understanding, coming out reflects a commitment to resolve the unfamiliar within familiar interpretive and epistemological frameworks. It is a move to reveal that which exists but is hidden, to standardize that which does not fit, to discipline diversity through transcendental unity, to assimilate the strange into a stable and unquestioned ontology. This fundamentally conservative orientation is for many of us quite comfortable and practical.

In contrast, knowing as a sexual stranger invites us to bring intact differences to the surface where unexpected and unfamiliar perspectives are available. In the lives of sexual strangers, heteronormativity loses its common sense, an experience that suggests that other unmarked assumptions in our thoughts and practices might be thrown into

relief by occupying different interpretive perspectives, asking new kinds of questions, and evaluating answers using new criteria.

Thinking of Lee as a sexual stranger, we can see how teachers who teach from positions of difference might see in themselves, and offer to their students, fruitful new ways of knowing and being. Lee was most insightful (and inciting) when he was most like a sexual stranger, unable or unwilling to fully hide or clarify his difference. His thinking about his self and his subject matter blended together, and as Phelan (2001) says, “disrupt[ed] seemingly natural boundaries and borders” (p.29). He tried to keep his private life separate from his public identity, only to find that his students’ heteronormative discourse denied his attempts to partition his life. He thought his sexuality would have nothing to do with being a teacher, but by trying to keep his sexuality out of the classroom he only attracted curiosity and suspicion. All he wanted was a neutral position so he could focus on explaining biology instead of himself. But some of his students were bothered by this ambiguity, this strangeness, and pressed Lee into a familiar binary, either straight us or gay other.

By the time Lee taught the genetics unit, it was clear to him that his students’ beliefs about sexuality, sometimes including their perceptions of *his* sexuality, were elements of the larger belief systems that they used to make sense of themselves, others, and school subjects. Similarly, as Lee’s understanding of his sexuality changed, so did the interpretive perspectives he brought to bear on himself, others, and the topics he taught. He became more aware of the ways in which biology, as he had learned it, failed to account for his experiences and feelings as a gay man. Knowledge he once accepted as a factual account of the “natural way of things” no longer seemed complete or even truthful to him. Along this increasingly fuzzy boundary between knowledge and identity, Lee said, “was where the scientist in me conflicted with my personal feelings.” This was a transformational conflict that undermined some understandings and identities, and spawned new ones that enriched Lee’s life and ways of thinking, as a gay man, and as a teacher.

Two years after student teaching, Lee described the changes in his understandings of science and his self-in-science:



I...started to question the nature of science, the field I had studied and been devoted to for many years. I was initially attracted to science because it was based on facts, logical processes, and predictable outcomes. I found the mysteries of science intriguing and the search for an ultimate, unwavering truth was exciting. I thought I could be secure in the truth and value of the facts, content, and skills I learned, and would someday teach. But after student teaching, I began to see science as a social construct that is not isolated from the outside world. The scientific “facts” I taught about were not as reliable as I once thought. I felt like a hypocrite when the subjects I taught questioned, devalued, and denied the credibility of my sexual orientation. I did not feel connected to the field, I did not see myself reflected in it...

Lee came to understand the social construction of science in the process of uncovering and participating in the social construction of himself. He learned that truth is mediated by values, facts are malleable in the face of social interests, and biological knowledge is simultaneously shaped by, and used to legitimate, heterosexual ideologies. He came to understand himself as a stranger to and in the biology he thought he knew, unrepresented in the Nature it constructs, and devalued by this silence. In response, he constructed new understandings of biology that secured a place for his self in the natural way of things.

Progressive pedagogies ask teachers to make school subjects more meaningful and personally relevant to their students. Good teachers find ways to mix up their students’ lives with the subject matter. As a sexual stranger in relation to biology as he had learned it, Lee developed new, deeply personal, and critical connections to science as he worked himself into genetics, and genetics into himself. The new understandings he developed illuminated the broader topic of how science and broader culture shape one another, which in turn is a resource for thinking about how school science can be made more accessible and meaningful to more people.

Lee’s experiences as a sexual strangers should cause us to wonder, what if schools valued difference—strangeness—above standardization? Can we imagine a science curriculum in which students and teachers are invited to embrace, rather than flee from, strangeness (Phelan, 2001)? Can we imagine a culture in which teachers who are strangers, or teachers who have learned to think like strangers, are valued for the diversity and differences they offer to their students (Leck 1999)? Can we imagine classrooms in

which students are educated *as* strangers – raised in the dominant culture *and* empowered by their differences to ask unsettling questions and create understandings that exceed the dominant imagination?

Questions like these are not new. Liberatory, critical, and multicultural educators have in different ways advanced similar perspectives. But in a time when teachers' and students' options for thinking and being are constricted by content standards, narrowly prescribed curricula, and accountability regimes, we need to advance more hopeful visions from multiple theoretical perspectives and lived experiences. I did not expect my interest in the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual student teachers to lead me to wonder about heteronormativity in the cultural construction of science and school science. Like Lee, I took for granted the division between our bodies and the bodies of knowledge we teach. Reflecting on Lee's experiences helped me to bring these assumptions to the surface for a closer look. He helped me learn to think like a sexual stranger. And Lee discovered, to his surprise, that sexuality matters. As he worked to reconstruct the facts of life in ways that acknowledged his life, he also made new sense of the life of scientific facts. As he came to understand himself as gay, he came to recognize and embrace the epistemological prospects of being different. Recalling his last day of student teaching, he wrote:

[I] was cleaning my room. On the front of a book of overhead transparencies someone had written "Mr. Swain is gay". At first I tried to wipe it off, but [I] realized that wasn't working. I decided to just leave it on there.

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