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BREAKING GENDER EXPECTATIONS

Adolescents' Critical Rewriting of a Trans Young Adult Novel

Rob Simon and the Addressing Injustices Collective: benjamin lee hicks, Ty Walkland, Ben Gallagher, Sarah Evis, and Pamela Baer

> Hello ugly children, this is your community radio station, 90.3 KZUK, the Z that sucks. Today we're talking about stereotypes and gender roles. The world has expectations for gender, what women should do and be and what men should do and be. It's like being put in a box, no way out. But we want to break out of those boxes, break your boundaries and do what you feel is right for you. So let your B-side show.

This voiceover opens a music video that adolescents in our project, Leah, Tali, Kayla, Grace, Sydney, and Ava made as a group response to the young-adult novel, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Cronn-Mills, 2012). The group of eighth-grade students from an ethnically diverse public school in downtown Toronto, along with teacher candidates from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE), spent several months investigating ideas about gender and change, working to construct curriculum together that addressed their reactions to the novel. Our work is part of the Addressing Injustices project: a multiyear research collaboration that invites adolescents and educators to explore issues of social justice in response to young adult novels and co-research that process (Simon et al., 2018). The authors of this chapter are co-investigators who work alongside youth and teacher candidates and document our participatory research. Each year, we select novels like *Beautiful Music* that students and teachers use as openings for inquiries into identity, culture, and power.

Beautiful Music tells the story of Gabe, a teenage disc jockey and music lover, who tries to come to terms with who he is and how he fits into the world. He explains to readers,

> My birth name is Elizabeth, but I'm a guy. Gabe. My parents think I've gone crazy and the rest of the world is happy to agree with them, but I know I'm right. I've been a boy my whole life.
>
> *(Cronn-Mills, 2012, p. 8)*

"Beautiful Music for Ugly Children" is also the name of the late-night radio show that Gabe hosts on a community radio station. Music and records are a recurring metaphor in the novel. Gabe says,

> When you think about it, I'm like a record. Elizabeth is my A-side, the song everybody knows, and Gabe is my B-side – not heard as often, but just as good. It's time to let my B-side play.
>
> *(Cronn-Mills, 2012, back cover)*

The group's opening voiceover adopts the language of radio and records from the novel and uses it to frame their own frustrations with the gender stereotypes imposed on them as adolescents. They have a sense of the world's expectations for their behavior, and the ways in which those expectations can act as restraints. These words highlight adolescents' resistance to what they viewed as "stereotypical" portrayals of female characters in the novel, and their desire to "contribute to breaking gender expectations as a whole." The voiceover captures much of what we aim to explore in our chapter: the pedagogical implications of students' resistance, the consequences of adopting an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) in and outside of the classroom, the importance of supporting a multiplicity of responses to texts, and the critical potential of opportunities for the creative redesign (Janks, 2010) of literature.

Queer-in-Content YA Literature and Queering Educational Space

Our co-inquiries with youth and teachers follow those of other educators and researchers who have explored critical approaches to teaching queer-in-content young adult (YA) literature and queer approaches to teaching and teacher education. While queer content is sometimes addressed in classrooms, homes, or other informal learning spaces, the introduction of literature with queer characters or subjects does not guarantee that texts are taken up using queer pedagogies. As Blackburn and Clark (2011) explain, the history of introducing queer-in-content texts within classrooms has often been framed around inclusivity, a limited concept that can narrow who is heard, seen, and acknowledged as "queer." This practice may unintentionally re-establish homophobic discourses or center cisgender identities – individuals whose gender identification corresponds with the sex assigned to them at birth – since it hinges on heteronormative conceptions of the "normal."

Blackburn and Clark (2011) distinguish between an accommodating approach to queer content and a "queered" pedagogy, which emerges collaboratively through "ways of thinking, talking, feeling, acting, and being that are both linguistic and textual" (p. 224). Clark and Blackburn (2009) advocate for deliberately foregrounding the *pleasures* of reading queer-in-content literature, "to promote a wide array of responses" (p. 30), as an aspect of critical literacy, which involves examining how texts reinforce or critique established social orders (Janks, 2010). In other words, *queering* pedagogy involves more than text choice, but also shifting how those texts are interrogated. In this way, a queered approach to queer-in-content literature resonates with the New Literacy Studies, which regards both literacy and identity as culturally constructed and multiple (Street, 1995). As Krasny (2013) noted, taking up YA literature to explore the social construction of gender, and the possibilities of subverting those constructions, does not "dismantle the actual power relations that construct difference" (p. 17). Following Blackburn (2003), we invite youth and adults to work through the tensions that may exist between reinforcing and destabilizing notions of gender in their responses to queer-in-content literature.

In our research, we have found that our understanding of what it means to queer educational spaces and curriculum is continually enriched and challenged by young people's powerful, creative, and even subversive responses to the texts we choose for them. Queering educational space entails working more consciously to expect and prepare for individuals of multidimensional gender identities, sexualities, and family structures (hicks, 2017a). A queering-space perspective challenges the limitations of "anti-transphobia education" by problematizing this framework, as well as the terminology that supports it (Airton, 2013). This ongoing process of questioning is central to a queer pedagogy because, although anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia approaches have been developed with the intention of opposing violence and supporting inclusion, there is an aspect of inclusion that is binary: that defines some people as "in" and others as "out" (hicks, 2017a). Queering educational space means challenging the passive use of words like "inclusive" and "accommodating" by questioning how these determinations are made, by whom, and for what purpose. It also involves risk-taking: challenging previously uninterrogated institutional standards with the awareness that current approaches to anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia education are frequently ineffective in altering the felt experience of being a trans/gender diverse person in schools (hicks, 2017b; Taylor et al., 2011).

Our approach to queering instructional spaces has parallels to Hilary Janks' (2010) conception of critical literacy education, in particular to her observation that attempts to define the world are never neutral. Janks notes that "both the word and the world embody human choice" (p. 227) and calls for reimagining educational structures. Janks' (2010) four-part critical literacy framework emphasizes

the function of *power*, conceptions of identity and *difference*, individuals' *access* to socially valued materials and discourses, and the role of *design* as a means for young people to engage in redesigning, rewriting, or remaking the world (Freire, 1970/2005).

Co-Researching, Co-Teaching, and Co-Constructing Curriculum

The inquiry process that produced the video featured in this chapter draws upon Freirean (1970/2005) problem-posing and problem-solving education, which invites youth and adults to make power dynamics visible with the goal of addressing inequitable conditions in their schools, communities, and society (Picower, 2007). This work involves critical practitioner research, which positions educators as researchers, knowledge generators, and agents of social and educational change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), and participatory action research, which involves research collaborations among educators, youth, and community members (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Both methodologies foreground the epistemic value of situated experience and reciprocal connections between research and practice. In our work together, youth and teacher candidates are co-researchers whose questions, affective responses, and experiences of societal inequities inform the research process. We invited participants to use *Beautiful Music* as a basis for exploring their own identities, the social construction of gender, and the role of allies in the enactment of an equitable, all-gendered future. We intended this to be a starting point for the disruption of transphobic, homophobic, and misogynistic discourses and practices in schools and society: a way to "queer" curriculum, teacher education, and educational spaces (Butler-Wall, Cosier, & Harper, 2015; Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2008; hicks, 2017b).

In total 30 middle school students, 19 teacher candidates, and the 6 members of our research team came together to discuss our responses to *Beautiful Music*, to explore our experiences of gender and transition in our lives, and to use these conversations and activities as a basis for designing arts-based critical literacy projects. We collected videotaped and audiotaped classroom discussions, interviews, written reflections, creative work, and photographs. The goal of our larger project was to provide opportunities for youth and teachers to co-construct social justice curriculum that challenges top-down hierarchies and standardized curriculum development (Shor, 1996) while exploring the potential of collective research for actualizing social change.

This chapter was co-authored by six people who represent a larger research collective: Rob Simon, teacher educator and principal investigator of the project; benjamin lee hicks, artist, activist, and primary teacher, who organized gender workshops for youth and teachers; Ty Walkland, an experienced equity educator,

who coordinated the project; Ben Gallagher, a community-based arts educator, who helped organize and analyze data; Pamela Baer, a filmmaker who oversaw digital storytelling workshops and directed a film about this research (available at www.addressinginjustices.com); and Sarah Evis, educator and activist, who co-directed our research with eighth-grade students as their teacher. Our work together was part of the curriculum in Sarah's eighth-grade class and assignments in Rob's literacy methods course.

Youth and teacher candidates were invited to read and reflect on *Beautiful Music* in their own classes before meeting as a large group. We opened our first session together with an activity called "Big Paper," which facilitates a silent conversation through writing in response to quotes from the source text, as well as from other resources related to gender and equity. These initial impressions and questions were taken up throughout the remainder of our work. In the tradition of critical literacy educators like Hilary Janks (2010) and Linda Christensen (2017), we invited all participants to place their life experiences in conversation with our shared readings. Youth and teachers participated in creative workshops, led by benjamin and Pam, in which they developed found poetry from words generated collectively in conversations about their own experiences of identity and change. Participants used versions of these poems to create collaborative scripts for digital story-making.

Small groups of teacher candidates and students also designed three curriculum activities in response to the book. Curriculum-making provided teacher candidates with ideas for their future classrooms. Students chose one of these co-planned activities and worked together to produce a project addressing an area of interest for them related to gender equity. These projects included a rainbow mural with mosaic fish representing gender creativity, which is now on permanent display in the middle school; a project that involved rewriting *Beautiful Music* as a choose-your-own adventure online roleplaying game; a YouTube channel exploring gendered language and representation; a life-size diorama that addressed ideas related to identity and change; and the music video that we discuss in the remainder of this chapter.

(Re)making *Beautiful Music*

The three-minute music video, edited on students' iPhones, documents their response to the gendered ideals of femininity they encounter in their lives and saw reproduced in *Beautiful Music*. It opens with students performing feminized gender stereotypes – gazing at themselves coquettishly in a bathroom mirror and wearing high heeled shoes (Figure 12.1) – reinforced by the soundtrack, "Stacy's Mom," by Fountains of Wayne (Collingwood & Schlesinger, 2003), which sexualizes a friend's mother from the perspective of a teenaged boy.

FIGURE 12.1 Shoes that represent conventional ideals of femininity.

Halfway through the song, Leah "flips the record over," and the music changes to Beyonce's "Pretty Hurts" (Coleman, Furler, & Knowles, 2013). Like the previous song, this selection is specific and intentional. The director of the "Pretty Hurts" music video, Melina Matsoukas, noted in an interview for MTV News that the song explores "all the pain and struggle that we go through as women to maintain this impossible standard of beauty" (Vena, 2013, n.p.). The group echoes this sentiment in their voiceover:

> Wait, wait. Why does the world portray women like this? All the words rushing through our heads telling us not to act dumb, but don't be too smart. Be fit, but don't be too good at sports. It shuts us in a box and tapes it closed. Women are strong and powerful in their own ways. If you could break that box, what would you do?

In the next scene, Sydney steps into a box that reads "A-side" wearing a full-length dress and heels. She jumps out wearing jeans, and literally smashes this box with a hammer (Figure 12.2).

The second half of the film shows what students call, following the central metaphor in *Beautiful Music*, their "B-sides": images of students as artists, bakers, drummers, and friends. Sydney and Ava dance in front of a chalkboard, decorated with rainbows, stars, hearts, and peace signs, that reads: "Let my B-side run free: Let your freak flag fly." As the students' conversations described in the following section and students' project plan illustrate, the completed video draws together many of the group's collectively negotiated ideas for responding to the text, such as "smashing boxes, hate labels, etc.," using the "elements of music video" to "show people can have multidimensional A-sides and B-sides."

FIGURE 12.2 Sydney smashing her "A-side" box.

Resistant Readings for Critical Rewriting

In their initial small-group conversations about the book, students wondered whether they could deviate from what they perceived to be our expectations as teachers – in their words, "go off the sheet" and pursue their own areas of interest tangential to the novel. It was in one of these early planning sessions that the group members first articulated their critique of the binary gender stereotypes they noticed in *Beautiful Music*. Tali was vocal about the specific plot and character elements that frustrated her:

> I disliked it because, first of all, I thought the plot was, like, really, really slow and not a lot happened . . . And then I also just felt like a lot of the characters and scenarios were like really, really cliché. It felt really done before.

From here, the group launched into an analysis of the female characters in the novel and voiced the ways in which these characters felt two-dimensional or unrealistic, especially compared to their own more nuanced sense of themselves.

What could easily have been construed as resistance to the assignment, a rejection of the book itself, or a "risky" conversation because of the heated emotions that ensued, became the focus of a brainstorming session that inspired the project plan for the music video. As students continued to work through their ideas, the group deepened their critique of the novel and envisioned their creative response. They not only saw how Gabe's transgender identity was being labeled and stereotyped by some of his classmates, but also how Gabe as a male-identifying person was actively complicit in perpetuating stereotypical ideas about his female friends and crushes. For the girls in the group, who were simultaneously reflecting on

their own experiences of change, the project became a way for them to discuss and enact what it might mean to break through the labels and stereotypes they themselves felt burdened by.

Initially, students voiced a strong desire to "break boxes" by physically smashing some cardboard boxes in Leah's backyard. Fairly quickly, the boxes took on a symbolic weight, as Sydney said, "Boxes? No, we're *breaking* the boxes, we're breaking the boundaries." At the same time, they also considered the potential responses of authority figures. Tali said, "We're supposed to be, like, a *safe* space, not *breaking*," and Kayla worried about their teacher's reaction: "I'm not sure if Sarah would be so into it, just like, 'here are haters.'" While they expressed a desire to resist authority, they were uncertain about how that would be perceived. Others reassured Kayla that breaking boxes was a symbolic action, representing positive images of femininity and allyship: "We're talking about getting *rid* of hate: We're just *hating hate*."

The group also hoped to make space in this project to showcase their creative abilities, and initially discussed plans that included writing a song, hosting a podcast, or choreographing and performing a dance. This list led to a discussion of feminism, the Bechdel test (Bechdel, 2008), which critiques films in which female characters talk only about men, and the movie *Mean Girls* (Guinier, Messick, Michaels, Rosner, & Shimkin, 2004), ultimately returning to the discussion of gender stereotypes that became central to all subsequent conversations. From their perspective, the female characters in the novel seemed one-dimensional, and in the eyes of the protagonist, Gabe, they were, as Kayla put it, merely "sex objects with nice lips."

As the group continued to negotiate a shared project they could agree on, they launched into a discussion about the book's cover. They articulated that covers are another metaphor for thinking about stereotypes. And in reimagining the cover, they hit on the idea of recreating the female characters of *Beautiful Music* in ways that were less stereotypical. After the many twists and turns of a sometimes-heated brainstorming process, including frustrations about having to discard project ideas that they were excited about, the group decided to combine all their ideas into one: a music video that features boxes representing stereotypes that must be destroyed for a more nuanced self to emerge. Their subsequent exchange was a whirlwind of overlapping voices:

Tali: I don't know, I liked our original idea of including all of our talents and personalities into the video, so it's like, she'll be baking . . .
Kayla: [*interjecting*] I'll make *genderbread* men!
Tali: And it's embracing our own femininity and sexuality, personality, showing our talents and interests . . .
Leah: [*overlapping*] We'll be smashing boxes and punching . . .
Kayla: stand-up twerking . . .
Sydney: We'll be showing our talents.
Grace: Exactly.

When inquiry invites simultaneous and different responses, the possibility of conflict increases as well. For example, during the filming of the music video, some members of the group needed to step away from the project. Their post-production reflections gave voice to the challenges they experienced when the video began to evolve in directions they had not initially intended. In her final interview, Tali said:

> It got to the point where I just, I had to quit halfway through. And on the last day, I mean, we all sort of talked it out, we kind of made up. But, I don't know, it was like we didn't really work through it. I mean, people just kept working and I just went on to help other groups with their projects. It was a difficult process.

Later in the same interview, as she tried to reconcile the interpersonal difficulties of the creative process with a final video that her classmates responded well to, Tali also said that her "take-away was [that she] can't really have expectations for other people":

> I have to just, you know, roll with it, play off stuff. You know? Yeah, I think I really related to the project. And it was frustrating to have to leave halfway through. But I think I need to learn to give people more chances.

This was difficult learning – not just for Tali and her group members, but for us as teachers and researchers as well. Involving young people in constructing their own learning experiences invites conditions where everyone involved wrestles with difference and conflict, with the uncontrolled and the unknown. The risks are integral to the inquiry process.

(Re)reading the Music Video

Sarah's rereading of the group's video, from her perspective as their teacher, helps to shed light on the world from which these adolescents' words and images evolved:

> At first glance, it is a charming, clever, and entertaining take on the A-sides and B-sides of six Grade 8 students; a student film, made entirely on an iPhone, with a rocking soundtrack. Peel off a layer, using the transcribed conversations that led up to the creation of this project, and we see a carefully thought out and nuanced response to the gender binary stereotypes in the novel.

When we look carefully at what is going on in the scene of their collective dressing-up time in the bathroom, we see the students giggling and genuinely

hamming it up for the camera. But they are also gazing at themselves in the mirror. This is not a coincidence. Part of what they want us to see is that they are watching themselves – they are both the actors and the audience. The performers are standing in for the stereotypical male gaze that they found so problematic in the book. They seem to be thinking: We are showing you what you want to see, but we are on to you, and so we are also disrupting what you think you see – a conventional dressing-up and decorating of "femininity": make-up, hair, tight dresses, and fancy shoes (see Figure 12.1).

Let's move to the action, flip the record over. Sydney doing what she was so keen to do in the group's original discussion about what their project should look like – smashing the box (see Figure 12.2), and with a vengeance!

The clothing changes, the students' real selves emerge. Kayla making *gender-bread* cookies in the kitchen, Ava making art, Leah, the cameraperson, drumming, then Sydney and Grace and Ava – wearing her Girl Power jacket! – dancing, gently supporting each other.

I am never able to watch this section of the video without recalling the first time the group showed it to me, sitting at my desk, in the middle of English class. Tears streaming down my face, threatening to erupt into sobs of joy and amazement.

Because the final layer peels away to reveal what can happen when a group of students with difficult and complicated relationships with being at school feel supported in their strong desire to address damaging social constructs, and be their true selves, all within the framework of a novel study assignment.

As Sarah's analysis suggests, the music video illustrated how students took up the research team's content, questions, and ideas about trans identity and allowed a story of gender transition to speak to experiences in their own lives that have felt similarly mismatched. The video also demonstrated students' natural facility for interpreting and remaking texts from their own feminist perspectives (Appleman, 2014).

Several group members interpreted their video as a response to the ways that gender roles were imposed on them by the world at large. Grace was struck by the way the novel did not fully resolve the negative impacts of stereotyping. She said, "We wanted to show that if you're trying to break stereotypes, then why are you stereotyping people in the book?" For Tali, the portrayals of women in the novel spoke to her own felt-experience of being boxed and labeled by others. She said, "We really related to that, always being stereotyped into being, you know, *basic*, and having this white rich girl personality – that we're all supposed to be exactly like that." Reflecting on the message they wanted to send about their resistance to stereotypes, Leah noted, "Not all girls want to be like that. They have different opinions on how they want to act and how they want to live their life."

As we described previously, the group presented social stereotypes as the "A-side" of a record, while their more deeply personal selves became the "B-side." Some members of the group were suspicious of this metaphor, because they felt aware of the pervasiveness of binaries within it, even as they hoped to

disrupt them. Tali, however, argued, "You can have a *multidimensional* A-side and a *multidimensional* B-side." For us as researchers this idea offered a frame to interpret the group's analysis of gender that speaks to the difficulty of stepping outside of binary constructs – linguistically, conceptually, socially, and institutionally – far enough to "queer" them. Although it does not address trans lives specifically, the concept of multidimensionality highlights how the music video directly challenges systemic patriarchy and misogyny that allow gender binaries, stereotypes, and inequities to persist.

At first glance, the students' inquiry may seem removed from the focus of a book with a transgender main character. On closer inspection, however, students' own work is strikingly similar to the process that the protagonist, Gabe, experiences in *Beautiful Music*. Their message reveals an increasingly common and vocal rejection of the binary, gendered language that perpetuates gender stereotypes. The resistance that these young people demonstrate is therefore also queer, just as this ongoing process of pedagogical inquiry is queering.

By embodying how their self-knowledge challenges the ways they feel "boxed in and labelled" by others, these young people articulated their demands for self-determination. This insistence creates a spaciousness within which the limiting questions we may ask about gender are eclipsed by many possibilities for a future in which gender diversity is celebrated. By asking their audience, "If you could break that box, what would *you* do?" the group powerfully implicates all viewers – including their classmates, teachers, and ourselves as researchers – in the work of "breaking gender expectations as a whole."

Implications for Literacy Education and Cross-Disciplinary Fields

The examples we present in this chapter suggest how taking an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) on gender involves negotiating difference and discomfort, working across multiple viewpoints, modes of expression, and even points of contention, toward imagining and working toward an alternative future. This entails reframing adolescents' resistance as forms of critical engagement, with the potential to enliven rather than impede their learning, as well our own learning as educators, parents, caregivers, and scholars in literacy and other fields. The adolescents' inquiries presented in this chapter offer one example of what exploring gender through critical literacy can look like.

Although we locate this work in a classroom and draw upon frameworks from literacy studies and education more broadly, this exploration of the intersection of gender diversity, identity, and power may resonate with scholars and activists who work in other sites and fields of study. Our research particularly suggests how listening to and learning from young people's experiences and perspectives can be a starting point for raising questions, making connections, and opening conversations about gender. Recalling Janks' (2010) framework, the music video evolved

through conversations in which students took up critical perspectives on *power relationships* in society – including relationships to texts, teachers, and normative constructions of gender. Negotiating different approaches to responding creatively to *Beautiful Music* invited a *diversity* of perspectives and increased *access*, allowing all group members to participate. Yet it was not an easy or foolproof process. The eventual shape of the final project was revealed by holding the multiplicity of young people's perspectives in focus. Recalling Clark and Blackburn's (2009) discussion of the pleasure of inviting multiple responses as a way of queering educational spaces, in or outside of school, this demonstrates how pleasure and conflict can occur simultaneously in youths' inquiries and are themselves not binaries either.

As these students considered the words of *Beautiful Music* together, they were able to parse, deconstruct, debate, and reform some of the ideas that challenged them. In doing so, they showed, shared, and came to understand more about their own gendered experiences in the world. This could be read as a political project of making students who are comfortable resisting authority, including the authority of educators or other adults. From another perspective, it presents an opportunity to engage in the emotional labor required to accept – even celebrate – students' resistance. In supporting Krasny's (2013) call to demonstrate how to dismantle the power relations that construct difference, educators, researchers, and concerned adults must also be prepared to play an active role in dismantling our own (assumed) power.

In spite of our collective encouragement for adolescents to recreate words and worlds (Freire, 1970/2005), we remain cautious about attributing this group's creative efforts solely to our research design or theoretical approaches. The middle school students we worked with came with their own pre-existing group dynamics relationships, and critical perspectives. The music video featured in this chapter is about being understood in ways that resonate with young people's experiences of themselves and their world. It is also about developing more empathic perspectives of others. As Janks (2010) suggests, creative rewriting is a way of empowering students to change the world, and developing empathy and understanding in the process.

When teachers first introduce books with queer content in classrooms or concerned adults invite adolescents into conversations about gender, it can feel imperative to define words like *transition* and *transgender*, to talk directly about stereotypes and myths that some people carry about queer lives and trans communities, and to discuss the details of policies that aim to disrupt transphobia and cis-centrism. This was a significant beginning for us as researchers as well. Yet, in our ongoing work together, we recognize there will always be a next layer of questioning to consider in the practice of queering. Mirroring in some respects youths' own process of rewriting gender, we continue to work through how rewriting curriculum to queer the physical and emotional landscape of learning environments may differ from introducing content that is queer in story or theme.

We began this project in the hope that we could support youth and teacher candidates to explore non-binary understandings of gender in ways that were free of limitations. Two years later, we face the humbling recognition that stories told in reaction to a dualistic system are still constructed in reference to that system. We invited middle school students to read this novel with a transgender main character in the hope that maybe they would think about gender and the future of gender differently. With so much more depth and multiplicity than our own gendered upbringings had prepared us to expect, these students responded beyond binaries.

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