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Plastic or phalloplasty? Negotiating masculinity and (cis)gender norms in schools and the academy

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ABSTRACT

Through an imagining of gender-queer space as a site that opens up a mesh of possibilities in schooling, this paper argues that a gender-queer hidden curriculum as enacted through a gender-queer space can be one possible corrective framework to the pervasive cis-norms and values that enact violence against queer, trans, and gender-fluid youth in schools. Using the respective authors' counternarratives and an analysis found in dissensus, the authors argue that the significance of these spaces is as much about school safety as it is about unlearning normalized gender understandings in local and less local contexts.

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Doreen Massey (2005) argues that space and multiplicity are co-constitutive: Within space exists a throwntogetherness of intimately connected histories, contemporary stories, and narratives yet-to-come that can be understood as an assemblage (Puar, 2013; Weheliye, 2014). Gender is similarly constructed, within spaces of possibilities (Helfenbein, 2010) where gender-queer understandings thrive and, simultaneously, spaces are wrought with challenges that are often understood as reified forms of cisgender histories and ways of being. Additionally, we live in a time when gender binaries have at once exploded into a multitude of possibilities¹ for gender-queer people and groups (Johnston, 2016) while remaining relatively fixed within sociocultural ideas and ideals (Halberstam, 1998; Krylova, 2016). When combined, these perspectives infer that if something is gender-queer and gender-queer can be understood as space; then there is what we are naming here “gender-queer spaces.”

Utilizing understandings of gender-queer spaces in all their representations and forms, this article unpacks tensions between sociopolitical and historical cisgender norms and contemporary queered ways of being. To do so, we analyze our positionalities within counternarratives to address socioculturally

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constructed normalization of cisgender, hyper-masculine structures that are reified in educational spaces as the status quo. We argue that an emphasis on genderqueerness and the resulting spaces created are vital to deconstructing needing to “be” masculine in order to traverse the all-too-familiar cis-hetero-patriarchy that continues to be reproduced in schools and schooling.

In order to do so, we attend to the expression of networks that make up assemblages (Weheliye, 2014) in ways that parallel Massey’s (2005) description of place as the “thrown-togetherness” of historical and contemporary understandings, contexts, things, events, and material and liminal constructions. It is this thrown-togetherness of queer-spaces that is the knot at the heart of the assemblages that Weheliye (2014) discusses, and we explore through our respective counternarratives.² Finally, we conclude by unpacking how gender-queer spaces expressed below resonate (Gershon, 2017) against cisgender, patriarchal ideals that pervade schooling.

Boni’s narrative: If you cannot beat ‘em, Grab a Dildo

During a decade of teaching in K-12 schools I learned that, while I could not conceal being biracial in overwhelmingly white contexts, I could and, in conservative communities perhaps, should suppress my queerness. Being in the closet, I found it difficult to live up to sociocultural ideals of femininity and a toxic cis-hetero patriarchy. Despite my efforts, I consistently felt like my queerness was showing as I worked to refine the art acting straight and white. For example, I had my shoe selection critiqued by female administrators and received negative comments about my clothes (a collared shirt and khakis) from colleagues for not “looking like a girl.” Not a woman, a girl. In a profession that is still socioculturally gendered female, I often wondered how colleagues so often continued trying to please men and masculine ideals. In moments of futility, I frequently felt the urge to bring in an actual material penis to the table in the form of a large, rubber dildo, slap it down and say, “Now I have a dick too, can I please have a seat at the table?”

Reagan’s narrative: “Put a little sugar in my bowl”³: Can I get some queerness in my Black love?

I am unapologetically Black and Queer. I come from household that situated Blackness as a constant celebration; however, discussions of Queerness were non-existent. These non-discussions, in relation to Blackness, caused me to fear my own Queerness during childhood. Eventually, starting in my early adulthood, I shifted the energy which invigorated the fear to enliven my inquiries and confidence in regards to my Queerness. Individuals such as Pauli Murray, Lorraine Hansberry, Bayard Rustin, to name a few, became sources to challenge and talk back to the constructs that situated Black

historical narratives within the contemporary cis-hetero patriarchy and other phallogentric contexts. In short, it was often textual dialogs that unlocked queer-spaces in my life, reflexively engaging the entanglements of my childhood as they met questions of Blackness and Queerness. It is this complex conversation that informs the multiple ways I approach and challenge the cis-hetero patriarchy and other phallogentric contextual silencing I often live within classroom spaces.

Refusing cis-space

Schools tend to be systemically, institutionally, and interpersonally anti-queer (Gilbert, 2014; Sedgwick, 1993). Additionally, just as gender-queer spaces exist, so do cis-hetero patriarchal spaces. Because schooling is a reflection of broader systems of power, schools are spaces created by and for the cis-hetero patriarchy. We argue for an attention to gender-queer spaces that exist as the opposite side of the coin of schooling. Gender-queer spaces engage in a politics of refusal that unapologetically “refuses the choices offered” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 129). Similar to the many ways that trans and gender-fluid persons and groups engage in the rejection of cis-gender hegemony through ontologies that trouble sociocultural norms, we are arguing that gender-queer spaces also reject and trouble normalized ideals of identities of spaces. Additionally, following arguments for an explicit gender-queer formal curriculum (e.g., Miller, 2015), we are calling for gender-queer spaces that speak and leak (Helfenbein, 2010) across curricular forms as a refusal of normalized cisgender spaces in school.

Our narratives speak back to systems of schooling that are nested with historical, socio-politically driven curricula that have successfully marginalized queerness. Although Boni’s narrative is indicative of more explicit aggression informed by gender norms and Reagan’s narrative describes implicit hostilities that silence queerness in (male) communities of color, both stories describe sociocultural understandings that normalize the cis-hetero patriarchy. Both narratives also argue for a refusal of such values: In Boni’s case by seeking what might seem like excessive measures for equity (e.g., the plastic phallus) and in Reagan’s case by using textual voices to speak against cultural understandings of masculinities and Blackness as they similarly relate the patriarchy in his current academic context. In sum, our narratives seek gender-queer spaces as tools for a multiplicity of ontological and epistemological mobility against monolithic ideals of being and knowing.

Our argument for gender-queer spaces in schools is particularly important because, as the rise of trans-directed violence continues largely unabated in educational places and beyond, spaces of possibility that an attention to gender-fluidity that can be productively generative in and

against often-limiting and anti-queer understandings of schooling as cisgendered. Finally, as Tinsley (2016) argues, gender-queer spaces can serve as forms of resistance grounded in an attention to (re)building schools as nonviolent spaces for all LGBTQ+ students, with a particular emphasis on trans and gender non-conforming youth. We do this because it is through our trans and gender non-conforming students, colleagues, and communities that we learn the art of *(un)becoming to become* (Miller, 2016), and gender-queer spaces are a necessary step toward re-thinking safety and equity for marginalized youth in school.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Contributors

Boni Wozolek, Ph.D. is a 2017–2019 Inclusive Excellence Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Loyola University Maryland. Dr. Wozolek's work considers questions of social justice, qualitative research methods, and teaching practices that focus on the examination of race, genders and sexual orientation in schools. Aside from her numerous presentations and publications, Dr. Wozolek is currently working on two grant projects, including a grant with the Baltimore Police Department and a second grant from the Ann E. Casey Foundation.

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Notes

1. To be clear, we are focusing this dialogue on contemporary possibilities within gender queer understandings. We recognize the historical presence of gender queer people and groups and their sociocultural significance. However, given the limited space of this article, our focus is on contemporary possibilities of outwardly present gender queerness.
2. We are non-binary, non-trans, queer scholars whose narratives are but two trajectories through infinitely possible positions of queerness. Similarly, from our position, queerness, transness, and gender are three deeply interrelated yet distinct constructions and it is our intention to treat them here as such.
3. Title sampled from Bessie Smith's 1931 recorded single "I need a little sugar in my bowl".

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Dr. Boni Wozolek is a postdoctoral research fellow at Loyola University Maryland. Recipient of several nationally recognized awards, her work considers questions of social justice, qualitative research methods, and teaching practices that focus on the examination of race, gender (along with its multiple forms and expressions), and sexual orientation in schools.

Dr. Reagan P. Mitchell is a visiting professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Colgate University. His research examines the cultural and historical influences of race, gender, sexuality, space, gentrification, auditory architecture, and communal wisdom on education. His scholarship brings together curriculum theory, ethnic studies, critical geography, and sound studies.

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