

‘Mr. Swain is Gay’: Problems and Prospects of Teachers as Sexual Strangers

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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, but also about making sense of himself and his sexuality in relation to cultural norms, his students, and to biology, the subject he taught.

Lee's dream illustrates how dominant cultural storylines—values, beliefs, images, stereotypes—can shape the sense we make of ourselves and how we imagine others see us. Lee conjured up a familiar American cultural narrative 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 and subject to others' perceptions. 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 independent and 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. What I hope to do tonight is to illustrate the complementary nature of identity and knowledge, and 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 sought to limit who it was possible to be and what it was possible to know in his classroom. 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 struggle to understand himself was part of the same process by which he developed new understandings of the school subject he taught.

After I share a few stories from Lee's experiences as a student teacher, I'll look back at those stories from two perspectives that reflect different academic and activist orientations within the uneasy alliance we call LGBTQ. I'll offer two readings of Lee's stories that entail different views of the nature of and possibilities for identity and knowledge. The first reads LGBT experience as the struggle to claim authentic identities in the face of prejudice and shame. The second reading 'queers' the identity essentialism celebrated in coming out stories as constraining rather than liberating, and wonders instead about the pedagogical possibilities of embracing ambiguity and strangeness (Phelan, 2001). My hope is that by reading Lee's story in multiple ways we can multiply the ways of imagining how the differences that teachers and students bring to classrooms can be embraced, not erased, and lead to new ways of 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 was a recent UD graduate who returned to the University to complete the requirements for a teaching certificate in biology. 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. Lee 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 during his student teaching placement in the spring, until one evening when he walked into a campus talk group for LGBT students that I sometimes attended. Shortly after that unexpected meeting (where we both recall thinking, "What's *he* doing here?"), Lee and I began to talk and write together about our experiences as gay teachers (Fifield and Swain, 2002). In the writing that we did about Lee's experiences, he chose, after some thought, not to use a pseudonym.

My analysis of Lee's experiences as a gay teacher examines how norms of heterosexuality shape the possibilities for identity and for knowledge (Nobles and Letts, 2000). Writers in gay and lesbian studies and queer theory see these norms as a quality of dominant cultural practices that they call heteronormativity, "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. The paradox of 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 resist the norms can create new identities and ways of knowing.

Classroom Language and the Weak Boundaries of Personal and Professional Life

A double standard of heteronormativity is that while our culture is already pervasively heterosexed, behaviors that make additional sexual identities visible are

criticized for inappropriately sexualizing the public sphere, the workplace, or the classroom. As he looked ahead to student teaching, Lee wanted to follow the rules and keep his budding, 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.

But 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 marked their disapproval about any number of things with comments like “Oh, that's so gay!”, and nonchalantly hurled “fag” at each another. Whether to some students these were dead metaphors, or were effective put-downs precisely because they remained linked to a pathologized identity, they made clear to Lee that his relationship with students was mediated by language that reached beyond the formal science curriculum. Coming out made Lee 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 stung by those words, and he feared that his inaction left some students "more alone and more fearful than they were previously."

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). In everyday school conversation, heteronormativity dissolved the boundaries of personal and professional life and denied Lee's desire to compartmentalize his gay self. Even the act of telling rude kids to shut up and behave seemed to threaten to divulge too much of himself.

Girlfriends and Poop Chute Raiders: More Heteronormative Border Patrols

It's hard to strike an equitable deal with heteronormativity. As Lisa Weems (1999) observes, "heteronormativity operates to police the boundaries between normal and pathological forms of desire" (p. 34). 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. Lee did his best to bob and weave around these questions.

He wasn't sure what students picked-up on, but some of them marked him as not adequately heterosexual. Some students tried to assimilate him by creating the heterosexual biography that he seemed to lack. They saw him at a shopping mall with a female friend and playfully decided that she must be his secret girlfriend. Of course, they had to add the juicy details that Lee refused to supply. 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 storyline, so his students invented one for him. He thought these students were motivated by affection for him, but their actions clearly delineated the norms that he was supposed to embody.

A small group of sophomore boys responded less sympathetically to their perceptions of Lee's sexuality. Like Lee's dream, these young men drew 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, and the Natural Way of Things

Heterosexual norms denied the separation that 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 objective facts of biology, 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 culture.

Lee's students used the cultural resources they had at hand to construct their scientific 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. Some students, Lee said, "had a fit, and said that two women can't have a kid." The students' resistance to violating the rules of heterosexuality, even during worksheet sex, heightened an emerging tension in Lee's understandings of biology, his identity in science, and the causes 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 pointing to genes. 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 nor religion, as he understood them, regarded homosexuality as natural. But it *felt* natural to him. Genetic explanations for homosexuality appealed to him because, he said, "then I have to deal with it, rather than try to change it." To forsake the notion that his genes made him gay in favor of environmental causes, or just personal choice, seemed to Lee to lessen the legitimacy of his feelings, and to undermine his recent decision to "deal with" his sexuality, instead of resisting it. Like his students, Lee 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 directly 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 sexuality as a basis for civil rights (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.

What Lee Learned about Himself and Biology

What did Lee learn as he negotiated his way across the busy intersection of identity and knowledge? He tried to keep his private life separate from his public identity, only to find that heteronormativity pervades public discourse. He thought his sexuality would have nothing to do with his job as a teacher, only to find that actually trying to keep his sexuality out of the classroom attracted curiosity and suspicion. Think of a closet (the gay closet) with a screen door with Lee seeking shelter inside (Phelan, 2001). No one could get a really good look at him behind the screen, but ambiguous images filtered through that fed the imaginations of at least some of his students. The screen then served as a surface upon which students projected cultural images and narratives through which they made (sense of) Lee. All Lee wanted was a position of sexual identity neutrality from which he could focus on explaining biology, rather than explaining himself. But some of his students were bothered by this ambiguity and pressed Lee to the binary poles of us or other, either of which seemed more familiar than Lee's strangely ambiguous stance.

By the time Lee taught the genetics unit, it was clear to him that beliefs about sexuality, sometimes including *his* sexuality, were inextricable elements of the belief systems that students used to make sense of themselves, others, and classroom topics. 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. He said that this collision of knowledge and identity "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, that facts are malleable in the face of social interests, and that biology 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 himself in the natural way of things.

Two Readings of Lee's Story: Coming Out & Queering Strangeness

That, in my view, is some of what Lee came to understand. What can we understand from his story about the more general problems and prospects of gay teachers? I thought it would be appropriate in this setting, which is about the critical exploration of LGTBQ experiences and standpoints, to look at Lee's story from two analytic perspectives that reflect some of the diversity and tensions in LGBTQ thinking. In relation to my themes of identity and knowledge, the two different readings of Lee's story that I will offer entail alternative views of the nature of and possibilities for identity and knowledge.

I will use the notion of 'teachers as sexual strangers' as a point of reference around which to contrast alternative readings of Lee's story. The sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman (1988, 1991), developed the analytic concept of the 'stranger' in his study of the historical position of Jews in social and political systems in Europe. In Bauman's view, European Jews might be native borne, life-long residents, and next-door neighbors, but they still were not commonly 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) says that gays and lesbians and other sexual minorities are '*sexual strangers*' in the United States. They are not citizens in the "full political sense" (p. 5) because, to the extent that their sexual difference remains intact, they are denied acknowledgement as equal members of the political community. Sexual strangers are not those who are far away and beyond comprehension. They live and work among the majority, but do not belong fully to or with the majority. Strangers are troubling precisely because they are close at hand and often hard to distinguish from non-strangers. A stranger is "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, italics added). Strangers "*disrupt seemingly natural boundaries and borders*" (p. 29, italics added), and "*undermine and crack open from inside all polar categories of social order*" (pp. 29-30, italics added).

Let's now read Lee's story through these lenses of 'strangeness' and 'the sexual stranger,' looking in particular at how strangeness is regarded and what happens to it when we frame Lee's experiences in different ways.

I associate this first reading of Lee's story with calls for LGBTQ persons to publicly proclaim and embrace their LGBTQ identities, and with activism to create the social conditions in which it is safe, or at least safer, to come out. This is a familiar plotline to many of us, and perhaps one that you have already imposed on Lee's story as I have told it so far. You can find stories similar to Lee's 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). The 'closet' and 'coming out' are powerful metaphors that organize how we interpret these stories. But as these metaphors organize our stories, they must also, inevitably, constrain their meanings. So, from a perspective that advocates coming out, what can we make of Lee's story? It might go something like this –

The homophobic stereotypes that circulate in society and in classrooms pressed Lee back into the closet just as he was inclined to cautiously crack open the door and ease himself out. Life in the classroom closet takes a tremendous physical and psychic 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 from students important parts of who they are can find it more difficult to develop trusting relationships with students in which they are willing to uncover and 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 as a student teacher illustrate how heteronormative stereotypes and prejudices go unchallenged when gay and lesbian teachers must remain unseen and unheard.

Accounts of the plight of gay teachers then turn to the transformative potential of coming out. 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. Of course, the difficulties of coming out should not be taken lightly. Creating social and institutional conditions in which teachers can consider coming out requires sustained political action. But in the end, the burden rests on teachers to drive cultural change through their individual decisions to come out. In his preface to *One Teacher in 10*, Kevin Jennings (1994), describes what's at stake in these individual acts of courage:

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)

What's the fate of teachers as sexual strangers in this account? The closet hides the truth about gay and lesbian teachers, and they remain strangers. Coming out brings them into the light, where stereotypes about gays and lesbians 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 sexual strangers to 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. By coming out, gay and lesbian teachers help to expand the definition of 'normal' to include themselves. 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 give his students the chance to come to know a real gay man, not the stranger of cultural stereotypes.

This is a familiar and compelling reading of stories like Lee's. For an alternative view I turn to perspectives from queer theory. Queer theory is an eclectic collection of research that examines 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 do not use the term 'queer' as a noun, as a catchall category for LGBT and other non-heterosexual persons. I use queer as a verb. Queer theory queers by casting a skeptical eye on apparently natural, fixed, and transcendent categories like male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and self and other, and by excavating 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 queer the reading of Lee's story that I just offered by challenging what is taken-for-granted about sexual identity, knowing oneself, knowing others, coming out, and strangeness. By interpreting Lee's story in a different light, I want to multiply, not replace, the ways we think about the problems and prospects of gay and lesbian (and straight) teachers.

In the first reading, teachers who come out are said to counter distorted images of gays and lesbians by revealing their authentic selves to students. Appeals to honesty and authenticity in self-presentation reflect a conception of identity as innate, fixed, and culturally and historically transcendent. And yet, what sense can we make of ourselves in the absence of our relationships to others, and apart from the language and cultural meanings through which those relationships take shape? Lee, like the rest of us, participated in the production of his identity, but he was not free to autonomously determine his identities as a teacher and a gay man. In classrooms, as elsewhere, identities are communally 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 (Talburt, 2000). As an act of self-determination, coming out is also, necessarily, an invitation to others to project their understandings back upon us. The understandings that others develop of gay and lesbian teachers may not resemble the 'authentic' selves that teachers are trying to reveal (Talburt, 2000). The labor of identification (Pinar, 2001) by which identities are constructed is collective and situated in cultures that both enable and constrain who we can become (Tierney, 1997). As such, coming out has a more complex and ambiguous relationship to embracing identities and to countering homophobia than is usually acknowledged.

In the first reading, strangeness was clarified and dissipated through the act of coming out. If the result of coming out is to fix gays and lesbians as the natural, acceptable 'others' in relation to heterosexuality, then coming out serves more to silence difference than to voice it. If the price of inclusion within modestly expanded boundaries of the 'normal' is to proclaim a gay or lesbian identity that is seen to differ from the heterosexual only by a relatively minor variation in sexual behavior, then the culturally transformative potential of coming out is being oversold. Equality is meaningful only if difference persists. If coming out in the classroom dissolves strangeness into a novelty that is easily accommodated by a liberal recasting of hetero & homo as naturally complementary, then the educational and transformative potential of strangeness has been forfeited with little to show for the loss.

What if, instead, we consider the pedagogical possibilities when teachers embrace positions as sexual strangers, as neither us nor them, as ambiguous figures?

Phelan (2001) argues that "the position of the stranger is not only difficult, it is rewarding" (p. 8). In Phelan's view, 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). What might be the pedagogical rewards of embracing the role of sexual stranger?

In Lee's story we can see how teachers who teach from positions of difference might offer their students new possibilities for ways of being and knowing. From his

standpoint as a sexual stranger, Lee asked challenging questions and developed remarkable insights about himself and about biological knowledge in ways that, as Phelan (2001) says, “disrupt[ed] seemingly natural boundaries and borders” (p.29). Teachers are constantly implored 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, who was not acknowledged in the biology he had learned, Lee nevertheless found deeply personal and critical connections to science as he worked himself into genetics. Lee developed insights on how science and broader culture shape one another, and how science can be made more accessible and meaningful to more people than one would ever guess from the drudgery that goes on in most science classrooms.

For teachers, these kinds of life experiences can feed pedagogies that engage, challenge, and multiply the ideas and identities that students bring to school. I don’t claim that as a student teacher Lee was prepared to, or should have been expected to, enact a radical pedagogy of strangeness. But 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?

Back in the classroom, on the last day of student teaching, Lee was again the target of a bit of heteronormative housekeeping:

[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.

Despite the difficulties he faced, Lee came to see his position as a sexual stranger as rewarding and, as Phelan suggests, worth embracing.

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