

**A Novel Idea: A Narrative Inquiry into Queer Engagements with  
Fiction**

By

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# **A Novel Idea: A Narrative Inquiry into Queer Engagements with Fiction**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the role reading novels (textual or graphic) played in the survival and desires of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer) students. At the time this research project was conceived, there were not many psychoanalytic and queer feminist critical literacy research studies concerned with how LGBTQ students were using literacy in relation to self-care and trauma caused by anti-LGBTQ oppression. Also LGBTQ students were frequently being characterized in positivist anti-oppression research as one-dimensional victims who were not exercising any agency, while being told by lesbian and gay celebrities to tolerate unlivable conditions at their schools because a better life in a LGBTQ enclave awaits them.

Disempowering research, the unlivable lives LGBTQ students are expected to endure in schools and the need for further queer feminist research into specifically queer and trans critical literacies served as the central motivations for the undertaking of this project. This research study focuses on the ways in which LGBTQ students have come to understand the relationships between reading novels, self-care, trauma, and the development of a queer critical literacy.

Narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and creative analytic practices were the methodologies used in this project. The data for this research was collected using qualitative

methods. The participants agreed to answer questions in a semi-structured interview and also wrote responses to a few reading journal questions after they had been interviewed. All of this qualitative data was analyzed using psychoanalytic, queer, post-structuralist, and integrative feminist theories. The author represented the insights and the process of this research study creatively in a synopsis of a proposed fictional graphic fantasy novel. Graphic novels and fantasy textual novels were prominent in the qualitative data which led the author to choose those forms for a proposed fictional story. This thesis worked to reveal insights about reading and self-care for LGBTQ students through both conventional qualitative research methods and by proposing a creative representation of the research while looking toward developing a queer world making project based on the findings of the entire project.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

I was interested in investigating how non-normatively gendered and sexual individuals construct livable lives despite being marginalized within the school and the curriculum. Psychoanalytic theories, queer theory, and integrative feminism are the theoretical influences in this project. I worked to extend their use within curriculum studies because of the unique insights each theory offers.

I shifted my research interests to curriculum and the school more specifically because of my experiences as a student-teacher. In my first practicum placement as a student-teacher I explicitly encountered the colonial, heterosexist, homophobic, and sexist ways in which teachers are expected to embody their role. Two of my mentor teachers told me I was too soft in general and that I should manage the children with a particular type of authority. I was also reading this as a commentary on my queerness. I was not the hegemonically masculine White patriarch these straight, conservative women expected me to be. At several schools I have been to, young students have been perplexed by my masculine appearance, gentle comportment, small frame, and soft, feminine voice. To them these aspects of embodiment are incompatible with what they have come to understand about sexed embodiment and gender. I have been asked several times: “Are you a woman or a man?” Older students have read me as queer and have referred to me as “the queer teacher”, “so gay”, and most bluntly “that fucking faggot.”

## 1.1 Oppressive Lessons for Queer Students

These experiences within schools as a teacher mirrored my experiences as a non-normatively gendered and sexual student as well as the quotidian experiences of homophobia and heterosexism I have. These traumatic experiences continually threatened the livability of my

own life but one thought among others has been both a consolation and an encouragement. I have seen that there are many other individuals who are similarly cast out, isolated, and silenced for their non-normative gender and/or sexual identities.

One day during my first practice teaching assignment when all the student teachers were alone in the staff room with a long term contract teacher, we all talked about our personal lives and our specific projects. After mentioning I had done research with trans people, the contract teacher told us that there was a trans girl who had left another school and was now attending this particular public school. Another day, one of the students in the class I was teaching mentioned that at recess time she saw a “boy wearing a wig, dressed up like a girl”. I wondered if it was the girl who is trans and if it was her, how did she feel each day at this new school where she was accommodated with her own lockable washroom and sworn secrecy amongst the school staff. It was these experiences that convinced me students with non-normative gender and sexual identities have narratives that need to be shared and explored. There is also a growing body of literature featuring non-normatively gendered and sexual youth telling their own stories themselves including Dececco and Gray (1999), Mastoon (2001), and Rooney (2004) each of which details the ways in which they experience domination and how they resist this domination. Students face gendered and sexual oppression from overt expressions of homophobia and transphobia but also through structural oppressions which can be seen in the daily operations of the school as an institution.

For instance, Lee Airton argues in their Master’s thesis entitled “What do we mean by ‘gender’ and how should it be addressed?”: Exploring the inclusion of gender in a teacher education curriculum (2009) that gender is the basis for a certain series of oppressions within schools and teacher education programs . Airton (2009) defines genderism as the pervasive and



systemic belief in male/masculine and female/feminine as the only natural and acceptable gender identities and expressions (p. 29). Airton (2009) points to the fact that teacher training curricula works to reinforce gender as a stable body of knowledge which can be observed readily in the classroom (p. 23). I was concerned with the psychic and cultural work students do to survive the daily gendered, sexual, and racial violence regularly perpetrated in schools. My research question was what role does reading novels (textual or graphic) play in the survival and desires of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer) students in education? I had thought that trauma, palliative self-care, and the grounds for what constitutes a livable life were three important areas in the process of exploring this question. The statements made by the participants have led me to argue that reading novels whether graphic or textual is a form of palliative self-care for these queer and trans readers. I return to a discussion of these concepts in my theoretical framework and my analysis chapter.

## 1.2 Plan of Study

To answer the research question what role reading novels plays in the desires and survival of LGBTQ students in education I conducted semi-structured interviews and also had response journals about reading novels. I contacted participants initially through a call for four adult student participants posted on local university LGBTQ listservs, at LGBTQ university groups in the Greater Toronto Area (University of Toronto, York, and Ryerson). I chose to contact participants through these channels because these areas yielded more participants through “snowball sampling” where a friend would ask another friend to participate in my previous Masters research. I invited the participants to a semi-structured individual interview. Following this interview, I asked them to write journals about a fictional novel (graphic or textual) that they feel helped them address the trauma they experienced because of their gender expression and/or sexuality. I sent the participants their transcripts to be sure that I could move

forward with an analysis and also to see if they approved the content of the interview for analysis. I then analyzed these interviews and journals using psychoanalytic, queer, and integrative feminist theories.

My thesis has six chapters; an introduction, a literature review and a theoretical framework, a methodology chapter, an interview and journal analysis chapter, an analysis of the research based proposed fictional story, an autoethnographic chapter where I analyze my readings of novels in the same way as I did with the participants and then a conclusion chapter. In the next section, I describe my rationale for this project and present the arguments that support undertaking a project of this kind.

### 1.3 Rationale

The rationale for this project was based in three different areas; disempowering research on LGBTQ young people, the unlivable lives non-normatively gendered and sexual students are compelled to live in schools and the possible survival strategies non-normative students could acquire through reading novels. My rationale addresses these three areas individually while elucidating how each aspect is connected to the others. Psychological and sociological researchers such as Proctor & Groze (1994), D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington (2001), and Dysart-Gale (2010) have observed that LGBT youth and adults have higher rates of suicide, depression, homelessness, and drug addiction than their heterosexual counterparts. This particular type of research is helpful in demonstrating the need for anti-oppressive environments. I do see the palpable need for research that demonstrates what non-normatively gendered and sexual youth and adults are experiencing throughout their varied lives. However, queer and trans people are read in these studies as inevitably troubled people and the self-care that queer and

trans people attempt is not described in these studies. In this way, this research actually does a kind of harm to non-normative students and teachers.

## 1.4 Damage Centered Research

Eve Tuck (2009) discusses qualitative research studies about marginalized groups (specifically racialized people) that while seeking to demonstrate the need for social change often end up actually characterizing marginalized groups as irrevocably damaged which then produces “damage-centered research” (p. 409). This kind of research affects the communities about whom it is conducted by obscuring acts of resistance and assigning a perpetual victim role to the people in these studies. Similarly, the research project I am proposing represents a move away from qualitative research focused on documenting the immeasurable harm done to marginalized groups of people. I am arguing that queer and trans people do work to survive an existence that can be overwhelming and unlivable.

### 1.4.1 Unlivable Lives

In order to understand how LGBTQ lives in education have come to be seen as unlivable, I turn to the theories of French philosopher, Michel Foucault. The school is an inherently oppressive institution that does not willingly provide non-normative students with the kind of space to explore the gendered and/or sexual aspects of their selfhood in positive ways. Historically, both children and LGBTQ individuals have been imagined as lesser beings, which must be “made normal”. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977/1995) Foucault describes how the disciplinary mechanisms of the school operated to shape and control the bodies of students (p. 172-173). Students are organized, positioned, and must practice “naturalized” activities throughout their day at school. Students are trained to walk silently in a straight line, to stand and sing the national anthem, to sit at desks for certain periods of time, and

must constantly perform according to the teacher's expectations. There are also gendered and sexual expectations that work to reinforce normative gendered embodiments.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1978/1990) Foucault argued that in the 19th century the act of sodomy became a reflection of interiority, an androgyny of the soul that could then be treated through psychiatric intervention (p. 43). This continues Foucault's previous discussion of the soul in *Discipline and Punish* (1977/1995) because it is the soul that is seen as the target of punishment rather than the body (p. 16). Foucault (1978/1990) also argues that homosexuality speaks itself when activists or individuals proclaim its naturalness to their own self hood (p. 101). This affirmative re-framing within the discourse of sexuality available is an act to make life as a non-normatively gendered and/or sexual person livable. Following Foucault, Tonya Callaghan questioned the ideology of Catholic schooling in her book *That's so Gay! Homophobia in Canadian Catholic Schools* (2007). Callaghan interviewed six teachers who are gay or lesbian about their experiences of homophobia in Catholic schools in Canada. Callaghan draws from the theories of Foucault and merges his thinking about education with the theorizing of Antonio Gramsci.

Callaghan (2007) describes LGBTQ teachers as living “lives of fear (being in the closet), lives of danger (being out), or some combination of both” (p. 61). The suicide of a promising gay male drama student prompted Callaghan to think about how LGBTQ students are positioned similarly within this painful triangle. Indeed the sexually marginalized people in a Catholic, private, and even at a public school will feel like they have more to fear from their peers, colleagues, and/or parents of students than the opposite. The threat of being outed, wounded by homophobic remarks, erased by heterosexism, and gendered in violating ways are some of the punishments meted out to some LGBTQ students and teachers in schools as

Jennings (1994), Khayatt (1992; 1995), Kissen (1996), Killoran and Pendleton Jiménez (2007) have variously argued.

#### 1.4.2 Children in Narratives of Gender

Some LGBTQ people have become subject to what Foucault calls bio power. Foucault (1978/ 1990) defines bio-power as numerous techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations (p. 140). Children in general are another non-normative population that the state has sought to control. In *Tendencies* (1993) Eve Sedgwick writes about how non-normatively gendered boys are pathologized by psychiatrists and subsequently “diagnosed” with the “sissy boy syndrome”. Sedgwick (1993) argues that within dominant heteronormative discourses and the societal institutions which disseminate these discourses there is actually advice on how to raise children to become queer (p. 156). For example, heteronormative discourses about gender and sexuality in children establish a cause and effect relationship between certain behaviors and preferences in children ( i.e. The stereotype that boys who participate in ballet, play with dolls, love musicals, and/ or cry when hurt are going to “grow up to be gay”). Similarly, tomboys who choose not to become stereotypically feminine in hairstyle, attire and activities in late childhood or adolescence are thought to be “prototypical” lesbians.

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999/2013) José Esteban Muñoz expresses his admiration and empathy for children who are racialized or queer and especially children who are racialized and queer when he writes:

I always marvel at the ways in which nonwhite children survive a white supremacist U.S. culture that preys on them. I am equally in awe of the ways in which queer children navigate a homophobic public sphere that would rather they did not exist. The survival of children who are both queerly and racially identified is nothing short of staggering. The obstacles and assaults that pressure and fracture such young lives are as brutally

physical as a police billy club or the fists of a homophobic thug and as insidiously disembodied as homophobic rhetoric in a rap song or the racist underpinnings of Hollywood cinema (p. 37).

Muñoz's heartfelt and deft analysis remains as relevant as ever because LGBTQ youth with their varied ethnicities, disabilities, religious, and class positions continue to face heterosexist, transphobic, and homophobic violence in a variety of contexts, especially at school. White, upper middle class, able-bodied lesbian and gay adult activists have focused on same sex marriage, donating blood, serving in the military, and "rescuing" non-normatively gendered and sexual people in formerly colonized nations. These well-to-do, White lesbian and gay adults have assimilationist goals that ignore the daily acts of oppression LGBTQ youth are subjected to and in doing so they unwittingly support anti-LGBTQ oppression. In *Cruising Utopia* (2009) Muñoz has noted this disturbing trend of politically conservative pragmatism espoused by White, upper middle class lesbian and gay activists (p. 20-21).

Other theorists such as Puar (2006) have made similar critiques of this dominant LGBTQ activism highlighting the racist, colonial, and classist motivations lurking within White, upper middle class LGBTQ activism. The quotidian experiences of LGBTQ youth have of oppression and their ways of resisting are of grave importance especially considering the ongoing suicides of queer and trans youth. I am angry that the suicides of LGBTQ people particularly youth have been reacted to as if this was somehow a "new" or "unheard of" issue. When I was the same age as many of these queer or trans children and adolescents I too was ostracized by my normatively gendered and sexual peers. I received the message from these peers that a short, chubby, high voiced boy like me who loved reading, writing, and drawing would have no future.

I remember thinking I would have to become someone else to have a future. There was no narrative telling me that I was good enough the way I was and that there was some wonderful

place out there where I would be accepted unconditionally. My parents, my brother, and the very few friends I had showed me all their love but this did not mitigate how unacceptable I was to everyone else. At the time, I reminded myself to be aware of how the more overtly gay, bi, and trans people that I knew who were physically attacked on a regular basis. It was in these years that I became haunted by the hatred other people held towards others who they deemed “abnormal” with regard to gender and sexuality. I had hoped that other students were not going to experience what I and other LGBTQ people had been through.

However, LGBT youth helplines, Gay-Straight Alliances, and The Triangle Program are all still much needed networks of support. The queer and trans youth who have recently died by suicide were much more active than I was at their age. They were “out” at school and at home, they were involved in social media projects of their own making such as blogs or YouTube channels, and some were active in gay-straight alliances. They were people who were creating an existential path for themselves in an overt effort to survive. My strategies seem passive by comparison; I tried to survive by being so quiet or uninteresting that I would not be noticed or at least not taunted as often as I had been. But my silence did not really protect me and every time I slipped up in my performance of “bland and boring guy” I was right back to being that “pathetic, ugly faggot”.

Mainstream media coverage of queer and trans youth suicides and social media responses to these deaths including the “It Gets Better Project” ( <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>) led by Dan Savage have reinforced the damaging idea that queer and trans youth who have killed themselves were only victims. This “It Gets Better- so tough it out!” directive message also implied that queer and trans youth who kill themselves are failures in an individualist, neoliberal logic. This message is also cruel in that it tells depressed or suicidal queer and trans youth to accept

psychological and/or physical torture because they might have a “good life” once they leave school.

It is highly problematic to tell queer and trans youth in all their diversity to simply endure these traumatic circumstances and hold out for an idealized existence. In addition to that very problematic message, this particular approach does not address the root causes of LGBTQ students’ oppression and does not offer them survival strategies. When all that is highlighted about the lives of queer and trans youth who have killed themselves is their victimization the depth of their existences is lost. I assert that they deserve to be remembered as complex, creative, and courageous people who were fighting an extreme existential crisis to have a livable life. The queer and trans youth that survive middle school, high school, and university have strategies or tactics that sustain them. In *Hear Me Out: True Stories of Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia* (2004) J.T.S. Berrigan describes how he sustained himself in high school. He lived in Nova Scotia and described his experiences as a male student who is Black and gay. Berrigan’s story (2004) is one that some LGBTQ people of color may find familiar. He explains how his gender and sexuality intersected with his racialization.

I knew how to posture and make fun of the boys who didn't fit in. I did this because the last thing I wanted was to be looked at in a different light...It was enough that there were already questions of whether I was Black enough because my parents were white and I didn't look like the typical Black guy (p.71-72).

Berrigan remained closeted and engaged in the abjection of other non-normative boys in order to redirect attention towards boys who were centred out for their gender presentation and/or sexuality. Berrigan was also the subject of a racialized gaze that created the perception of him as “not Black enough”. To be “not Black enough” with White parents and being openly gay would have been too much for Berrigan to struggle with at that point in his life. However, this did not protect Berrigan from feeling that he did not know who he was anymore, trying very hard



to conceal a part of himself from everyone. Berrigan's existence was not livable without expressing his embodiment of a multifaceted queerness.

Some children never identify themselves as queer but are characterized by their homophobic peers in this way. Carl Walker Hoover was only eleven years old, African-American, and had not yet identified himself under any sexuality category but was relentlessly tormented by homophobic assaults at school. Carl eventually admitted to his mother, Sirdeaner L. Walker that boys at his school were calling him gay, “faggot”, and said that he behaved “like a girl.” Carl was being read as a proto-gay Black man by his heterosexist and homophobic peers who like everyone else had no idea how Carl actually thought about his own subjectivity. His mother found Carl had hung himself one evening in 2009. Susan Donaldson James (2009) reported that Sirdeaner L. Walker had this to say about what she and Carl faced each day: “I have been homeless, but Carl and I made it through. I was a victim of domestic violence, and we made it through. The one thing we couldn't get through was public school” (Bullies Render Kids Helpless section, para.12).

Children are policed in terms of their gender and sexuality by their peers just as much as the adults and hegemonic ideologies in their lives. In *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009) Kathryn Bond-Stockton argues that children are always already queer for a variety of reasons which she observes become apparent within an analysis of developmental theories, racialization, sexuality, and socio-economic class (p. 13). She uses several examples from literature, film, and recent news to illustrate her points about how dominant discourses construct the child as queer. Bond-Stockton (2009) argues further that children are defined by what they cannot be and cannot do; they are in a state of delay, a delay that they are urged to labor through in order to become more and more like an adult (p. 6).

Following Sedgwick (1993) and Muñoz (1999), Bond-Stockton (2009) also observes that queer adults comment on “finding themselves” in popular cultural texts which were not meant to have any identification possibilities for them when they were children (p. 1). These anecdotes provides some evidence that queer children are “reading into” narratives and characters for some validation of their gender and/or sexual subjectivities.

These readings become evident as such in the memories of these adults understanding their child selves more deeply in retrospective. A retrospective is an important way of understanding trauma, how you may have addressed that trauma then, and what it means for your subjectivity in the present moment while you also look to the future. The present moment is awash with trauma from the past and how we think it will affect our future. This looking backward and then forward comes to the fore in one way when we identify with and interpret texts. Queer and trans readers are in a position where they are not necessarily identifying with and interpreting texts in a “straight” or linear way. Queer children may do this in very noticeable ways from the perspectives of heteronormative adults. Bond-Stockton (2009) argues that children, especially queer children grow sideways rather than growing up in some linear fashion, which renders them incoherent to adults (p. 6). Bond-Stockton’s thinking about children as “queer beings” is congruent with Judith Butler’s (2004) thinking about how citizens in a state are imagined and what their lives mean to a state. One of these normative ideas about a citizen is that their body is clearly one sex or another (i.e. female or male).

In *Undoing Gender* (2004) Butler asks questions about whether trans and intersex people will ever be regarded as fully human. In the chapter entitled “Un-Diagnosing Gender” Butler analyzes the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder in youth and adults who seek to transition from the sex of their birth to another sex (i.e. female to male, male to female). Butler asks if the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders will ever have any considerations within it for the unlivable conditions trans people are forced to endure in order to come closer to a desired sexed embodiment. Butler (2004) discusses the brutal murder of Gwen Araujo, a young trans woman who was killed because, the straight men who were in sexual relationships with her discovered she had male genitalia (p. 99). Butler also discusses the case of David Reimer, who was given sex reassignment surgery as an infant boy due to a botched circumcision. David was then raised as Brenda with his twin brother, Brian. The premise motivating this move was that David could easily be socialized to understand himself as female.

However, throughout their childhood they were observed and psychologically abused by the doctors who used them as proof that gender was a matter of environment not nature. Brenda rebelled and became David once more, transitioning back to the male he always understood himself to be. David and Brian were both harmed irrevocably by what these doctors had done to them. An already horrifying situation became even worse when, several years later, Brian overdosed on anti-depressants. David also killed himself a few years after his brother's death. Butler understands David's situation as a point in which the knowledge production about gender/sex/sexuality cannot adequately address what had happened to him: "He is the anonymous-and-critical condition of the human as it speaks itself at the limits of what we think we know" (Butler, 2004, p. 75).

This also has implications for intersex people whose bodies are routinely deemed unlivable and then altered to be recognizable as distinctly female or male. Under such conditions part of the struggle for freedom would involve making meaning of a life deemed meaningless unless it is intelligible within a hegemonic framework. Butler (2004) argues that non-normatively gendered, sexed, and sexual persons are continually compelled to situate themselves

within heteronormative narratives of gender/sex/sexuality in order to have a life that could be regarded as livable. Bodies are situated within particular heteronormative narratives based on their anatomical appearances. Butler's thinking leaves queer and trans people on a continuum with end points of severely diminished autonomy on one side and almost no autonomy at all on the other side. I am also in agreement with Mari Ruti's (2006) criticism that Butler's thinking shuts down the ability of the subject to express autonomy through forms of dependence particularly with regard to networks of support (p. 68).

For these reasons I knew I had to look to other post-structural feminist theorists for thinking that was much more generative and reflective of what the participants did with regard to their literacies. I observed hopeful and creative tendencies in the ways that the queer and trans research participants made sense of their relationships to literacies and novels specifically. The queer and trans participants in this study read their own bodies in opposition to normative stories about who they are or who they could be. Muñoz's (1999) dis-identification is a way of theorizing this process of re-working meaning from hegemonic narratives which I discuss further in my theoretical framework. In the next section of this introduction I will define the key terms for this project and indicate how I use these terms throughout the thesis.

## 1.5 Defining Key Terms and Summary

### 1.5.1 Subjects and Subjectivities

Here I define key terms that I use in this thesis that I explore in more detail in my literature review. The key theoretical terms I use throughout this thesis are subject position, subjectivity, identification, and bibliotherapy. I turn to Kelly Oliver (2004) because her definition and use of the terms subject, subject position, and subjectivity aligns with my use of

those terms in this project. In *Witnessing and Testimony* (2004) Oliver describes subjectivity and subject positions in this way:

By subjectivity I mean one's sense of oneself as an 'I', as an agent. By subject position I mean one's position in society and history as developed through various social relationships. The structure of subjectivity is the structure that makes taking oneself as an agent or a self possible. The structure of subjectivity is what I am calling a witnessing structure that is founded on the possibility of address and response; it is a fundamentally dialogic structure. Subject position, on the other hand, is not the very possibility of one's sense of oneself as an agent or an 'I' per se, but the particular sense of one's kind of agency, so to speak, that comes through one's social position and historical context. While distinct, subject position and subjectivity are also intimately related. For example, if you are a black woman within a racist and sexist culture, then your subject position as oppressed could undermine your subjectivity, your sense of yourself as an agent. If you are a white man within a racist and sexist culture, then your subject position as privileged could shore up your subjectivity and promote your sense of yourself as an agent (p. 82).

Oliver's definitions of subjectivity and subject position work for this thesis because they are much more accurate with reference to what I discuss than terms like "identity". The term identity is complicated by post-structural understandings of social/political categories such as lesbian, gay or trans which do not regard these categories as fixed but changeable because these self-identifications and spaces for selfhood within discourses are being socially constructed on a continuous basis. An understanding of the self as trans, lesbian, or gay changes over time and there is flexibility within these categories for some people at the same time they are important to political struggles because from these terms oppressions can be named and confronted.

I do not regard gender and sexual subjectivities as simple or biologically essential categories as some researchers such as D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington (2001), Dysart-Gale (2010), Jennings (1994), Kissen (1996), Proctor & Groze (1994), and Taylor & Peter (2009) have implied. Gayle Rubin writes about the political problems generated by strategic claims about queer and trans subjectivities and subject positions in *The Transgender Studies*

*Reader* (2006) an essay entitled “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch Gender and Boundaries”:

Our categories are important. We cannot organize a social life, a political movement, or our individual identities and desires without them. The fact that categories invariably leak and can never contain all the relevant "existing things" does not render them useless, only limited. Categories like “woman,” “butch,” “lesbian,” or “transsexual” are all imperfect, historical, temporary, and arbitrary. We use them, and they use us. We use them to construct meaningful lives, and they mold us into historically specific forms of personhood. Instead of fighting for immaculate classifications and impenetrable boundaries, let us strive to maintain a community that understands diversity as a gift, sees anomalies as precious, and treats all basic principles with a hefty dose of skepticism (p. 479).

All I have to add to Rubin’s excellent summation here is that any identity category is best understood as a series of identifications. Identifications are complicated and often messy ways of forming a personhood as Rubin argues because we are affected by varied experiences in terms of our social, political, and economic contexts that effect how we come to embody our subjectivities and subject positions. Those contexts will influence what we read, why we read (if we read), and how we read it. I define and explain identifications next.

## 1.6 Identifications

Identification is a central concept to this thesis project because I argue that our engagements with texts specifically novels are based within identifications. Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) define identification as :

A psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified (p. 205).

I turn to Sigmund Freud’s model of the psyche to elaborate on how identification works. The psyche includes the ego, the id and the super ego. The ego works to please both the super ego which represents a higher moralizing power such as our parents or a grand deity and the id

which represents the passions in an unruly state ( Freud, 1925/1984, p. 22). Freud theorized a child's ego must work through the unacceptable desires to take one parent as a loved object and murder the other parent who is seen as a rival for the loved object's affections. To Freud the successful dissolution of this conflict (the Oedipus complex) means that the ego obeys the super ego's prohibitions against incest and murder while satisfying the id by finding a socially acceptable substitute for the love object. The child identifies with the same sex parent and pursues a socially appropriate differently sexed person. In my view Freud's concept may be a plausible theory of White European heterosexual masculinity but his theories about the sexualities of queer and trans people have never been convincing to me. Identifications that deviate from the Oedipal model are far more interesting to me in this project. Indeed the participants had identifications that questioned this model but did not discredit how the process itself works as it was described by Laplanche and Pontalis.

Queer and trans people are noticed as such when they identify with the "incorrect" subject position which can span across several social differences (i.e. White gay male identifying with a non-White straight female and subsequently fashioning a subjectivity based on aspects of her non-White heterosexual female subjectivity). The assumed "correct" subjectivity for a White male is the unremarked able-bodied, masculine appearing and acting heterosexual male seeking a socially acceptable heterosexual female as a substitute for the redirected love of the mother.

Queer and trans people either throw these expected identifications aside completely or alter them so that these identifications appear to match the Oedipal model on one level but queer the model obviously on another level. Another example of this could be the non-White trans woman who self-identifies as straight but identified with masculine women not feminine women

as she came to an understanding of her own subjectivity. However, Freud's thinking about the psyche and identifications with texts remain useful for this project considering what he has to say about how memory and trauma works. Muñoz (1999) following Sedgwick (1990; 1993) takes up psychoanalytic theory to explore how the marginal of the marginal specifically queers of color may end up disidentifying rather than identifying with dominant cultures because they are so powerfully excluding. Muñoz (1999) also draws from the theories of French linguist, Michel Pêcheux who conceived of disidentification as the actions of a subject "working on and working against" dominant ideology rather than assimilating the self to dominant ideology or vigorously rejecting dominant ideology (p. 11). Disidentification as Muñoz (1999) deploys it is not unlike the work of the bricoluer/ bricoleuse who takes what is readily available and makes something they can use to empower themselves out of it: "Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning" (p. 31).

Muñoz (1999) describes disidentification as a process involving several elements: assimilation, utopian-ism, and working within (p. 11). Assimilation involves identifying with the dominant culture, which is followed by utopianism which is a counter identification against dominant culture, and finally working within and against these dominant ideologies. Identifications in this thesis are embodied assemblages of racializations, gender expressions, sexualities, abilities/disabilities, and understandings of socio-economic class that are constructed consciously and unconsciously.

Following Muñoz, other recent scholarship in the area of critical curriculum studies in education such as Mac a Ghail (1994 ) and Sykes (2001; 2004; 2009; 2011) has also reconsidered psychoanalytic theory and integrated it with post-structuralist feminism and critical race theory. Fuss (1995) and Sedgwick (1993; 1997) both reconsider psychoanalytic insights



with a queer feminist and critical race perspectives to analyze novels and films. Rob Simon (2011) and the New London Group's (1996) writings and research highlights why identifications are spread out across different mediums and different forms of communication. These mediums and the uses of language are connected to trauma and memory. Queer and trans students use a variety of mediums to communicate and form identifications. The various mediums and narratives they use could take the form of daily oral communications, digital creations, or graphic novels/comic books. I will return to this in my review of literature. Trauma, memory, identification and reading are also important parts of the process of bibliotherapy.

## 1.7 Bibliotherapy

Fran Lehr (1981) provides a comprehensive overview of bibliotherapy and offers a definition of this particular form of creative psychotherapy. Lehr's (1981) straightforward definition of bibliotherapy is : "...the use of books to help people solve problems" (p.76). According to Carol F. Berns (2003) bibliotherapy is helpful in three primary ways: identification, catharsis, and insight (p. 325). Berns used bibliotherapy as clinical method in her practice to help bereaved children work through their trauma. Berns states that through identification, the child comes to identify with a book's characters and events. Catharsis is brought about when the child becomes emotionally involved in the story and is able to release pent-up emotions within a safe environment. For Berns, children in therapy gain insight when they become aware of how their problems might be addressed by identifying possible solutions for both the book's characters and for their own issues. According to Berns (2003) bibliotherapy operates through a series of phases:

The process through which bibliotherapy leads to healing is quite simple, yet profound. By sharing the experiences and feelings of another individual as they are expressed in a story, we gain a better understanding of those feelings. The door is opened for insight, clarity, understanding, and a sense of camaraderie. A story shared provides a link

between us, a sense of unity, as well as a common frame of reference. Each story calls forth other memories, thoughts, and connections from past to present, and sometimes on into the future (p. 364).

My caution about bibliotherapy is that it has a place in clinical psychology, a discipline that claims to know clear binaries between health/illness and that some such psychologists such as Berns (2003) believe it to be a curative method. I see this as a problematic assertion because it assumes a simplistic and deliberate “cause and effect” relationship between choosing to read and alleviating trauma.

The participants did not set out to do anything therapeutic consciously with every book we discussed in the interviews and that was written about in the journals. Instead I observed that a kind of bibliotherapy came through as a retrospective way of understanding what they were doing when they chose to read certain books which I discuss further in the analysis chapter. I also want to establish that reading novels for the participants did not represent a “cure” for trauma and I would not argue that this was what the participants’ experienced either. I see their experiences as they described them as being healing and reparative. Any healing the participants experienced retroactively from their novel reading experience was not a “cure” nor was that their conscious goal for reading the texts. Queer and trans students are imagined in media and in school contexts as an inherently pathological group in need of a “cure”. Queer and trans youth are also unwittingly characterized this way in qualitative research that purports to help them as in the psychological literature that I discussed. The work of D'Augelli, et al, (2001), Proctor & Groze (1994), and Taylor & Peter (2009) unwittingly characterizes LGBTQ people as a debilitated or “high risk” group of students. Critical disability scholars Robert McRuer (2006) and Nirmala Erevelles (2012) have both observed the ways in which queerness and disability are integrated because to be queer or trans in a school is to be considered pathological or potentially pathological by peers, teachers, and the curriculum.

In my introduction I have outlined my rationale, described my areas of focus in this research project, and explained the key terms and concepts I use in this project. In the next chapter of this thesis, I review the literature most relevant to this project. Following this, in my theoretical framework I indicate where my project fits within curriculum studies by discussing the other research projects that I was influenced by and that I am extending in a unique way. And following this I describe my research methodology in the methodology chapter. I will also discuss why it is the best choice for this project, describe my methodological framework, and indicate my methods connections to trauma and self-care.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Curriculum Studies

I review the relevant theoretical literature in the first part of this chapter. Following my literature review I discuss where my project fits within curriculum studies. Curriculum studies represents a philosophical rethinking of education as it had been understood in North America and Europe in the 20th century. Scholars in the field of curriculum studies including Britzman (1991; 1995; 1998), Bruner (1962; 1977; 1990), Ellsworth (1989; 1997), Freire (1970), Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), Pinar (1988), and Willis (1980) have asked some of the following questions: “What is learning and education?”, “What is knowledge and how is it produced?” “Who is the teacher? “, “Who is the student?”, “What is expected of these social actors within the school?” “What is to be studied? And why?” Scholars and activists in curriculum studies asked these questions because there was an assumption that these questions had simple answers and the education system as it was knew what students needed to know and who they should be upon finishing their studies. Typically, in North America this meant the teacher had all the knowledge in their mind, students were blank slates waiting to be filled, and that learning could be observed and assessed through particular tasks such as tests.

The work of Paulo Freire is the most relevant, critical starting point in curriculum studies for this particular, proposed project. Paulo Freire's foundational work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) brought Marxist and phenomenological conceptions into educational theory in an explicit and provocative way. Freire acknowledges the psychological dimensions of learning for those who are told they are unimportant within a society in various ways whether it is through silencing, erasure, or overt exclusion. Freire argues that the relationship between teacher and student is highly problematic because of the way power and knowledge are linked and

performed within education. Greene (1971) and Huebner (1967) in particular were concerned with how curriculum can be part of a consciousness raising project for students which considers existential questions beyond the pragmatic focus of a curriculum. Following Freire (1970) there was a movement to re-conceptualize the curriculum in the 1960's and 1970's in North America. Critical pedagogy emerged from the collective efforts of educators who recognized the school system and its texts were either not addressing social realities or directly reinforcing a wide variety of social inequalities. The participants of my research study did not encounter or were not able to access novels that addressed their social realities as LGBTQ people until after they came out. The participants had to search for queerness in the normative novels that were available to them at the time. Psychoanalytic feminism in curriculum studies asks questions about the motivations behind such pursuits.

## 2.2 Critical Psychoanalytic Feminism in Curriculum Studies

The psychoanalytic feminist work done in curriculum studies by Britzman (1991; 1995a; 1995b; 1998), Brushwood-Rose (2002; 2006a; 2006b; 2011), Felman (1987), Gilbert (2004; 2007; 2010), Granger (2011), Penley (1989), and Pitt (2003; 2007) explores the narratives of education and how they are fraught with conflict stemming from unconscious conflicts surrounding affects and desires. I turn primarily to the work of Deborah Britzman first as her thinking has some of the most relevant insights for this particular project.

Schools create this narrative of life as part of the one way to be “normal”. Knowledge is something one consumes but does not have conflict with, especially knowledge of the self. However, Britzman (1995a) taking her cue from Sigmund Freud argues this is a failed project from its inception because it is more thoughtful to work with a queer pedagogy that: “worries about and unsettles normalcy's immanent exclusions” (p. 80). A queer pedagogy asks about

what is being hidden, what motivates reading practices and what are the implications of these reading practices?

Britzman (1995a) points that inclusion in the curriculum does not necessarily translate into acceptance and/or empathy towards the excluded Others (p. 87). Indeed if the notion of tolerance is what foregrounds the “tolerant” inclusion of LGBTQI, racialized, disabled, poor, and/or fat people in the curriculum then intolerance is always already part of this inclusion. The students who see themselves as “normal” compared to any of these marginalized groups will still see themselves as “normal” within a dominant hierarchy because marginalized people are still seen as the abnormal. The same normative thinking never considers that a student’s subject position might be LGBTQI, racialized, and poor. A queer pedagogy would question the whole notion of normal and subject it to a vigorous critique. Students would be confronted with their complicity and possibly feel implicated rather than confident in their sense of being normal and therefore the best type of person. The participants were searching for non-normative characters and experiences in their choices of novels. The way they interpreted these novels indicated that they sought to interpret a novel’s thematic meaning beyond authorial intent. This method is a creative way of defying and ignoring limits imposed in normative methods of studying literature. A non-normative method that may be seen as one way queer theory could operate in the study of literature.

### 2.3 Queer Theory in Education

Queer pedagogy emerged as a way of bringing queer theory to educational theories and practices. Bryson and de Castell (1993) first coined the term and reflect upon the frustrating difficulty of trying to resist essentializing of identities especially lesbian identities in the context of a classroom where white heterosexuality continually reasserted its own power. Britzman

(1995a) theorized that a queer pedagogy is the study of limits, reading practices, and of ignorance. Kumashiro (2000; 2002) continues Britzman's psychoanalytic and queer interventions with a critical race perspective, an autobiographical section, and qualitative interviews with non-white queers. I see three main points in Kumashiro's work: working through the ambivalence of subjectivity and identifications for the self and others, acknowledging and investigating the shifting relations of power in the social within education more specifically, and pointing out that queerphobia and heterosexism are just as important as racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. Kumashiro's own narratives as well as the people he interviews offer compelling evidence that it would be very limiting if not highly problematic to focus solely on one or two categories of discrimination. Kumashiro interviews several different people about their experiences of racialization, sexuality, class, and gender. The insights of his work merge the problems of identities with the problems of knowledge production within the classroom.

In William Pinar's *Queer Theory in Education* (1998) Susanna Luhmann argues that queer pedagogy should not just be about replacing bad representations of queers with good ones but exploring how the student relates to a text and the teacher's relation to it as well. Airton (2009) argues for a rethinking of gender as a concept and the ways in which it has become the "how" of teaching which has clear implications for the curriculum and its constructions of students and teachers. Queer theorists in education such as Kumashiro (2000; 2002), McWilliam (1999), Pinar (1998), and Sykes (2001; 2004; 2009; 2011) are concerned with narrative and the curriculum because heterosexism and queer phobias inform knowledge production and subjectivities within schools. Queer and trans characters were not studied by the participants in their formal education until they became university students when they had the opportunity to study such characters and literature. Psychoanalysis and feminism are both interested in what is

hidden or marginalized. In this next section, I discuss why psychoanalytic feminism is part of my theoretical framework.

## 2.4 Psychoanalytic Feminism

I explain in this section why psychoanalytic feminism was necessary for this project. Two psychoanalytic feminist thinkers, H el ene Cixous (1975; 1990; 1993) and Julia Kristeva (1982; 1991) have both argued for the importance of writing because of the ways it can help us re-imagine gender/sex/sexuality and/or represent messages from the unconscious. The work of psychoanalytic feminists has challenged the sexism and homophobia of psychoanalysis but also opened new space for thinking about gender identities, sexed embodiment, psychological development, and the unconscious. Cixous and Kristeva were important to this project in particular because of their thinking about subjectivity and writing. Cixous (1990) argues that we should write as we dream which is to say that we are doing something powerfully human when trying to represent the unconscious in words (p. 22). In *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (1993) Cixous also theorizes reading and writing as two processes that are intrinsically linked. Cixous states that the writer and reader are in an imagined conversation as a book is being written because the writer is imagining the reader to be a specific persons or group of people. Cixous (1993) elaborates further on this line of thought by stating:

Reading is escaping in broad daylight the rejection of the other most of the time it's a solitary act, exactly like writing. We don't always think of this because we no longer read, we used to read when we were children and knew how violent reading can be... writing and reading are not separate, reading is a part of writing...reading is also clandestine...a furtive act we don't acknowledge it. Reading is not as insignificant as we claim. First we must steal the key to the library. Reading is provocation, a rebellion; we open the book's door, pretending it is a simple paperback cover, and in broad daylight escape! We are no longer there; this is what real reading is. If we haven't left the room, if we haven't gone over the wall, we are not reading. If we're only making believe we are there, if we're pretending before the eyes of the family then we are eating. Reading is eating on the sly. Reading is eating the forbidden fruit, making forbidden love, changing



eras, changing families, changing destinies, and changing day for night. Reading is doing everything exactly as we want and on the sly (p. 19-22).

Reading for pleasure then is an escape but more than escapism, Cixous characterizes it as a potentially subversive disruption of normative expectations. Kristeva's (1982) concept of the abject is also important in this regard because it is defined as that which disrupts, is in between, or is ambiguous in a way that is horrifying (p. 3). Non-normative students and teachers are regarded as abject in the heteronormative imagination because they disrupt gender and sexual normativity and expose the ambiguities that heteronormative thinking refuses to consider.

Kristeva (1989) also sees the melancholic person as someone who has the potential to be highly creative, a creativity that is inspired by loss (p. 6). When we leave the pre-linguistic state of wholeness by learning language and separate ourselves from a mother we have experienced a great loss. For Kristeva it is these unconscious losses that inspire us to use language in ways that try to both reveal and work through this conflict of existence.

Cixous and Kristeva offer critically complex ways of thinking about gender, sexuality, reading, and writing that are a vital part of this research project. These theorists perspectives were useful for analyzing the theme of fantasy in the qualitative data and also helped me think about the ways that I could represent the theme of fantasy in the fictional writing. The participants spoke of their relationships to queer texts and their own sexuality in ways that indicated trauma was part of these relationships. I discuss this further in chapter four in the section where I explore the themes of the "Fantasy Genre" and "Identifications" Psychoanalysis is also important to this project because of the ways Freud and his successors have theorized trauma.

## 2.5 Conceptualizing Trauma

The creation of trauma theory has given researchers new ways of thinking about the concept of trauma. In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead (2004) describes the emergence of trauma theory and focuses mainly on two researchers, namely Cathy Caruth (1995; 1996) and Shoshanna Felman (1992) have contributed to more sophisticated understandings of trauma. Caruth (1995) defines trauma as a disturbing experience for an individual who is possessed by an image or event (p. 4-5). Both Caruth and Felman turn to psychoanalysis for an understanding of trauma that is not entirely tied to medical discourse. Caruth (1996) states:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet (p. 3).

Caruth's thinking was useful for this project because she argues for an understanding of trauma that is literary, within and outside of what we can narrate. This theorizing allows for an unconscious aspect of a personal narrative and for a non-linear narrative that can move throughout time and space. Caruth's theory of trauma and its detailing of the intersections between psychoanalysis and literature is also a reflection of the importance of fictional novels to understanding trauma. For Felman, trauma is intimately tied to testimony and witnessing. Felman uses the example of when she was teaching a course and she showed a video of two Holocaust survivors' testimonies to her class. The woman and the man testifying had witnessed the deaths of relatives and friends. Felman (1992) realized throughout her time with the class that it was also traumatic for her students to witness the survivors detail their traumatic experiences (p. 52). In *Trauma Fiction* (2004), Anne Whitehead goes on further to explore trauma theory and its effect on fictional novels that deal with historical atrocities. Whitehead (2004) argues that writing and reading novels such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz*

(1992) raises awareness of the psychological impact of trauma due to oppressive societal structures (p. 3). She argues that trauma theory has left its mark on fictional novels and that the novels she analyzes replicate the symptoms of trauma within their form as well as content (Whitehead, 2004, p. 161). Trauma theory especially its relationship to novels informs this project because I tried to extend the insights and creative work of both fiction writers and trauma theorists. Whitehead's theorizing about the relationship between fiction and trauma was part of what inspired me to think creatively about the participants' narratives in both the analysis of their qualitative data and the creation of a proposed fictional story. Other trauma theorists move towards a stance that is closer to the thinking of anti-psychiatry movements.

## 2.6 Living Beside Trauma

Tanya Lewis (1999) has crafted a trauma theory that argues for a different kind of agency than what is typically imagined for victims of trauma in traditional medical models. Lewis theorizes "living beside trauma" in opposition to medicalizing models of trauma survival that pathologize female victims of sexual abuse, rather than pathologizing a society where sexual abuse within a family can take place with tacit approval. Lewis (1999) takes issue with medical discourses that characterize trauma as an experience you "recover" from on a path to health from one of disordered illness (p. 11). She also states that the trauma she experiences daily due to sexual abuse must be honored (Lewis, 1999, p. 120). Lewis's thinking was useful for this project because I do not think experiencing trauma related to gendered and sexual oppression is a mental illness nor is it an experience that can *only* be addressed by using anti-depressant drugs or by seeing a psychotherapist for counseling privately. While some LGBTQ individuals may think these approaches are sensible neither solution resists the idea of trauma as a psychic wound that must be dealt with individually within a binary of illness or health. The quotidian experiences of trauma due to an inequitable and oppressive society are submerged by such thinking. This is one

example of the integration of queer and disability issues where a proper LGBTQ subject is expected to become psychologically “able” to fit the “compulsory able-bodied” norm McRuer (2006) reveals and interrogates. For the participants reading fictional novels when faced with trauma related to gendered and sexual oppression was one way of “living beside” trauma as Lewis has described in her work.

### 2.6.1 Psychoanalytic and Post-Structural Literary Theories

To be able to tell your story, to narrate your existence, one must use language which as Bronwyn Davies (1989) points out serves as both a resource and a constraint, because one can only use the discourses available to them (p. 1). Reading, writing, and speaking are human ways of engaging with language that allow us to communicate and bring our experiences into some kind of coherence. In *The Death of The Author* (1977) Roland Barthes argued that the reader is more important than the author because once a text is read it will be interpreted differently from the author’s intent and the possibilities of these interpretations create a space for the readers to exercise agency in relation to a text. In effect, the death of the author brings about the birth of the reader (Barthes, 1977, p. 142). Barthes also theorized that readers take an erotic pleasure from reading in *The Pleasures of The Text* (1974) through both readerly texts, in which the reader passively consumes narratives, and writerly texts, in which the reader can shift to the position of the writer through actively reading an open ended, highly interpretive book, rather than just consuming it (p. 14). Barthes argues these two types of text offer different kinds of pleasure for readers. Writerly texts require the reader to work to interpret and are often non-linear and prompt creative thinking from a reader. Reader response theory is literary criticism that focuses on the reader and the audience generally of literatures. Jane Tompkins (1980) gathers the perspectives of reader response theorists such as Jonathan Culler, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, and Gerald Prince among others to reflect the range of issues within this theory

of readers. Tompkins (1980) summarizes reader response theory as arguing that the reader will respond to texts in an active manner and the text cannot be analyzed apart from the effects it has on the readers (p. ix).

In *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Lois Tyson (2006) argues that reader response theorists have different approaches to theorizing about readers and their relationships to texts (p. 172). Tyson (2006) outlines each approach: Transactional, Subjective, Psychological, Affective Stylistics, and Social. Transactional reader-response theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt argue that there is a transaction between the manifest content of a text and the reader's personal feelings, there has to be an aesthetic connection for this transaction to occur (p. 173). Otherwise readers are only reading for information or ideas not a personalized connection according to these theorists. Subjective reader response theorists such as David Bleich argue that the readers written responses to what they have read are the texts not the physical book. This re-symbolization of the book is specific to the mind of the reader because the text only becomes meaningful to the reader this way. The written responses of readers are analyzed for consistency by these theorists.

Psychological reader response theorists analyze the motives of the reader because these theorists such as Norman Holland argue that the inner conflicts and desires of the reader influence how they engage with an "objective" text (Tyson, 2006, p. 183). Stanley Fish, the leading proponent of Affective Stylistics argues that a text only comes into existence through the reader; the text has no fixed meaning independent of the reader. Reading a text is an event that occurs moment by moment rather than reading a text in its entirety and then interpreting it (Tyson, 2006, p. 176). Tyson (2006) describes the method affective stylistic theorists' use as interpreting the structure of a text word by word or phrase by phrase to see how it leads the

reader to think as they read rather than after they have read (p. 177). Fish later argued that readers are influenced by the interpretive communities they belong to and therefore there are no individual subjective responses to a text and this premise is the basis for social reader response theory (p. 185). The strategies of a particular interpretive community will affect how the readers of that interpretive community will interpret the text as it is read.

Reader response theorists are divided by what they think about readers and texts but they do agree that the reader and their relationship to a text is complex rather than necessarily linear or simple. Reader response theorists are predominantly White, heterosexual, able-bodied, upper middle class men of European descent. As a result this school of theory can be universalizing, Eurocentric, racist, sexist, heterosexist, and ableist. Feminist and queer literary theorists such as Cixous (1975; 1990; 1991;1993), Hocquenghem (1978/1993), Sedgwick (1990;1993;1997), Castiglia (1990), McDowell (1995), and Spillers (2003) take a corrective stance by focusing explicitly on women in all their diversity, LGBTQ people, and/or queerness. My own project is informed by integrative feminisms and queer theory both of which enable me to draw useful insights from other theories, specifically literary theory and bring these theories into conversation with queer, integrative feminisms. One of the most useful insights about reader response for this project came from Wolfgang Iser. Iser (1997), like Stanley Fish and Louise Rosenblatt is one of the most prolific reader response theorists and he argues that: “Literature reveals that we are the possibilities of ourselves.” For the participants the novels they read represented possibilities for themselves. By thinking retrospectively about a novel they could see why it was important to them at a certain point in their lives and what meaning they took from these texts. Reader response theory was being developed alongside other theories of reading.

Concurrently, in *Of Grammatology* (1976), Jacques Derrida provided readers with a challenging way of thinking about reading. Since Derrida conceived of deconstruction readers would need to “read” a text at more than its face value. Reading was no longer a straightforward activity of consuming information and interpreting it in limited ways. Instead, we can read “against the grain” or read critically to see hidden and/or multiple meanings within a text. But Derrida emphasizes that we are always reading a text within the contexts we, the readers are situated in. The research participants did some reading “against the grain” of the novels they discussed with me. Reading was not simply about entertainment or gathering information, a new theory of reading was developed by critical pedagogues and was influenced by Derrida’s thinking about texts.

## 2.7 Critical Literacy: Reading and Writing

Ira Shor defines critical literacy in his essay “What is Critical Literacy?” (1999):

Essentially, then, critical literacy is language use that questions the social construction of the self. When we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it. All of us grow up and live in local cultures set in global contexts where multiple discourses shape us. Neighborhood life and schooling are two formidable sites where the local and the global converge (p. 2).

Shor argues that critically literate people are aware of the privileges and oppressions within their specific social, historical, and psychological contexts. Critical literacy exercises that analyze texts ask particular questions aimed at drawing connections between knowledge, power, and subject positions. Critically literate questions could be: Who benefits from the story being told from this point of view? What knowledge is being generated or reiterated through this story and its characters? Who is the author and why did they choose to tell the story this way and in this form?

Critical literacy projects in a classroom involve a kind of intervention into dominant understandings of historical events. Critical literacy is generally not focused specifically on LGBTQ people so I turn to the examples of this theory and practice that are the most relevant to this project. One excellent example is in Laraine Wallowitz's *Critical Literacy as Resistance: Teaching for Social Justice Across the Secondary Curriculum* (2008). In this anthology, Rachel Mattson (2008) describes an anti-homophobia critical literacy project which involved investigating the life of Bayard Rustin who was African-American gay civil rights activist who was subjected to racism and homophobia throughout his life (p. 93). Mattson (2008) offers this lesson on Rustin in opposition to a GLSEN lesson about "highjack this fags!" being written on a bomb dropped by American soldiers in Afghanistan in 2003. The GLSEN lesson takes up this event only as an example of homophobia in American society. Mattson (2008) asks why there is no critique of masculinities in the military, war, and the mission in Afghanistan itself (p. 91). I am in agreement with Mattson's assessment as GLSEN's critique is the sort that only objects to overt homophobia and makes no comment about the integrated structures of oppression. Other critical literacy projects challenge students to learn a more sophisticated form of critique and then create a representation that has a critique of society within it.

In *Shards of Glass* (1993) Bronwyn Davies conducted a critical literacy research project in which she taught a group of Australian middle school aged children what discourses of gender/sex/sexuality were and then asked the children to read stories critically. Following this analysis, they wrote stories of their own that challenged these dominant discourses of gender/sex/sexuality. For Davies (1993) reading and writing represent a way to negotiate subjectivity and subject positions within discourses (p. 174). The writing enabled Davies and the children to imagine their lives and their worlds in alternative ways. Reading in a deconstructive



manner created space to refashion the self against dominant discourses and to see the multiple selves one creates within narratives.

Rishma Dunlop has argued in her dissertation, *Boundary Bay* (1999) which is also a novel, that reading and writing are creative political activities that allow her as a feminist to transgress, cross boundaries, blur genres, and challenge standardized paradigms of knowledge. Dunlop, like Davies and Derrida, sees language as having a certain potential for multiple and deep meanings if deployed in critically aware narratives. Dunlop's *Boundary Bay* (1999) is a moving, insightful novel both as a work of literature and as a creative analytic practice. I cared about the characters in this story, identified with strongly some of them, Jordan, a despondent gay male student and Grace, a young contract teacher. Dunlop's work represents a powerful questioning of the dissertation form by inviting reader identification, exploring negative interpersonal affects, and featuring teacher and student perspectives. Her novel also works as evidence that a novelist can be a researcher, and can ask questions and think through arguments in the form of a fictional story. Douglas Gosse author of *jackytar* (2005) and Jason Lukasik's *The Zoo Curriculum escaping colonial cages and going wild with imagination* (2010) dissertations employed similar methods to Dunlop's approach in that they challenge academic knowledge production and do so through a critical, creative representation of their research.

In *Read For Your Life: Literature as a Life Support System* (2001) Joseph Gold argues for reading in a somewhat different way than Dunlop, Davies, Gosse, Lukasik, Mattson, or Shor. Gold (2001) is similar to these thinkers in that he argues that there is a direct link between what you feel about stories and what you feel about everything else, especially what you feel about yourself (p. 3). Gold's argument differs most significantly from Davies and Dunlop in that he sees reading as an embodied experience that has a powerful effect on our physicality. His line of

thinking leads him to argue that reading is a biological necessity in the way that one considers eating and sleeping to be necessities of life. Gold (2001) summarizes this perspective with the following statement:

If you read a story that really involves you, your body will tell you that you are living through the experience. You will recognize feelings that have physical signs - increased heart rate, sweaty palms, or calm, relaxed breathing and so on, depending on your mood. These effects are the same you would feel in similar real-life experiences - fear, anger, interest, joy, shame or sadness. Amazingly, you can actually 'live' experience without moving anything but your eyes across a page (p. 30).

Some thinkers may argue that this explanation of why reading is important risks links with the highly problematic fields of evolutionary psychology and evolutionary biology. Also Gold's observation is very specific to Western culture; other cultures may not have texts like novels or short stories. I am critical of these normativities within these aspects of Gold's thinking and that his work is explicitly situated in the dubious genre of "self-help" books. However, Gold's thinking emphasizes bodily experiences in ways that I find useful because as Connell (1995), Prosser (1998), and Rubin (2003) have variously argued bodily experiences are just as important to identities as the social and historical contexts that these bodily experiences occur within.

Dennis Sumara (2003) following Lakoff and Johnson (1999) has argued that to develop more sophisticated theories of reading, literacy researchers should be in conversation with cognitive scientists. Reading and how our bodies are affected by it, is quite important and the discovery that the brain is actually quite changeable has many more implications than those that have been researched. However, I am more interested in the multiple ways in which queer people read and how that affects our relationships to our bodies within the spaces and worlds (material and/or imagined) we travel within. I cannot speak of unlivable lives and trauma without taking bodily experiences into account.

Conversely, Laurel Richardson (2011) has argued that writing is a form of palliative self-care. Richardson argues that writing helped her address the trauma of watching her sister slowly die, mourning her sister, and then volunteering in a palliative care centre herself. Richardson's work served as an inspiration for this project because reading can also be a form of palliative self-care and that the fictional writing that resulted from this qualitative research can also function as palliative self-care. I researched the process non-normative students' work through to read novels in ways that allow them to create livable, alternative subject positions to those presented to them as "natural". I asked non-normative students about subjectivity, identifications with narratives, how they analyze novels, and how they create counter-narratives. In *A History of Reading* (1998/ 2012) Argentine-Canadian writer Alberto Manguel argues that marginalized people including women, queers, and racialized people have a need for literature that reflects their lived experiences: "This is usually the case for segregated readers: the literature they require is confessional, autobiographical, even didactic, because readers whose identities are denied have no other place to find their stories except in the literature they themselves produce" (p. 234).

While I would argue that "require" is a problematic way to characterize the literature that marginalized people may desire but I do think Manguel has a thoughtful point in arguing marginality compels a person to be creative and represent the unrepresented or to seek out pieces of your Self within a dominant representation. The research participants were versatile in that they could find themselves in fictional literature not meant for their gender and/or sexual subjectivities as well as in queer and trans fictional literature geared to them. Reading and writing for those on the margins constitutes a creative act that can be profoundly political. The participants and I are literate in a variety of ways especially because all of us read both textual

and graphic novels which communicate in different ways. It is in this way that queer and trans readers could be said to be multi-literate.

## 2.8 Multiliteracies

Multiliteracies is a new term created by the New London Group, a group of academics interested in finding a way to address the changing state of communications, languages, and media. The group defines multiliteracies (1996):

A word we chose to describe two important arguments we might have with the emerging cultural, institutional, and global order: the multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity. The first relates to the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on. This is particularly important in the mass media, multimedia, and in an electronic hypermedia. Second, we decided to use the term "multiliteracies" as a way to focus on the realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness. Dealing with linguistic differences and cultural differences has now become central to the pragmatics of our working, civic, and private lives (para. 2).

Rob Simon has written about the pedagogy of multiliteracies (2011) and one particular article that he wrote (2012) highlights the importance of being visually literate with regard to comic books. Comic books or graphic novels were important to the research participants because they regarded these texts as some of the best representations of queer people. In Simon's article he describes and analyzes how an adolescent student, Yusef is critically literate and literate in multiple ways especially with regard to how Yusef understands his subjectivity in relation to comic books. This essay also analyzed the dialogic exchange between Yusef and a student-teacher named Alex who learned to teach English in Yusef's grade 10 classes. Yusef was categorized as a racialized, potentially violent, student by administrators. Simon (2012) observes that Alex saw him very differently because in their conversations Yusef identified himself as a reader, artist, and writer, who loved Marvel comic books and Japanese manga (p. 516). Yusef's violent comic stories got him into trouble at his previous school but this was a

misunderstanding that was linked to Yusef's disruptive behavior. The manga Yusef was reading did contain graphic violence and his manga style drawings were also a reflection of the news in his neighborhood which had aired several reports on violent crimes at the time.

Comic books were a part of how he understood his own subjectivity and Alex made space for Yusef to treat comic books as literature. Comic books were not considered literature when I attended school, I could only read my comic books at recess. I can identify with Yusef in that regard and also that my shyness led teachers and other students especially to regard me as "depressive and weird." This is because comic books and those who read them were regarded as geeks who were in a state of "arrested development" because "real guys" didn't read they were athletes and if they played an instrument it was the drums or guitar. Comic books were part of Yusef's struggle to survive in a racist and classist schooling context that sought to "stream" him out of school. When I was in high school I really did not think I would ever go to university because I disliked high school so much. My grades were usually mediocre, which is part of how a homophobic Catholic school streams out an introverted gay student who does not draw attention to themselves.

Yusef and I had comic books and illustration as part of a survival strategy in common. He went on to be a high achieving student attending an arts high school with the support of Alex who worked to incorporate Yusef's various literacies into an alternative learning program. Alex and Yusef developed a dialogic exchange that changed them both but they could have only realized this in retrospect. Reading, writing, and creative interpretation were generative acts for Yusef and Alex. Narrative is the key element in these acts and exchanges. Being able to identify with and create narratives that nurture your subjectivity and subject position can be a vital need for marginalized people.

In a conversation about the importance of narrative to marginal people's survival Dr. Satoko Itani shared a passage from Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (2011) with me that adds to the discussions about relationships between literacies and marginality. Trinh T. Minh-ha (2011) focuses on the fantastic tales that serve as inspiration to marginalized people when faced with desperate or seemingly impossible oppressive situations:

Tales often read like profound strategies of survival... Hope is, however, always kept alive in the tale--hope, and not expectation, for it is through fairies, deities, and genies, or as in the case of the tale told earlier through the forces that exceed the lifetime of an individual, that people who knew the lores of survival seek to solve difficult situations and social inequity. As Native American storytellers remind us, stories are what we have to fight off illness and death; they make medicines and are a healing art. Bringing the impossible within reach and making us realize with poignancy that material reality is only one dimension of reality, tales address our longing of a more equitable world built on our struggle as well as on our dreams, our aspirations and actions for peace (p. 17).

The research participants realized retrospectively that they the novels we discussed had a therapeutic function for their marginalized subjectivities. The novels they read became repositories for some of their deepest desires. The process they used to find these desires in the novels they chose to discuss and loved involved dis/identification. A process that is creative, ambivalent, and reparative.

## 2.9 Queer Theory: Disidentifications and Reading

I observed a strong link between the creative, survival strategies used by the performance artists José Esteban-Muñoz analyzes in *Dis-identifications* (1999) and those that are or can be used by the research participants in their relationship to reading novels. In this work, Muñoz finds that the marginal of the marginal specifically queers of color disidentifying with dominant cultures to creatively re-interpret and re-present their experiences of racist, anti-queer, and sexist culture. How queer people read novels whether they are graphic or textual and how they attempt

to build subjectivities from their identifications, dis-identifications and counter-identifications with these fictional print texts is a plausible, offshoot project from Muñoz's work.

Fiction is already a part of the curriculum in that students must learn to read, comprehend, and analyze fictional texts throughout their educational career. Fictional writing is not burdened by having to be the "Truth" or "objective" nor is it divorced from what we may understand to be "reality". Instead, fiction offers readers and writers a chance to try and fill the gaps created by various forms of difficult knowledge. For instance, it is difficult to accept that we cannot know our unconscious in any complete way or that we will face marginalization, illness, and death at some point. Fiction offers us a pathway to both possibilities and potentialities. The kinds of possibilities and potentialities for queers alluded to recently by Muñoz (2009) when he states: "The here and now is simply not enough. Queerness could and should be about a desire for another way of being in the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough" (p. 96). Queer pedagogy in critical curriculum studies represents the kind of shift towards another way of being. The participants' choices of novels and how they analyzed their relationships to these novels is an example of how the LGBTQ students who participated in this research project search for other ways of being. I discuss this in more detail in chapter four in the sections entitled "Identifications" "Dis/identifications" and "Pathways/Access" Next; I will discuss three recent studies that explored how LGBTQ people searched for other ways of being in an education system that threatened their survival.

## 2.10 Critical Curriculum Studies/Queer Pedagogy

Four recent examples of research in curriculum studies --Goldstein (2010, 2013), McCready (2010), and Sykes (2011) -- demonstrate how bodies are organized around particular

oppressive narratives within schools and the curriculum, which make the lives of non-normative students and teachers unlivable. Goldstein (2010) creates a performed ethnography out of data gathered from 2002 to 2003 in an empirical study of anti-homophobia education in Toronto schools (p. 68). She also compiled three of her plays into a moving anthology *Zero Tolerance and Other Plays: Disrupting Xenophobia, Racism and Homophobia in School* (2013) that explores and asks critical questions about safe school practices, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia. Goldstein's innovative approach to illustrating the difficulties of addressing homophobia in schools is reflected richly in the diverse characters who express multiple views on the matter which are both realistic and affecting.

Goldstein's work is inspirational and innovative; I tried to perform similar work by using the short story as one medium to represent the research data generated by the interviews, journals, and autoethnographic observations. McCready highlights how safe space initiatives within schools such as Project 10 in the United States and Gay-Straight Student Alliances can fail for a number of reasons. The lack of attention to the diversity of non-normatively gendered and sexual youth was the most salient of these reasons. Non-normatively sexual and gendered youth come from all social classes, every ethnic group, are differently able, may have a learning disability, and could practice any religion. In *Making Space for Diverse Masculinities* (2010) McCready observed some of these problems when it came to the intersection of race and gender in a Project 10 program at a school he worked in.

Sykes conducts a critical examination of the prejudice and ignorance that lingers in Canadian physical education. Sykes uses feminist, psychoanalytic, and queer theories to reveal that identifications offer more insight than gender or sexual categories. These are theories that also put a spotlight on the harm normative thinking has on gender, sexual, and body size



outcasts. Sykes and her assistants interviewed forty people about their experiences in physical education. Some of the interviewees ended up identifying with teachers who were not queer or anti-homophobic in their teachings at all. Gerald for example resists and desires his abrasive White, heterosexual male gym/math teacher (Sykes, 2011, p. 82). Gerald can see that this teacher is incompetent at teaching mathematics and is oppressive to Gerald in gym because of the racist expectations he has of him in gym class. However, Gerald still finds this fit, violent White man attractive (Sykes, 2011, p. 83). This example reveals how identifications with teachers for queer youth are complicated and troubling but also creative. This ambivalent relationship demanded a response that could address the complicated web of power relations and desires at work between Gerald and his teacher. Gerald could have repressed his feelings of attraction to the teacher but instead he retained these feelings. It was a creative, survival strategy to “dis-identify” with and desire this racist and homophobic, White man. This move represents a unique choice to “live beside” trauma rather than send it away somehow.

Queer pedagogy was important to this project because of its critical exploration of education discourses, the narratives produced by these discourses, and how this affects the lives of queer students and teachers. Memory is a significant part of these educative experiences which was evident in the memories Gerald described of his schooling and his ambivalent desire for the white male gym teacher.

Memories and the desire that accompanied them were vitally important to how the participants in my research project understood narrative and reading. The memories of the first novels they read that they could identify with were important to understanding how they used novels in their lives. I discuss this in more detail in chapter four in the participants’ description sections with their pseudonyms for titles (i.e. Phi, Upsilon, Tau, Omega) and in the theme section

entitled “The Fantasy Genre”, “Identifications”, “Disidentifications”, and “Pathways/Access” I recognize how my research project that has extended the insights of the psychoanalytic feminist, queer, and post-structuralist theorists. I have discussed how LGBTQ people navigate their subjectivities within schools and their relationship to reading novels. In the next section I describe my theoretical framework. The first part of this discussion focuses on memory and narrative. Both concepts are important to this project in terms of the ways queer, feminist, and post-structural theorists have interpreted these concepts.

## 2.11 Theories of Memory

Memory is vitally important in understanding queer and/or trans peoples’ relationships to their own subjectivity which is evident in recent writing about queer and trans identities such as the works of Muñoz (1999; 2009), Freeman (2008), Delany (1999), Love (2007), Castiglia and Reed (2012). I return to Sigmund Freud first because he offers a literary and playful way of thinking about how memory works. In *On Metapsychology* Freud (1925/1984) uses a very imaginative metaphor for understanding memory, consciousness, and unconsciousness. Freud uses the example of the Mystic Writing Pad which was a children’s toy with a sheet plastic that you can write on but once the plastic is lifted the writing disappears and yet leaves faint traces behind. For Freud (1925/1984) this was a way of explaining how both the conscious mind and the unconscious develop a memory after the fact of perception (p. 430-431). There are traces of an experience that remain conscious but other aspects of the experience are kept unconscious. Freud theorized this is how an individual perceives an experience, develops a memory, and interprets this memory. Memories are the first narratives people construct and for queer and trans people memories have a powerful role in understandings of subjectivity. So Freud’s thinking is quite useful for understanding memories in this project because if traces of an

experience can be retained in the unconscious then how queer and trans people read novels and the memories of their reading are layered accounts of their own subjectivities.

Muñoz focuses mainly on queer of color performance art and negotiations of public space in his work to find inspiration for a critical queer futurity. Muñoz and Delany (1999) both agree that queer male spaces especially those where queer males of different body types, classes and ethnicities had sex publicly were made to disappear to conjure up an illusion of “greater public safety” (p. 90-91). Delany’s *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) is about the memories of these lost spaces as much as it is a call to action. Delany and Muñoz both see how queerness and memory are important when seeking inspiration to counter the agents and the powerful influence of neoliberal hegemony. The agents of neoliberal hegemony push for the privatization of memory and space to individuals thus preventing marginalized people from forming an effective solidarity with each other. The participants in my study had to find space within their own environments to counter dominant ideas about gender, sexuality, and memory.

In a similar vein, Elizabeth Freeman (2008) argues that queers and trans people have non-normative relationships with time and that this is deeply intertwined with non-normative sexualities. Freeman focuses on lesbian, gay and trans people and their creative works in her analysis. For example, Freeman astutely argues that BDSM participants work through their memories of a variety of traumas in a way that “queers” normative conceptions of time. Freeman (2008) describes how memory structures an S/M scene by stating: “...memory is not organic or natural at all but depends on various prompts and even props” (p. 161). Freeman’s argument being that S/M revises history whether personal or global and creates a moment that never happened to create pleasure where there was only pain in the past. For the participants their relationships to the novels they read created pleasure from identifications and dis-

identifications with characters or situations in novels. Their retroactive linking of these relations between novels and subjectivity makes it clear that the affects surrounding these relationships are what makes them understandable in a present context. I discuss this further in my analysis of the participants' commentaries in chapter four. Trauma associated with having a particular subjectivity is not understood until after it has occurred.

In *Feeling Backward* (2007), Heather Love recognizes memories especially painful, traumatic memories of queerness in the past should not be submerged to favor an uncritical embrace of a certain kind of LGBTQ pride. Love (2007) uses an elegant example to elucidate how easily this motivated forgetting happens: "In the darkroom of liberation, the "negative" of the closet case or the isolated protogay child is developed into a photograph of an out, proud gay man" (p. 20). This kind of pride is about disappearing into the centre and simply becoming "normal". The temporality of this pride is about moving forward to a linear moment of liberation in which LGBTQ people will no longer be recognizable as such. White upper middle class lesbians, gay men, queer, bi, and trans people will just be "normative citizens in a capitalist "democracy" which Jasbir Puar (2007) has observed is a goal of assimilationist LGBT politics. Love and Puar are in agreement that this entails leaving behind the "less than respectable" LGBTQ people: those who are lower class, homeless, fat, racialized, undocumented migrants, have a disability, HIV positive, the genderqueer or non-gender conforming, leather/fetish/BDSM queers, and LGBTQ people who explicitly resist corporate and authoritarian power.

Love explores LGBT novels and films of the late nineteenth and twentieth century that were written before any LGBT liberation moments. She is looking back at an era when all queer and kinky sexualities were formally pathologized in medical discourses. Trans people are still

explicitly pathologized in medical discourse. Love argues that these texts represent an “archive of feelings” that risk being lost in assimilationist narratives. The dominant assimilationist narratives that look forward with tunnel vision working to ignore the continual denigration of queer lives and forget those queer people who suffered and died before whom Love (2007) describes as: “the abject multitude against whose experiences we define our own liberation” (p. 10). Love (2007) turns to sex positive feminist Susie Bright who discusses her ambivalence about LGBTQ pride narratives and the shame that self-hating lesbian characters in texts expressed sincerely and poignantly:

I think people do feel that way today still...And there's part of me despite all of my little signs, you know, like “Happy!” “Proud!” “Well Adjusted!” “Queer” “Kinky- you know no matter how many posters I hold up saying, “I'm a big pervert and I'm so happy about it” – there's this part of me that's like, “How could I be this way?” (p. 16).

I see this as a moment Tanya Lewis (1999) would describe as living beside trauma rather than submerging these feelings. But while traumatic feelings are damaging these feelings are not only destructive, they can actually be a source of inspiration. The participants in this research project remained ambivalent or afraid for various periods of time after they realized they had a non-normative gender or sexual subjectivity.

## 2.12 Remembering Shame

Didier Eribon explores this phenomenon from a gay male perspective in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (1999/2004). Eribon (1999/2004) theorized that Western gay male subjectivities, politics, and culture are structured around resisting an existence defined by being the maligned or demonized object of insults. Moreover, Eribon's most poignant and relevant evidence for this study is when he discusses gay men and reading. Eribon (1999/2004) writes:

The gay child-we need to be able to think here of "gay childhoods"- first of all turned in on himself and organized his own psychology and his rapport with others around his

secret and silence. It is from this inner life that he draws the ability to transform himself. Perhaps this can help explain the peculiar relation-one that has often been described-between gay men and books, between gay men and culture (p. 30).

I see an outline in Eribon's theory that is congruent with the way the participants reflected on the books they loved as children and adolescents. The inner world we enter imaginatively once we have learned to read and have become able to discern which books speak to our nascent desires. Kathryn Bond-Stockton (2009) cites gay children as the people who demonstrate how the figure of the child fails to represent childhood especially in the ways that queer adults remember this period of their lives (p. 6). Indeed, to categorize children as gay violates the dominant construction of children as "naturally" gender normative and developing into "heterosexuals" but also somehow non-sexual. Children are constantly resisting and conforming to the processes by which adults construct them through education, media, and social culture. Children only become adults when adults say they are no longer children. Bond-Stockton argues this established narrative is one of the ways children become very queer indeed whether they are gay children or not. As I see it, a queer childhood is only understood as such through memories, which are more often than not a bittersweet mixture of pleasure, pain, and insight. The participants each had a story about when their queerness was emerging especially in comparison to other children or adolescents their age. Memories of novels were great sources of insight for the participants in this regard.

## 2.13 Generative use of Memory

Castiglia and Reed argue in *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (2012) that memory is a vital part of queer lives. Specifically, they argue that memory is the impetus for ideality politics, meaning "a politics of the possible...not a claim to social borders" (p. 37). Castiglia and Reed have several thoughtful works they analyze, but one of their best examples is a novel by Ethan Mordden entitled *How Long Has This Been Going On*

(1997). One of the novel's characters, Frank Hubbard quits his job as a police officer and becomes a gay pornographer. Frank is unsatisfied with the gay pornography he consumes. He sees as it is unrealistic and feels these films are very distant from his own experience of gay life. One of Frank's films involves him going to Fire Island and having a series of sexual encounters with a variety of men there. Mordden (1997) has the character Frank take a piece or article of clothing from each man after they have sex with him, and he becomes a desirable leather man by the end of the film (p. 57).

Castiglia and Reed (2012) analyze Frank's character in the porno film as being like Freud's melancholic hanging onto to the lost object (p. 58). The articles of clothing that become part of Frank's character's attire are symbols of this attachment with an erotic memory tied intimately to each part. Castiglia and Reed (2012) argue that unlike Freud's melancholic in this example mourning and memory are acts of generation rather than "self-lacerating" repetitions of loss (p. 58-59). The activities of scrap booking and creating memory boxes are similar to the way Frank creates his leather ensemble from the scraps of clothing he takes from the men he sleeps with because these activities use memory to be generative. The stories the participants and I shared with one another were like the articles of clothing Frank assembled which helped me recognize how fiction and our memories of what it means to us are generative for our understandings of subjectivity in the present moment.

Following the perspectives in these compelling accounts of individual and collective identities then it can be plausibly argued that queer and trans identities are structured non-normatively around memory, time, and space. In order for lesbians and gay men to come out as such they have to pinpoint their first memory of same sex attraction, same sex erotic fantasies, and/or gender atypical behavior. Presenting a coherent narrative of your sexuality is often

necessary to gain the support of friends or family who may be in disbelief or denial. Indeed, family or friends may need to be convinced that the person they thought they had deep knowledge of is not who they thought they were. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities are also constructed by homophobic and biphobic imaginings of what “lesbian” “bisexual” or “gay” mean. Trans people are continually prompted to recollect the “right” set of memories to convince psychologists and other healthcare workers that they need hormones and/or surgeries. Non-normatively gendered and/or sexual subjectivities have to be held in the psychic space of the “closet” The closet is a space that is never forgotten and never really goes away in the social constructions of gender and sexuality. The closet has become central in the Western world to narratives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and trans identities. The participants all spoke of “coming out” because the closet has become an embodied metaphor for expressing queer subjectivities but it is also inescapable as queer people must continually come out to new people they may encounter in the future.

## 2.14 Narrative and LGBTQ identities

My project was focused on the relationships LGBTQ or non-normatively gendered or sexual people develop with novels they chose to read from their childhood into their lives as adults. The stories about what novels were sustaining, affirming, and perhaps rejuvenating are just as interesting to me as the novels the participants chose to speak about themselves. I asked myself and others what it is about narrative that makes it central to our own understanding of our subjectivity and the subjectivities of others. Reading into a text and then writing a text about our reading are both methods that the participants and I used to engage the research question.

In ways that are both similar and different from other marginalized groups, LGBTQ people in Western cultures have an intimate knowledge of silence because LGBTQ identities are



constructed around both silence and breaking silence. It is very difficult to separate LGBTQ identities from the ideas of “being in the closet” “coming out”, “passing” or “being out and proud”. The “closet” becomes a revolving door for queer people because there is no end to the “coming out” that is necessitated by this powerful cultural construction. A person’s gendered and/or sexual selfhood is not always obvious. The concept of “passing” is also quite powerful.

A trans person in transition will be concerned about whether they are “passing” as woman or a man in public spaces. Similarly, lesbians and gay men who are not out will be self-monitoring their gender presentations, expressions and how they are perceived in terms of sexual orientation. Racialized people regardless of their sexuality, gender expression, or sexed embodiment have historically been compelled to either pass for white or meet the racist expectations associated with being a “model minority” to avoid overt racism. The threat of not “passing” is great enough for marginalized persons that this continual self-monitoring becomes a narrative that has an impact on the subjectivities of people who are racialized and/or non-normatively gendered and sexual. Passing and the closet as concepts become forms of discipline in the ways Foucault imagined in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) when he theorized the ways in which the same type of disciplinary measures used in prisons are also applied similarly in hospitals, militaries, and schools.

Sedgwick (1990) famously argued that homosexuality as a concept is needed to make heterosexuality what it is understood to be (p. 10). Butler (1990) argues that coming out is a speech act that necessarily has implications about the body. One implication is that bodies are assumed to be heterosexual and heteronormative and therefore “reproductive”. However underlying this unmarked, assumed narrative of bodies is that homosexuality haunts all bodies threatening “to come out”. Homosexuality is also tied to scientific racism as Sommerville

(2000) and Seitler (2004) have both argued differently. Both authors discuss how the concepts of race and homosexuality were intertwined as part of a state apparatus to pathologize bodies deemed deviant to preserve colonial and hetero-patriarchal power. Sommerville turns to novels to reveal how constructions of sexuality and race are linked. In *Second Skins* (1998) Jay Prosser theorized that trans people seeking hormones and surgeries have recounted their trans identities like the plot of a novel. The plot of this novel being the “born in the wrong body” narrative gender therapists expect to hear from those seeking hormones and surgeries. These are the plots that LGBTQ people of various backgrounds are coerced into for most of their lives. I was more interested in the narratives LGBTQ people identify with and experience positive affirmation from.

There is a feedback loop between LGBTQ people’s lives and the novels they experienced pleasure from reading. Roland Barthes argues in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1974) that there is eroticism to reading which is part of why humans read but also that people prefer texts that are consumable like a favorite food rather than texts that challenge us as readers. For Barthes (1974) the texts of pleasure or readerly texts are easier to interpret and often confirm stories that LGBTQ readers have an affirming attachment to whether this is an attachment that is critically aware or not (p. 14). A lack of critical awareness would entail a reader feeling an unproblematic affirmation from a text that violently excludes a marginalized group. Barthes (1974) describes texts of bliss or writerly texts as texts that do not offer readers the comforts of reading passively, these texts will possibly generate frustration because they ask readers to think as a writer rather than only as a reader and to re-write the story with our own meanings rather than the inferred authorial intentions (p. 14). One of the participants (known as Upsilon) in the study discussed his current favorite novel and his description of it makes it seem like a text of bliss not one of certainties. He stated:

A novel that affected me was this one called *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski. I loved it because it had such an unconventional narrative. It works really hard to destabilize reality...it took the guy like ten years to write and then it's like all these invented narratives (Upsilon, February, 2014).

Texts of bliss destabilize the co-constructed realities within novels actually highlighting that reader and writer are working together rather than separately. Barthes does not set this premise up as a kind of limiting, bifurcated way to categorize texts because it is entirely possible to have a text that becomes more writerly as you read it. An example of this is a text that was written as though it came from the unconscious, like an incoherent dream. Individuals who understand themselves through the books they read may very well interpret their own life narratives as texts of bliss and texts of pleasure. When an individual experiences a breakdown in meaning in their life due to the trauma caused by homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, ableism, and so forth, they are definitely not in a state of bliss. Living in a world that is trying to make you as a marginalized person disappear is exhausting and painful on many levels. However, avid queer and trans readers may work to find a text that gives them meaning once more. Upsilon argued this point similarly when discussing his favorite book as a child:

I think Harry Potter has a lot of appeal to me...there's that it's kind of a similar narrative to that of queer people you discover a sort of lost history that you know about yourself and it's something that makes you different from most people around you...(Upsilon, February, 2014).

Stories have such strong implications for readers in terms of subjectivity and day to day existence that I needed to understand the way queer and trans people read as a creative method. In *Fiction as Research Practice*, Patricia Leavy (2013) also discusses the neurological research that revealed research participants brains were altered by reading a Jane Austen novel (p. 261). After having read a novel readers do not always recognize the impact that reading may have had on them until they discuss how they felt about this type of story with someone else. Reading is a private experience but it is an experience that needs to be investigated. I was interested in

discussing these issues and this process with LGBTQ people who had an affinity for books and reading generally.

I have reviewed the relevant literature and explained the conceptual foundations of this project, explained where I see the project fitting within curriculum studies, and now I will describe my research methodology. I will also discuss why it is the best choice for this project, review the methodological literature, and indicate its connections to trauma, palliative self-care, and livable lives.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Methodological Framework

I will begin with a brief overview of the research paradigm and methodologies that I used during my research process. I worked within an interpretive paradigm for this project which as Creswell (2003) has described is an approach to research that is aware of the fluidity of social contexts and subjectivities within such contexts, does not begin with a theoretical answer to a research question, and asks the researcher to be aware of their own position to the research they are conducting (p. 8-9). The information was gathered inductively rather than deductively. I assumed the worlds of the participants and myself to be socially constructed spaces. I realized that my own subjectivity and subject position will inform how I process the information I analyze, and that theorizing these experiences are an emergent, on-going process. A positivist paradigm uses deduction to arrive at conclusions and assumes the researcher is an objective observer who will produce quantifiable knowledge from their research. I did not choose a positivist paradigm because of these principles.

I recognize that this research project can be categorized as an “arts based” research project. However, I resist the philosophical underpinnings that are part of arts based research. I had written part of a novel, a novella, and then an illustrated short story based on the interviews, journals, and novels we discussed. I am not a professional writer or illustrator so I listened to the wise advice from my supervisory committee that a brief synopsis and a short discussion of plot and character design in a proposed fictional story would be a sufficient creative representation for this project. Despite all my attempts I do not think I would ever be a successful fiction writer and/or illustrator. However, even though I am not a skilled writer or illustrator I sought to somehow represent the creative inspiration from the qualitative data that I had during this

project. Creative representation especially fiction in dissertations has a history of being challenged and criticized as not being legitimate academic work. Whether a novel is acceptable as a dissertation form was the subject of a heated American Educational Researchers' Association in 1996 debate between Elliot Eisner, arts based research proponent and Howard Gardner (famous for his multiple intelligence theory).

Rishma Dunlop (1999) described the argument succinctly: Gardner argued that a dissertation should be citable and contribute to a discipline. Eisner countered that “images larger than life inform us in special ways” (p. 20). I disagree with the logic of both positions. I disagree with Eisner because his view takes the agency away from the viewer of a representation and contains creative practices within the quantifiable realm of the “arts”. Gardner’s response simply promotes the status quo which privileges positivist ways of knowing, researching, and representing within qualitative educational research. I turn to Paul Willis whose explorations of symbolic creativity in *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at play in the everyday cultures of the young* (1990) offer a less problematic frame for the way I am thinking about what I and the participants were doing with fictional novels. Willis (1990) defines symbolic creativity as:

Symbolic creativity can be seen as roughly equivalent to what an all embracing and inclusive notion of the living arts might include {counterpoised, of course, to the current exclusions of art.} It transforms what is provided and helps to produce specific forms of human identity and capacity. Being human-human being-ness-means to be creative in the sense of remaking the world for ourselves as we make and find our own place and identity (p. 11).

Willis criticizes high art and the institutions and practices that perpetuate the hegemonic ideology behind it. He argues that art is in everyday experiences and collective activities including that which is considered ordinary or profane. Willis’s thinking about what constitutes living arts and the processes which construct subjectivities meshes to a degree with Muñoz’s (1999) conceptions of dis/identification as a method of creative living. Willis’s theory of

symbolic creativity also aligns somewhat with that of Britzman (1995a) in her definition of queer pedagogy as a method for studying limits, reading practices, and normativities. Muñoz, Britzman, and Willis are all speaking of different issues but the link for this project between the three theorists is that they advocate creative methods that do not take their foundational logic from dominant thinking about research, creativity, representation, subjectivities or subject positions.

Secondly, they each persuaded me to challenge, question, and create in ways that do not reproduce dominant, oppressive theory or practice. I am trying in this dissertation to move towards a method that refuses to be a “high arts based” research method. I am trying to create a method that is ambivalent about being arts based or arts informed. I may even call my method an ambivalent, symbolically creative, dis-identification based research method because I have observed that this is closer to what the research participants and I have actually done instead of reiterating dominant notions about what art and creativity is. There are two methods that have allowed me to reach towards this kind of research method: autoethnography and narrative inquiry.

My primary methods in this research project were autoethnography and narrative inquiry. Carolyn Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as a research methodology in which the researcher is in a process of researching their own subjectivity within a culture rather than researching the subjectivities of other people within a different culture (p. 37-38). Narrative inquiry is the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analyzing stories of life experiences (e.g., life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies) and reporting that kind of research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define

narrative inquiry as “the study of experience” but also as an “experience of the experience” (p. 189).

### 3.2 Why Narrative Inquiry?

I chose narrative inquiry as methods for this project for several reasons. The first of these reasons being that narrative inquiry is a generative and introspective method of conducting qualitative research. A method with these characteristics was necessary for contemplating my own personal experience as the researcher well as interacting with other marginalized people and understanding their personal experiences. I have conducted a narrative inquiry that is informed by integrative feminisms, psychoanalytic, and queer theories. I chose narrative inquiry because it is concerned with the meaning individuals make from narratives they have created about their lived experiences. It is a method that uses a variety of field texts as data sources such as stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, photos (and other artifacts), and life experience. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) and Denzin (2008) have noted that the narrative turn in qualitative research in the 1990’s reshaped the field because of the focus on experience as a narrative phenomenon. Laurel Richardson (1990) has argued that “narrative is the best way to understand human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives” (p. 133). Narrative inquiry studies human experiences but not in a completely singular way.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that narrative inquirers are always working in relation to other people in contextual and temporal relations. Clandinin and Connelly are inspired by philosopher and educator John Dewey’s theory of experience as education. Dewey’s theory of experience focused on context and temporality. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the three elements of this theory as the situation, interaction (the tensions between



people, contexts, and actions) and continuity (experience grows out of other experiences) (p. 32-33).

The authors (2000) argue that narrative inquirers must remain in a state of “wakefulness” because as a narrative inquirer one needs to continuously reflect on the work they are doing and what kinds of knowledge they may be producing (p. 184-85). John Dewey whose theories inspire narrative inquiry has been accused of being ethnocentric by Thomas D. Fallace (2010) and Peter Cole (2006). Narrative inquiry can be ethnocentric because it emerges out of this Western philosophical context. In my own project I am engaging in a critical dialog with narrative inquiry in a manner similar to the work done by feminist thinkers such as Britzman (1998), Cixous (1975; 1991), Gilbert (2004; 2010), Granger (2011), and Kristeva (1982; 1991) each of whom discuss the problematic aspects of psychoanalytic thinking but decide to work with the theory in tension despite any sexist, racist, and/or queerphobic ideas within this method. I see this approach as a critical and creative way of addressing the ambivalent relationships researchers have with theories behind methods such as narrative inquiry. Narrative texts put journeys in subjectivity on display, which is why a psychoanalytic framework is helpful in complicating and enriching this narrative inquiry by providing space to acknowledge ambivalence in narrative methods and being concerned with what the researcher can and cannot know in the process of knowledge production.

## Autobiography/Autoethnography

For this project I did both a kind of autoethnography and asked my participants to do an autoethnography specifically about their lives through novels. The journals were a way for the participants to perform a “mini autoethnography” of their own readings of novels. These works

are personal narrative texts in all the ways Ellis (2004) defines such writing (p. 45-46). A personal narrative text allows the researcher and participant to explore their lived experiences and situate these experiences within a culture and the relations of power within that culture. I chose this method along with journaling and interviews because I asked the participants to research their own reading processes and convey them to me as they are the expert on how they have worked through these processes throughout their life. Granger (2011) has argued that autoethnography allows individuals to see the multiple selves we have and construct throughout our lives and how we embody identities in variable ways throughout our lifetime.

Autoethnography is concerned with the “epiphanies” one has in their lives as Carolyn Ellis (2004) has noted (p. 33). I worked with the participants to locate the epiphanies they have realized retroactively about the connections that existed for them to between queerness and reading novels. The interview, the journals, and the follow up questions are three separate pieces that were linked together in the creation of a proposed fictional piece after being analyzed. The design, plot, and characters of this proposed fictional piece could represent the creative survival practices of non-normatively gendered and sexual people. I ask myself questions about the validity of this proposed fictional representation in the analysis chapter.

### 3.3 Creative Representation

There are several creative representations that were methodological influences on this project. I start with Carolyn Ellis’ *Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel* (2004) in which Ellis created a novel about teaching a qualitative research class that featured her students as characters and also highlighted her relationship with her husband Arthur Bochner. The novel teaches concepts and grapples with ethical dilemmas in qualitative research particularly Ellis’s problems with how best to represent the students she taught. She discusses the use of composite

characters and even interviews each student in the book about how they were represented after sharing a draft with them of the book. Ellis's work uses fiction as a method as opposed to the expected textbook format which could never accomplish what Ellis has with her fiction.

Douglas Gosse's *jackytar* (2005) tells the story of Alexandre Murphy, a gay man in a subtly abusive relationship who is traumatized by his past experiences of anti-First Nations racism, sexism, and homophobia. Gosse uses flashbacks and poignant episodes from Alex's life to show how the experience of multiple forms of oppression reverberates over a person's lifetime.

*Jackytar* (2005) was published as a novel and a supplemental resource text was also published for pedagogical purposes.

Laurel Richardson's *Hospice 101* (2011) details Richardson's experiences of caring for her sister as she slowly passes away in palliative care and her subsequent training to become a hospice volunteer. Writing about these two experiences is therapeutic for Richardson and readers are given a nuanced, introspective window into Richardson's trauma and how she tries to live with it. Tony E. Adams *Narrating The Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction* (2011) like Richardson and Gosse illustrates how traumatic experiences are experienced over time and how this pain unfolds in non-linear yet harmfully repetitive ways. Adams's experience of concealing his same sex attractions, guilt about this desire, and how it impacts nearly every facet of his life is detailed in personal journal entries. This story could not have been dramatized with the same effectiveness in a traditional qualitative format. Rishma Dunlop's *Boundary Bay* (1999) features a cast of characters that are immersed in education. Dunlop addresses sexism, racism, homophobia, existential longing, despair and suicide in educational spaces through a realistic and poetic depiction of the character's lived experiences and the sympathetic, involving narration.

I am extending the approaches and methods of these researchers by describing a proposed fictional story inspired by qualitative research data, using queer feminist thinking to challenge normative ways of knowing and doing research, and also challenging the centering of realist fiction in research based fiction. Fictionalized writing as a method of qualitative inquiry can work in other genres such as fantasy, erotica, or horror. The participants' stories about reading novels in these genres added further evidence to the argument that when we narrate experience we may use the literary techniques such as metaphor, simile, or hyperbole that we learned about in the study of literature without necessarily realizing that we have done so. Our relations as readers to metaphoric and hyperbolic descriptions are part of what animate many fantasy, erotic, or horror stories and also within the narratives we construct about the experience of having read these genres of fiction. I return to this discussion in the analysis section of chapter four. Next I will reflect analytically on the process I worked through while trying to creatively represent the research project.

### 3.4 Reflective analysis of the creative representation method

I will discuss and analyze the epiphanies I had during this research process, I will focus on the thinking behind the proposed fictional story. This research project is a metaphorical labyrinth I willingly entered five years ago. I spent the beginning of this journey trying to find exactly what question I wanted answer about LGBTQ people in education. I knew I wanted to explore how queer students and queer teachers negotiated oppressive situations and structures. I also felt that psychoanalytic and queer feminist theories could help me understand the specific issue I would investigate. Having to learn theories of education and curriculum that I had not known before helped me come closer to what I wanted to do in this dissertation. The discussions I had with my thesis supervisor also urged me to focus on one particular issue or narrowly defined topic because what I was thinking of was very broad. I had to “unspool” a more

substantial amount of the metaphorical “red thread” to guide myself more definitively throughout this process just as Theseus did in the Greek myth of the labyrinth. The research question “what role does reading novels (textual or graphic) play in the survival and desires of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer) students in education?” became part of my “red thread” directing me to follow wherever it might take me. Creatively represented research was way of doing research that I found more fascinating than any other type of research I had seen or conducted myself before.

Academic researchers writing plays, novels, musicals, filmmaking, dancing, and painting to represent their research findings was the kind of work I identified with. I knew at this point I wanted to create an alternative representation of what I thought I had learned or was at the very least working through with this research. I decided a fictional story was how I wanted to represent what I had done. Once the participants had come forward, I had interviews to conduct and journal questions to ask so that we could all become closer to the centre of this labyrinth.

### 3.5 Getting Lost: Losing the Red Thread while Writing

The process of gathering my qualitative data (interviews, journals, autoethnographic notes, novel readings) was a long part of this journey in and of itself. While I analyzed all this data, I brainstormed and then wrote little story scenarios out, for example I wrote: “Reading good novels was like entering another world for the participants. In the fictional story there should be another world or time travel or lucid dreams...” or “Love stories and fantasy seem to keep coming up in the data, so the fictional story should be a fantasy with involving romantic and erotic elements...” or “fantastic metafiction is more engaging than a realist singular narrative”, and “The participants all wanted to see more lesbian, gay, trans, and queer characters in fiction. I need to create LGBTQ characters that they and readers like them will love...” Once

I had seven themes from the qualitative data I wrote the story with enthusiasm. As it was I would have a burst of inspired fiction writing that often ended up being too loosely connected to the qualitative data. Narrowing down the list of themes down to the four I have now (fantasy, identification, disidentification, pathways/access) helped me adjust the writing to be more closely linked to the qualitative data. At this point, I knew that I had to create the story with characters and a plot that grappled with these concerns and difficulties.

I spent most of the summer writing more chapters of the novel I hoped to create from the interviews, journals and my imagination. The unfinished novel was too long and would have been far too much for myself and my thesis committee to work through given my completion time frame. I put the novel away in a file folder and backed it up. So I decided to turn the novel into a novella. This representation did not work either because important plots and character development were too condensed making the story less compelling and even more difficult to connect with the qualitative data. I did not have characters that could be identified with anymore. I changed the master plot of the fictional story several times until I decided it was going to be a more straightforward quest. A quest for a lost person and lost book because the participants and myself were continually searching for another great book like the other great books we had read and discussed before. Throughout the writing of the fictional story I worked to use literary tools such as metaphor in particular to strengthen the representation of the themes in the story.

All along though I have been afraid that a good qualitative research dissertation with a creative piece contained within it is a project that other people have done more effectively than I have. I was right to be have feared this as having passion to create an effective creative representation is not enough. I have had to rethink or reformulate most of what I had done. I

decided a short story with purposeful comic book illustrations would be my new creative representation format. But I had to look at the quotes and the themes again to make sure there was greater congruence between each part of this thesis. After all of this I realized on my own that I was simply not a good enough writer or illustrator to carry this out to the extent I had originally intended.

So I opted to write a short but detailed synopsis of a proposed fictional story and included some character designs in the appendix. I make connections between interview and journal data and the proposed story in chapter four. I came to the realization that this was actually the most I was capable of with this creative representation. I became lost several times in this metaphorical labyrinth until I accepted this fact and moved on. I turned to Cixous (1975/1976) who once argued that gay men like French writer/activist Jean Genet practiced “*Écriture féminine*” defying phallogocentric ways of writing that are beholden to logic and rationality (p. 879). I find her words of encouragement to women motivating for me also in my hopeful quest to recover my loss of desire to write fiction.

I felt she described the process I have experienced ever since I started to write creatively as an adolescent. The stories I wrote secretly were about a gay protagonist trying to fulfill marginalized desire and to heal the wounds created by loss. I would write them with such enthusiasm and enjoy them for a few weeks before reading them with very critical eyes. But it was usually then that I became filled with terror that someone else would read these stories and discover my gayness. At that point I ripped up the stories and pictures that accompanied them and threw them away. It felt like I was throwing a part of my Self away every time I did this. This was pattern throughout my adolescence and into my twenties. Cixous (1975/1976) offered

women a call to action and warm encouragement which I connected with because it seemed to speak to how I have been treating my writing as a gay male:

And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written (And why I didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great-that is for "great men"; and it's "silly" Besides, you've written a little, but in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way, or because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty-so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until the next time (p. 876-877).

Throughout this research project writing was difficult and tense for me. When I was having epiphanies I could move forward more quickly. I often wished I could have had these moments much sooner. I felt energized when the project seemed to have all the pieces that would create a coherent assemblage. There have been many internal struggles and late nights spent in front of the computer trying to create a brilliant work of scholarship that is also a sincere representation of what the participants and I discussed together. I decided this was a problematic frame for me to think about the project with, I was hampered by these thoughts. Nevertheless, I had several epiphanies while analyzing the qualitative data (interviews, journals, autoethnographic notes) and imaginatively crafting fiction from these sources. Now I am discussing in more detail how the qualitative data and proposed fiction have slowly come together. The main themes of the interviews (fantasy, dis/identification, identification, pathways) helped me build a plot, characters, and setting for the fiction. The participants had made choices about what they chose to read and what that meant for who they were in their respective worlds. It was a will to reconstruct or release aspects of their selfhood that had been confined or fragmented in profoundly affecting ways.



### 3.6 Reading the Red Threads

This realization led to me the second epiphany of this research project. This epiphany was that the way participants and myself read books is a way of life. The participants and I read texts and interpreted these texts with queer and/or feminist perspectives. The participants understood reading as a deeply collaborative and creative process which is very different from reading to be entertained or informed about a topic. I say this because the participants sought out literature that addressed their existential concerns and difficulties which goes well beyond reading for pragmatic purposes.

Before the participants or I had any sense of what queer or feminist theorizing was we were searching for the traces of our subjectivities in a narrative. This searching could only be observed and analyzed retroactively. It was a way for each of us to understand the ways we read and interpreted the meaning of novels before we had any critical apparatuses for understanding our ways of reading. The genre of fantasy was a favorite amongst the participants because the fantasy books they loved had the following characteristics in common: parallel or possible world scenarios, the positive and affirming use of imagination, and the search for affiliations and acceptance of marginalized subjectivities. In this section, I have discussed how my research methodology has unfolded throughout this project along with some observations that I will be exploring in more depth in chapter four. Now I will move to a more instrumental discussion about my methods of data collection.

### 3.7 Methods of Data Collection

I collected qualitative data from the participants in the form of journals and interviews. This information was written or recorded and the participants provided further information when I asked for it. I met them to conduct a semi-structured interview at a mutually convenient public

location that offered some privacy in order to conduct the interview without a lot of background noise or interference. Following this interview, the participants had the option of answering specific questions about novels they are reading or have read in a journal. I responded to their journals. The participants I met are adult students who identify themselves as LGTQ (Lesbian, gay, trans, or queer). The interview questions can be found in Appendix B and the journal questions are in Appendix C.

### 3.8 Data Collection: Journaling

I chose journaling as a method of data collection for three reasons. Firstly, journaling is a way for one to record thoughts and to begin to tell a longer story about your experiences. Journals become more meaningful over time as you can look at previous thoughts about an experience and how you analyzed those experiences. Gold (2001) recommends that anyone engaged in bibliotherapy should answer certain questions about why and what they read in a journal (p. 33). For Gold, this practice encourages contemplation and asks a person to think about their engagements with the literary worlds crafted by the creators of novels.

Secondly, the proposed fictional story I created based on the participants interviews and journal responses does as Laurel Richardson (1995) argues, “penetrate or rupture the “tidiness” of interview snippets or homogenized story (re) telling” that I would be doing as part of a conventional qualitative research project (p. 200). If I interviewed the participants and paraphrased parts of the stories they told me about what they think a non-normatively gendered and/or sexual person’s relationship to reading novels is then it would be a different project and a much more “tidy” one at that. The journals allowed the participants to reflect in certain ways about how and what they read that they may not have had an opportunity to do when they are in elementary school, secondary school, college, or university. The journals created a dialogue

about the novels the participants had attachments to which opens up queer pedagogical possibilities for how we think about queer critical literacies and how they can be enabled.

### 3.9 Responding to Journals

I replied to the journals in order to create the dialogic exchanges that Freire (1970) and hooks (1994, 2003) promote in their respective visions of the relationships between teachers and students. Except in this study I was trying to promote a similarly dialogic relationship between myself the researcher and participants. I tried to learn from them what their relationship to reading novels was as a non-normatively gendered and sexual person. Journals are usually private activities, my responses made the process of writing them more dynamic than it otherwise would be. I also read the most significant books described in the interview or journals with the individual participants. Psychoanalytic feminist thinkers such as Cixous (1975/1976), Kristeva (1991), and Felman (1992) have variously argued that writing is a way of working through traumatic experiences and also allows us the opportunity to ask what lies beneath the words we choose to make sense of trauma. I see the writing of the journals as a way of working towards revealing some latent content to the narratives in the narratives expressed and analyzed in these journals.

### 3.10 Data Collection: Interviewing

I conducted semi-structured interviews with open ended questions for about forty-five minutes to an hour. As with the journal writing the interview is rich from a psychoanalytic perspective because it allows us to think about our speech acts. In *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (2006/ 1991, p. 9) Irving Seidman argues in-depth interviewing is a way of understanding lived experience and the meaning people are making from their experiences. Adding to this argument is Robert Weiss who argues in *Learning From Strangers: The Art and*

*Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (1995, p. 1-2) that interviews provide us with access to memories and spaces that may be lost or remain unknown otherwise. With these important qualitative research premises in mind along with psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity, the interviews were analyzed for the ways the participants constructed their relationship to novels and trauma in conversations so that the interior work occurring within ourselves becomes more evident. In this chapter I have described my methods in this research project, discussed and reviewed the relevant methodological literature. Also, I have indicated why narrative inquiry and autoethnography are the best methodological choices for this project, and indicated these methods relationships with trauma, palliative self-care, and livable lives. In the next chapter, I will describe the study, describe the participants, analyze the interviews and journals, explore the themes of this qualitative data, and connect them to the proposed fictional piece. I will also analyze the proposed fictional story in terms of form and content.

## Chapter 4: Interview and Journal Analysis

### 4.1 The Study

In this section I will begin by describing the interviewees that participated in this project. I will also list all the texts the interviewees mentioned and discuss the context in which the book came up (i.e. what questions were asked? In what part of their lives did they read the book? ). I interviewed each participant for about an hour, sometimes longer because we both wanted to become more comfortable with each other. A long warm up discussion was absolutely necessary and this act made the whole process much more enjoyable even though we left tired afterward. I asked each interviewee the same questions which led up to bigger questions that they could then answer in their journals.

To protect the identities of the participants I have given them a Greek alphabet letter as their pseudonym (i.e. Alpha, Beta, Delta...) to conceal them enough that you would not know who they are even with the brief, demographic description they provided when asked to describe themselves. I will list them in the order that I interviewed them: Phi, Tau, Upsilon, and Omega. I have color coded each theme that I detected in the interviews and journals. The theme fantasy is purple, identifications is green, dis/identifications is orange, and pathways/access is blue. I have included color coding of the themes in charts for each participant indicating which texts they discussed and what theme these texts were connected to. Table 1 is an example of this chart. Next, I provide a more detailed description of each participant, summarize the discussion we had and the texts that were brought up, display a chart of the novels we discussed and the themes they fell under during analysis. Following this, I summarize and quote each of the participants' thoughts on why they read novels and what types of novels they loved before moving into the analysis of the themes of the qualitative data. I have done this to show readers

that the participants are like the complex and compelling characters in the novels we discussed and wrote about.

## 4.2 The “Character” of the Participants

I am following the method of fictionalization of the qualitative data in the same vein as Dunlop (1999), Ellis (2004), Gosse (2005), and Lukasik (2010) but also in a similar methodological mode to Patti Lather in her work with Chris Smithies in *Troubling the angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS* (1997) and in *Getting lost: Feminist efforts toward a double (d) science* (2007). Lather (2007) relocates herself as a witness rather than an expert on research participants lives. She states:

I trouble the ethics of reducing the fear, pain, joy and urgency of people’s lives to analytic categories. Exploring the textual possibilities for telling stories that situate researchers not so much as experts “saying what things mean” in terms of “data,” the researcher is situated as witness giving testimony to the lives of others (p. 41).

I see myself in similar position to Lather in that I was both a witness to parts of the participants’ lives and also a storyteller. In narrative inquiry and autoethnography the researcher works to provide a layered, multidimensional account of their research experience and what this means in the various contexts in which they are mobile. Being a witness-storyteller-researcher situates me as someone who is “saying what things mean” in terms of “data” but from my own specific standpoint in terms of my subjectivity, subject position, my lived experiences and my theoretical orientations. I do not consider myself an “expert witness” but rather like the narrating protagonist of a novel or short story providing readers with perspectives on an existential question as compelling novels or short stories often do. In a 1980 interview with Phillip Roth, Franco-Czech novelist, Milan Kundera, said: “The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question...” (Muller, 1980/2014).

I do agree with Kundera about a novelist being a person who can ask existential questions of the reader. However, I see a much more dialogic relationship unfolding between authors and readers from the moment reader, author, and text encounter each other. I see the novelist as a witness with a story to tell but the most ethical witness is a self-critical witness. A witness who has questions about the story they told why they told that story, and how they told it. I have worked to be a witness in the way that Kelly Oliver (2004) reimagines the concept (p. 81). Oliver argues in favor of the “inner witness” conceived by Holocaust survivor and professor Dori Laub who argued from his work with fellow survivors that each person needed an “inner witness”, an addressable other to be able to survive this trauma psychically:

This is to say that we learn to ‘talk to ourselves’ – to think – by talking to others. Our experience is meaningful for us only if we can imagine that it is meaningful for others. And, our sense of what is meaningful, our sense of meaning itself, comes through our relationships with others. Creating or finding meaning for oneself is possible only through the internalization of meaning for others (p. 83).

Following Oliver’s premise I see my position as the researcher-storyteller as being interdependent on my interactions with the participants. My interactions with the participants are part of what sustained me in trying to answer this research question; it was this interdependence that made the deep exploration of this question possible. I as a witness had to respond and address the research participants and know that my witnessing altered the structure of my own subjectivity. I had been working through how I might methodologically bring together these concerns and tensions. My methodological approach was to imagine the participants not just as composite characters in a fictional story (which I did) but also as the living people who resembled fictional characters in their interactions with me. In the process of analyzing the interviews and journals the participants become characters based on these moments. When they were composite characters in the fictional story they disappeared in a way that obscured them too deeply. The participants seemed to vanish within these characters which was not what I intended

to do. I had to revise this to make all the connections between the participants and fictional characters very clear and coherent.

Carolyn Ellis's (2004) novelization of her experience of teaching a qualitative research methodology class did disguise the students and create some composite characters but there was always a sense that these were real people you could imagine interacting with just as much as they were characters in a story. Ellis detailed her process of creating the novel and how she created characters out of her interactions with these students. Traditional qualitative research does not readily admit this fact. When we work to create categories from qualitative data we can actually be looking for characters, plots, subplots, and themes just as when we analyze a work of fiction. How else I asked myself can you create a narrative if you are not looking for such elements in qualitative data.

This research journey has been like a quest through a labyrinth to find the lost answers and find my way back out of the labyrinth retracing my steps with readers following me. With all of this in mind I decided to address the participants in one particular way: To imagine them as characters I have encountered in this research journey. Each participant had characteristics based on their interview data and journals which helped me imagine them to a degree as a type of character you could find in one of the fantasy novels or queer novels they themselves had read. Fantasy stories often feature a quest to find a lost object or lost person. The Harry Potter novels often had a quest within the narrative and Harry was the main seeker or quester in the novels. There was also explicit romance and/or sexual relationships in many of the novels the participants discussed including: *Great Expectations* (2001), *The Great Gatsby* (1925/2003) *The Tyrant Falls in Love* (2006), *Junjou Romantica* (2006), *Eon* (2009), *The House of Leaves*



(2000), *Imajica* (1991), *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), *Blue is The Warmest Color* (2013) , and *Written on The Body* (1993).

In each of these novels there is a romantic dreamer character that gives their deepest love to another character and wants to be loved back. In several of the novels mentioned by the participants there is an “analytical observer” narrator character as in *Agnes Grey* (2010) , *The Basic Eight* (1999), *The House of Leaves* (2000), *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), and *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* (2006). Finally, in several of the novels the participants discussed with me there is a caregiving or an empathic character that understands other characters emotional lives or makes a concerted effort to do so. This type of character can be found in *My Father’s Dragon* (1948), *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel* (2013), and *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* (2006). I see the participants as thoughtful and engaging gay, trans, and queer people whom I am grateful to have had the chance to explore the research question: “What role does reading novels (textual or graphic) play in the survival and desires of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer) students?” Below is an example of how I organized the qualitative data.

**Table 1: Participant Interview and Journal Theme Chart Example**

Participant	Fantasy	Identifications	Disidentifications	Pathways/Access
Phi	<i>Book Title</i>	<i>Book Title</i>	<i>Book Title</i>	<i>Book Title</i>

## 4.3 The Participants

### 4.3.1 Phi

Phi is the first person I interviewed for this project. She self-identified as a White, trans woman from a middle class background with southern European heritage. She had been an avid reader since her childhood. Phi was not reading in languages other than English at the time I interviewed her. She enjoyed both fictional and non-fictional texts. The novels she discussed with me included *Agnes Grey* (2010), *The Watchmen* (1986), *The Basic Eight* (1999), *Nevada* (2013), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *Great Expectations* (2001), and *The Great Gatsby* (1925/2003). She explained her identifications or dis-identifications with each of these texts and what that meant for her sense of self. *Agnes Grey* (2010) and *The Basic Eight* (1999) were mentioned by Phi as books she read as an adolescent.

Phi also discussed *Great Expectations* (2001) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925/2003) which were both important because each novel was about a person who transformed who they were. *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* (1964) was discussed in relation to the question of what novels she read as a child.

**Table 2: Phi**

Participant	Fantasy	Identifications	Disidentifications	Pathways
Phi	<i>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix</i> <i>The Watchmen</i>	<i>Nevada</i> <i>The Watchmen</i> <i>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix</i> <i>Agnes Grey</i> <i>The Basic Eight</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i> <i>The Great Gatsby</i>	<i>Nevada</i>

#### 4.3.2 Phi on novels

Phi is the most like a seeker or quester of a fantasy novel such as Harry Potter. This was evident to me in the way she discussed reading. She described why she reads novels in a way that indicated how a retrospective of reading can possibly help trans and queer people find further insight into what forces shaped the kind of literacy they developed throughout their lives.

Why do I read novels? I read books because I wanted to figure out myself I felt I had a big hole in myself. Where everyone else could know and actualize themselves could develop themselves wholly I didn't have that. I didn't have a reason to be proud of myself. I had a lot of self-hatred. Somehow I thought by reading the words of other people and characters I could implant myself. I could contrast myself to them, so to speak. I could be like: "Oh I wouldn't do that, therefore I know this about myself" It was like these books are guides if not surrogate playmates (Phi November, 2013).

Phi understood her way of reading novels to be about a search for subjectivity and a subject position so she could claim to be more certain about who she is rather than feeling lost or

lacking compared to her peers at the time. I will return to this discussion of relationships between subjectivity, subject position, and reading in the analysis section of this chapter. Phi made statements about her reading patterns which are also useful for understanding why reading was important for her subjectivity.

### 4.3.3 Phi's reading patterns

She went on further to describe her reading patterns from her being a toddler to early adolescence which indicated that novels were more engaging at certain points of her life than other points when other types of literature appealed to her more, such as magazines. Also, Phi's difficulty using speech in conversation made communicating difficult for Phi but she found a way to mitigate this aided by being able to read and write well on internet discussion forums. She noted how she stayed in at recess rather than socializing or playing as children are often expected to do. Phi can be said to have multiple literacies.

Did I read many fictional books as a child? I did. For a while I consumed a lot of books from grades 1 to 2, 1 to 5 even. For a period of time between grades 6 to 8 it became more about magazines. But when I was younger it was a natural thing to do. The internet was my other form of communication. I was talking on internet forums when I was 10 to 12 books and words were really easy ways for me to communicate. I guess I had trouble speaking. I had a way of slurring mumbling but I found myself articulate in terms of reading. I could read really well. I read Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix when I was in grade 4. I stayed in during recess to do that. At the time I guess I identified heavily with Harry. I was focused on that (Phi November, 2013).

Phi also had some insightful comments about when she reads and why. She described how this played out for her at the time of our interview.

I'm taking English courses so I am reading novels every day I can't pleasure read right now. I won't be able to until December or summer so I read a lot fewer books. Right now I'm reading a lot of books. When I read them if I read them it would be in the evening going into the night because I feel less pressure and anxiety during the night than during the day there's always some notion of what you should be doing during the day and when it's lost you feel free to be doing what you please...I wish I could read all the time...There's always something temporarily killing your ego so to speak. To replace it

takes hours; it takes hours to really engage with the text. Sometimes you really need to not be yourself. Otherwise you get kind of neurotic; I was definitely neurotic during my teenage years... (Phi November, 2013).

Phi outlined the healing properties of reading to her in this commentary. She makes psychoanalytic connections to reading when she mentions how the social expectations of the day in a capitalist society work to make her feel guilty or lazy if she was to read for pleasure. Social expectations in this case are extensions of the Freudian conception of the super ego. The high internalized authority dictates for Phi when reading for pleasure is appropriate and just how long it will take to be immersed in the world of a novel. Phi's desire to pleasure read was rooted in the need to "not be yourself" which she associated with the ego's need for therapeutic rest from subjectivity and subject positions. The next participant I spoke to was Tau. Tau was similar to Phi in that he also enjoyed and identified with fantasy books.

#### 4.3.4 Tau

Tau identified himself as a gay male and did not claim an ethnicity but did say he considers himself Canadian. I could argue that it is more than likely that in institutional and social contexts Tau would be racialized or ethnicized. He told me he read in English and was learning to read in French. He read several books that have remained important in his childhood. The texts he read as a child included *My Father's Dragon* (1948), *Spy X* (2004), and *Eragon* (2005). *My Father's Dragon* (1948) and *Eragon* (2005) by Christopher Paolini.

He also read Harry Potter novels just as Phi had. His favorite novels as an adult included *The Broken Empire* (2011), *The Tyrant Who Falls in Love* (2006), and *Junjou Romantica* (2006). Tau loves reading gay romance novels especially the Japanese genre of graphic novels known as yaoi and also known more generally in Japan as "Boys Love" stories.

Other novels we discussed but were not necessarily favorite or rich with identification possibilities were *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012), the *Twilight* (2005) series, the *Silverwing* (1997) series, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1997), *Batwoman: Elegy* (2010), *Eon* (2009), and *Eona* (2011). Tau struck me as having the characteristics of a romantic dreamer because of his reading preferences and what he stated about these novels.

**Table 3 Tau**

Participant	Fantasy	Identifications	Disidentifications	Pathways
<b>Tau</b>	<i>My Father's Dragon</i>	<i>The Tyrant Falls in Love</i>	<i>Fifty Shades of Grey</i>	<i>The Tyrant Falls in Love</i>
	<i>Broken Empire</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix</i>	<i>Junjou Romantica</i>
	<i>Batwoman: Elegy</i>	<i>Junjou Romantica</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i>	
	<i>Eon</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i>		
	<i>Eona</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i>		
	<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i>	<i>My Father's Dragon</i>		
	<i>Silverwing</i>			
	<i>Broken Empire</i>			

#### 4.3.5 Tau on reading novels

I asked Tau why he reads novels, what he reads and why he reads the types of novels we discussed. Tau was quite specific about what genres he read and why he read these genres. For Tau having an E-reader means he can have many more books than he would ever have room for on the small bookshelf in his home he described to me. He cannot find everything from these genres at the library which is why the e-reader comes in handy for him, it makes gay romance novels more accessible to him and it fit within his tight budget as a university student. Tau also

reads popular best-selling books to be able to discuss these novels with his peers which indicated that he reads to socialize as well as his own personal choices.

I read two genres: one of them is fantasy and the other one is gay romance. The gay romance ones I can only get in E- book form they are not printed so I can't get them from the library...For the romance novels it's whenever I'm feeling down or unhappy or something has gone wrong and I just want something to make me feel better I always go to read those usually at night. Reading those usually makes me feel better because everything is always happy right? For the fantasy novels it's more like something has to pique my interest. If it's actually a good book I read it any time. I might if I'm on the train or sitting waiting for class something if I have the time I'll just be reading it. At the same time I read things that tend to be very popular like for example Fifty Shades of Grey is not something I normally read (We both laughed) but I read the trilogy just because it was so popular. And I'd like to know what people were talking about (Tau, November, 2013).

*My Father's Dragon* (1948) was his most favorite book as a child because he loves dragons and thought it was a good story. It is also unique because it is the child of the father telling the story as one long flashback memory about when the child's father was a boy who went on a journey to an island to save an enslaved, young dragon from his animal captors. The story is about a young dragon, a mythical creature that he loves. The novel is one of the oldest novels we discussed in the interview which is noteworthy because he told me he is generally not interested in anything older than himself. He is not interested in old fantasy novels particularly because they do not have the pacing he finds stimulating that current fantasy novels have from his point of view. This is also part of why he enjoyed the dragon fantasy novel *Eragon* (2005) by Christopher Paolini. The other genre Tau loved was gay romance. Gay romance novels seemed intimately tied to Tau's subjectivity especially gay manga (Japanese comic book novels).



#### 4.3.6 Yaoi as Gay Romance

Tau loved reading gay romance novels especially the Japanese manga genre of graphic novels known as yaoi or “Boys Love” stories. Sharon Kinsella explains in her work *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (2000) that Yaoi stands for “Yamanashi, Ochi nashi, Imi nashi” which means “No build up No foreclosure No meaning” (p. 113). This term signifies that the plot is a simple or flimsy premise which is not given as much as importance as the romance and sexual relations between the main characters. These stories typically involve two young male protagonists who fall in love despite one of the two lovers being painfully shy, conflicted about their feelings for another male, or having a tragic past that has left him traumatized. These novels are written and drawn by female authors who may identify as being attracted to a different sex, same sex attracted, or lesbian. Some of the most famous authors in the genre are Shungiku Nakamura for *Junjou Romantica* (2006), Hinako Takanagamika for *The Tyrant Falls in Love* (2006) as well as Ayano Yamane, Youka Nitta, and Kazuma Kodaka. These novels are primarily intended for female readers.

However, in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan* (2015) Kazume Nagaike points out the manga books are also enthusiastically read by young queer men and heterosexual men in Japan. Female authors also write “Girls Love” stories known as yuri that means “lily” to connote femininity. These novels are also read widely by women, girls, and men as well.

In yaoi or Boys Love comics one partner (the *seme*) in the relationship is always more assertive and is coded as masculine while the other partner (the *uke*) is shy and passive which are associated with femininity. The occasionally explicit sex scenes in these novels follow these ideas that certain gender expressions are equated with a character’s sexuality. The terms *seme*

and *uke* originated in Japanese martial arts. Mark McClelland explains that (2006), the term *seme* derives from the *ichidan* verb "to attack", while *uke* is taken from the verb "to receive" and is used in Japanese male to male sexual contexts to mean the receptive partner in anal or oral sex. In yaoi, the uke usually moans in a mixture of pain and pleasure when receiving the seme's penis, fingers, or an appropriately shaped object (i.e. a dildo or a cylindrically shaped vegetable).

McClelland (2000) has noted that same sex attracted Japanese men have expressed a preference for novels and art specifically geared towards them such as the works of Goh Mishima, Gengoroh Tagame, Ben Kimura, and Takeshi Matsu. These comics are referred to variously as "Men's Love" or *gei comi* (gay comics). In these works made for gay Japanese men both main characters are typically adults in their late twenties up to late forties age group. These stories usually revolve around men developing a sexual relationship from a homosocial or homoerotic situation in a quotidian context. Tau's favorite stories were yaoi books that strayed from the predictable and arguably gender normative mold of Boys Love comics and these stories were actually similar to "Men's Love" comics. When asked about his favorite yaoi novel, he described it like this:

There's one...the translation is it's called "The Tyrant Falls in Love" I really like that one and one reason is that it's a longer series I tend to like the longer series it's more satisfying for me than a two chapter thing and it's done I want more. I also like the role reversal because a lot of the yaoi stories that have the typical uke-seme relationship, you can predict who's what... the shy passive boy and the aggressive masculine top guy. This one is different it's reversal of that in which neither of them are the shy passive person so it's interesting in that way. There's a lot more background for the characters. It's definitely one of my favorites and unfortunately not all of it has been translated into English even though the series I believe is finished. But not all of it has been translated so I haven't been able to read the whole thing but I'd love to. I loved it...Also for *the Tyrant Falls in Love* I really love the long hair of the manga characters, they are usually my favorite characters the ones with nice, long hair that's one of the reasons why I love that series, the main character's hair (Tau, November, 2013).

Tau loved the romantic elements of this story and his romantic dreamer character was most evident in this comment. Romantic dreamers in the fictional novels Tau read prefer the extraordinary over the typical, mundane, or normative. Upsilon whom I interviewed next was also a fan of yaoi.

#### 4.3.7 Upsilon

I interviewed Upsilon after I had interviewed Phi and Tau. He identified himself as a White, able-bodied, cisgendered, middle class gay male with a southern and northern European background. His mother has a career in education which he says gave him access to many books. He has always loved reading. The books he mentioned in the interview were *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *The House of Leaves* (2000), *Imajica* (1991), and *Two Boys Kissing* (2013). Upsilon could best be described a playful yet analytical observer character.

**Table 4: Upsilon**

Participant	Fantasy	Identifications	Disidentifications	Pathways
Upsilon	<i>House of Leaves</i> <i>Imajica</i> <i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i>	<i>Two Boys Kissing</i> <i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i>	<i>House of Leaves</i>	<i>Two Boys Kissing</i> <i>Imajica</i>

#### 4.3.8 Upsilon on his class and religion

Upsilon discussed his class position and his relationship to organized religion which was ambivalent for him. For Upsilon, being middle class was a tenuous socioeconomic position for his family.

I'm quite able, in terms of class squarely in the middle class but my family used to have financial difficulties when I was younger so at that point I would say lower middle class never to the point where basic necessities were in danger but we had to cut out luxuries. In terms of age I am 19. In terms of religion can I describe myself like I'm I was raised Catholic. But I guess I would describe myself a practicing non-believer which to clarify what I mean by that... when my sister got married I read at her wedding and then the priest afterwards liked the way I read. So he asked me to become a lector reader for a mass at the church. At that point my parents were still forcing me to go to church weekly. I said I may as well do something interesting if I'm going to be forced to go. So I still do that but I'm probably going to quit at some point this year. I don't personally believe but I'm fairly involved in it (Upsilon, February, 2014).

Religion was a source of conflict for Upsilon because it offered no room for his subjectivity and his subject position as a gay male. Upsilon had to read passages from the bible and hear it interpreted in certain ways which is unlike any other reading he has learned to do. Phi also remarked that being Catholic left her feeling guilty and worried without necessarily knowing why. Upsilon and Phi both described having religious families. Being Catholic and Italian I can see that there is a kind of middle class respectability constructed through involvement in the Catholic Church.

In my experience, Roman Catholic faith entails avoiding any excessive behavior, helping other people less fortunate than yourself, recognizing your faults and confessing these flaws regularly, and following certain rules about what food to eat. The good Catholic remains in control of their appetites and when they lose control they must confess and repent. In fact confession has become a central part of discourses in Western societies as Foucault has discussed in *The History of Sexuality* (1978/1990). I could identify with Upsilon's perspective because I have attended Roman Catholic Church services my whole life with a great amount of ambivalence about the entire organization because of Catholic homophobia, sexism, and obvious contradictions between what the church teaches and what its clergy practice.

Selected passages in the bible are continually cited as proof that the Christian God does not accept same sex attraction and non-normative gendered expression. An openly LGBTQ person in a Catholic family is a threat to their family's Catholic and by extension middle class respectability. Upsilon's middle class background did bring him advantageous access to books though when he was a child.

#### 4.3.9 Upsilon on reading in childhood and why he reads novels

Upsilon describes his reading habits as a child and that his mother (a primary teacher) had the resources to bring books to him in ways other children's parents would not necessarily have. Reading books in church was a way to not think about being there as it has been a practice of his family that he has not liked despite having to participate in regularly.

Yes, I did read a lot which was because as a child I wanted to be a writer partially I still do. So I've done a lot of reading and my mother was a primary teacher as well so she owns a lot of books for children and through her I had a lot of access to books at her school as well as my actual school as well as books at the library. So I had three main areas from which I could find texts from to read. So I read a lot and I would often read books in churches of course (laughs). So I was an avid reader why I did that I don't really know. I was thinking of being a writer how that came about was that it was something I always wanted to do. So there was never really a conscious formation of that it was just like an early intuition I can't really say why it's just... I want to say part of me but I think that too cliché... (Upsilon, February, 2014).

Upsilon's love of reading also inspired him to be writer which I have observed the other participants could certainly pursue also but Upsilon described writing with the most enthusiasm. He also spoke about how novels are instructive in that they teach us to listen and care about other people's points of view. This excerpt is part of the conversation Upsilon and I had about why he reads novels.

Aside from these compassionate reasons there is also this thrill to read by reading exciting, emotional things there is an amount of catharsis as well. If you read things that are dramatic with a lot of personal tensions between two people within two groups it helps you to learn to mediate in your own life. Yeah...During school I don't read on my own so much because I have reading to do for school. I'll read on the subway and only when I go home at night. I read during the summer when I have time to myself. I usually try to read for three hours a day. I usually do work outside usually an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. That's in terms of when I read, I read fairly often. Even aside from any mood or like I don't wait for the mood to strike me. It's like I have to read this book this much. That is because I'm very much like a "list" person (Upsilon, February, 2014).

#### 4.3.10 Reading and moods

Upsilon described how reading and his mood were related when I asked him. He described his reaction to a well-written novel which seemed to fit Joseph Gold's (2001) idea about reading as biological experience that you feel throughout your body. This is an example of Upsilon's playful, analytic observer character becoming more apparent to me. He stated:

In terms of actual mood when I read novels my mood changes depending on the events in the story. It's the same empathizing, focalizing with the characters as well as an element of catharsis. It is an action sequence it might get my blood pressure up. I'll be excited. If it's bad happening or someone says something they don't really mean and it causes a lot of tension I think oh no and you get that sick feeling in your stomach. Or if it's a sad event then you might feel more depressed small things start to close in. So I guess it's the vicariously living through the characters that affects my mood causes a physical reaction in me. This could manifest itself in... When you're sad you close up your body... If it is something really good I'll pump the air or something... So the mood goes up and down and changes based on the events in the story, what's happening with the characters and also of course it depends on if I like the characters or not. Because I'm like if a bad thing happens to a character I don't like I go yes! (We both laugh) So it's not always a perfect correlation. As much as you identify with it you're never completely immersed you have some level of critical detachment that's like observing the events. But of course, all of this mood going up and down I would have to be in a certain mood to be led by the text because if I'm not distracted by things in my own life or if I'm angry or if I'm sad I'm not going to be able to take anything in. If I am emotionally compromised that I'm not can it be able to relate with any of the characters (Upsilon, February, 2014).

Upsilon, like Phi needed to be able to immerse himself in a novel to be able to have the kind of deeply involving biological experience Gold (2001) argues for and also to have the blissful experience Barthes (1974) describes where the reader gains a deep insight and is challenged by what they are reading.

#### 4.3.11 Omega

Omega identified herself as a White, Jewish, queer woman. She also enjoyed reading as a child. She read *Matilda* (1988), *Witches* (1983), *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* (2006), *The Tenth of December* (2013), *Blue is The Warmest Color*

(2013), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Nightwood* (2006), *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel* (2013), and *Written on The Body* (1993). For Omega *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012) by Alison Bechdel was a key novel for her life because of the relationship she was with her mother was similar to the relationship Bechdel had with her mother. She also thought the psychoanalytic thinking within the novel made it a rich graphic novel to read. She went into personal detail about why she had these thoughts about this pivotal novel. She discussed the differences between *Fun Home* (2006) and *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012). Both graphic novels were written and drawn by Bechdel. The non-linear *Fun Home* is focused on Bechdel's abusive, closeted gay father. Bechdel herself described *Fun Home* as like a labyrinth with regard to the way she structured the novel. Omega was most like a caregiver and an empath. Omega discussed why she could not identify or relate to *Fun Home* in the ways she identified with *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012).



**Table 5: Omega**

Participant	Fantasy	Identifications	Disidentifications
Omega	<i>Matilda</i> <i>Witches</i> <i>Tenth of December</i>  <i>Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel</i>	<i>Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama</i>  <i>Blue is The Warmest Color</i>  <i>Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel</i>	<i>Written on The Body</i>  <i>Nightwood</i>

#### 4.3.12 Omega on reading novels

Omega is different from the other participants in that she did not have a strong escapist motivation for reading and she was not excited about the fantasy genre. She was more enthusiastic about character driven novels that dwelled on the more ordinary problems of life in a realistic sense. But she did have a very fantastical metaphor for why she loves reading.

If I could have one super power it would be to completely live as another person for a day... to just like witness their thoughts, feelings and reactions...I find that so fascinating understanding how people feel and react...we can never know but reading novels can give us a portrait of that...I like getting into the mind of another person and seeing how they

observe the world. It's just like stimulating creatively. I really like words and etymologies. I really like learning vocabulary and seeing things articulated in different ways which I think authors can be more playful in fiction than in non-fiction. I'm not much of an escapist reader probably because it doesn't happen for me that often but when it does it's an amazing feeling. Probably because I read postmodern literature that's so referential to the text you're reading so it's hard to get immersed. Postmodern literature is structured as a critique of literature as escapism. I read the Harry Potter books...I did read fantasy books...but I'm more interested in what's going on realistically I guess (Omega, February, 2014).

Omega's view of novels offering us a super powered way of understanding led me to imagine her as caregiving empath who tries to feel with another person which is similar to Upsilon's points about why he reads novels. Omega described this as stimulating with a more explicit ethical motivation to care for another by staying in their perspective for a sustained amount of time.

#### 4.3.13 Omega's reading patterns

Omega's reading patterns changed based on who she was identifying with and how she was feeling at that time of the day or in that particular time in her life. Omega like the caregiving empath finds it hard to immerse herself in another's world when her own affects are at an intense level.

I read much better when I'm not going through a stressful time if I'm stressed or there's something on my mind I'll read the same sentence over and over again. I read on weekends and in transit a lot during winter and on vacation, I read a lot more in the summer and when I'm in the bath. I find it easier to read when I'm single it's hard to have alone time when you're in bed with someone (Omega, February, 2014).

For Omega to be able to read is to have the right state of mind to do so. The solitary time needed to read is crucial to Omega just as it was for Upsilon and Phi. Omega said she needed this time to become involved with a book and its characters. Reading is difficult for Omega if she was very distracted by negative feelings. Omega's gradual distancing from identifications with straight protagonists in novels were part of what led her to read the stories of queer authors about

queer people. “I could no longer relate to most protagonists and I was more interested in what queer people think about I was coming out then” (Omega, February, 2014).

For Omega, Alison Bechdel’s *Are you My Mother?* (2012) was a pivotal novel not only because it features Bechdel as the queer female protagonist but also explores the troubled relationship she has with her mother who just like her father is a deeply troubled person. Omega saw parallels between Bechdel’s relationship with her mother and her relationship with her own mother.

I read “*Are you My Mother?*” after I came out. I just really identified with it. She (Alison Bechdel) uses a lot of psychoanalytic theory to explain her identity and her childhood and I just found that really fascinating. I also just found her relationship with her mother pretty similar to my relationship with my mother. Especially... I think my relationship with my mother has changed now that I’m living in Toronto again. But I was living in Montreal and it was difficult for us my parents are divorced they got divorced when I was seven. I lived with my mom for... I saw my dad on the weekends, it was just... we had a very close relationship it was just the two of us in this big house. I think it was hard for us; she was worried about me going to school and... she ended up moving to the Caribbean when I moved out which I think was this defensive move. It was like “You’re moving?! I’m going to leave too! There’s nothing left for me here! “kind of thing...so it was hard for us to keep in touch long distance and there was weird things that keep coming up like she was still supporting me... it’s like when you’re calling to ask for money...those kinds of issues. My mom has a very strong, intense personality and she talks a lot and she’s very passionate and I think that’s kind of made me a good listener...So it’s interesting when I’m going through a struggle and I want to talk to my mom about it...she will connect back to her struggle and then we’re... (Omega, February, 2014).

Omega can see several facets to the books she reads. She recognizes the emotions and attachments at play in these texts and links them to the difficulties of living out marginalized subjectivities. Omega’s reading patterns are also influenced by affect and an ethic of care. I have described the participants and listed the key texts they discussed. I have included color coded diagrams for each participant indicating which texts they discussed and what theme these texts were connected to. I will now describe the overall themes I could see from thinking about the interviews and journals together.

## 4.4 Themes of the Interviews and Journals

I listened to the interviews several times and began to think of themes I could see emerging in terms of how many times a word or subject that was referenced as well as the way certain subjects were discussed. I reviewed the responses to the journal questions. Based upon this work I observed six themes initially. These themes were fantasy, identifications, dis/identifications, distancing from selfhood, mother-child literacy relations, and accessibility of texts. After thinking about these categories and whether or not they could be condensed into four categories, I decided four categories summarized what patterns and similarities I saw when thinking about all the interviews and journals together.

## 4.5 The Fantasy Genre

The fantasy genre was the most powerful theme in all of the interviews or journals. The interviewees discussed why it was such an important aspect of the novels they read and found a powerful resonance in these types of books because as a genre it is full of possibilities. Upsilon described his childhood love of reading fantasy books. He made the connection between the fantasy genre and queerness when he discussed his love for Harry Potter books.

My favorite book when I was seven and again it was pretty mainstream is Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. I think Harry Potter has a lot of appeal to me partially because I was a very studious child and magic also appealed to me. So it had two things that appeal to me magic fantasy and adventure and then the thing that I was obsessed with school! So it had that nice coalescence of those two fixations. Also there's that it's kind of a similar narrative to that of queer people you discover a sort of lost history that you know about yourself and it's something that makes you different from most people around you and then even and this is the case with a lot of fantasy you go to a new place and it's like leaving the normative community and coming into the queer community. So I think there are some parallels there (Upsilon, February, 2014).

As an adult he continued to love fantasy genre books. However, he described how his focus narrowed in the way he chose books to read from this genre. A complex narrative was important to Upsilon because it is more intellectually challenging than straight forward

metaphors or singular narrator novels. Upsilon also connects queerness with the fantasy genre in his discussion of how metaphors work in fantasy texts.

I don't enjoy dry realist texts either. I like everything with literature is symbols. So I think fantasy has the most space to have symbols. A real text you could refer to someone as being like a spider whereas in a fantasy text person actually becomes spider. So for me realist texts are the texts of similes and fantasy texts are the texts of metaphors. I like anything that has a complex narrative and one that has multiple themes rather than a straight text with only one underlying meaning. Literary fantasy is my main focus but anything with a complex narrative interests me (Upsilon, February, 2014).

On the topic of books he could not read or access, Upsilon discussed the queer fantasy genre as being the least accessible yet most desired genre of texts for him to read. Upsilon did not possess the kinds of access that those with credit cards, their own money, and/or a private mailbox can take advantage of. A person living in the family home who is not yet out or who is out may not be able to do this because they fear disapproval or reprisal from their families.

Phi also spoke quite a bit about the fantasy genre in her interview. She made these comments about the fantasy genre providing her with a rich characters and scenarios to identify with. Phi also discussed how fantasy stories provide young readers who feel disempowered a narrative they can develop strong attachments with.

I read Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix when I was in grade 4. I stayed in during recess to do that. At the time I guess I identified heavily with Harry. I was focused on that...What was my favourite book as a child? Probably be Harry Potter because it was the most things I read of a series a lot. Why? I think I had a fantasy about being a wizard. Bored of life already know world-weary, the modern condition. At the time I thought I was reading a prescient notion of what my life was going to be. It was a guide, you know? Yeah. I think when you are a child there is a tendency to believe you're special. That those series really cater to. That you are the chosen one, exclusivity, notions of belonging to a group are... That helps form a self when you are younger. I think when you're still figuring out yourself you still cling to notions of belonging to a group. Let's just say you know very little about yourself so you hold on to those things (Phi, November, 2013).

Tau loved an even broader range of fantasy texts. He also discussed science fiction, which for him differs from fantasy in the moods and thematic path of such novels. The other most important books in the fantasy genre for Tau were *Eon* (2009) and *Eona* (2011) by Alison Goodman. Each novel involves a heroic quest against an evil villain and dragons are central to the plot.

Eon and Eona is a fantasy it's about dragons which I love it's actually about not your typical Dragon it's Chinese Dragon style it has a very Chinese setting and premise I think. It was the only book I've ever read like that. So I really enjoyed it. And that's probably another reason why I think it's a good book to have... The dragons in the book you can't really decide if they are real or not. There's that twist to it. I mean in the end they seem to disappear and never come back... there is a lot of layers to that book I know it. If I were going to be a teacher I think this book would be perfect to teach for young adults' novel study (Tau, November, 2013).

The fantasy genre was also important in terms of the possibilities it offered the participants in terms of identification.

## 4.6 Identifications

Identification was the second most important theme in the interviews because the interviewees had such strong attachments to characters in novels and also the need to understand the perspective of another person different from themselves. Identifications with characters in the novels were often complicated and for some of the participants these became moments that moved beyond identifying with gender normativity or heteronormativity. These identifications were actually worked into more affirming attachments to nurture their own emergent identities. Phi read *The Watchmen* (1986) as a young teenager and identified with the Comedian, a very unlikeable character who is overtly misogynistic and homicidal for someone who is supposed to be a superhero. However, at the time it was the Comedian's philosophical views on life that Phi had identified with. When Phi read the graphic novel again two years ago she could no longer identify with the Comedian.

Graphic novels...I didn't really read graphic novels. I read graphic novels when I was younger I read the Watchmen I didn't really like graphic novels it seemed like the illusion of depth...the Comedian...is that a bad thing to say that? the rapist? He took the same view about life that I did. Words seem pointless, you're here and laughing about it. I just thought about it and took it very seriously. Because I was like in grade 9 or 10. But last year I read it again and I was like I don't really believe that anymore also I think it is gross, the things he does to women. I think that's because I identify with women in novels (Phi, November, 2013).

At the around the same time Phi read two novels with strong and enchanting white female protagonists that she formed powerful identifications with. Daniel Handler, a straight, white male wrote the white straight female protagonist in *The Basic Eight* (1999) in a way that Phi found fascinating and convincing to her surprise. Anne Bronte's *Agnes Grey* (2010), which was about a Victorian school teacher, was also appealing but Phi was not sure why exactly.

Around age 14 or so there were really weird novels there were novels that I loved but I didn't even know why like *Agnes Grey* by Anne Bronte which is just about some girl who teaches kids... and yet I was so drawn to it I loved it. I think if I tried to argue it now there are other books like it like *The Basic Eight* by Daniel Handler who have these young women protagonists but they function as a kind of fantasy they were a land where I felt I could wholly identify with this female protagonist and get lost in her world and want to be her. But I didn't comprehend the very notion I wanted to be her I just thought it was very enjoyable fantasy a very appealing fantasy even like this Victorian school girl marm thing person like I don't know... If you're familiar with Anne Bronte she wasn't nearly as gothic romantic as her sisters... she was way more realist. It was very much a very personally informed narrative of the experience of teaching children. It was one of the only jobs available to her I like it... (Phi, November, 2013).

Reading novels was also similar to other forms of play with subjectivity. Phi described childhood games of playing pretend. Phi attributes this desire to her then unrealized trans subjectivity emerging through the preference for these types of activities.

I had difficulties separating worlds... I had lots of friends or people willing to engage in a fantasy with me to explore the notions of identities and bodies. That sounds like we had sex or something but I would say the idea of trading faces with someone or wearing a mask or becoming someone else was something I engaged in a lot as a young child to satisfy a feeling of wanting to be something else. Like the fantasy was just so appealing you know. Again it took me a long time to acknowledge why I was so repulsed by my own body I was so engrossed in these fantasies (Phi, November, 2013).

She also described why she thinks she could identify with male characters despite compelling identifications with white females and femininity. Phi enjoyed reading and identifying with the white male protagonists in *The Great Gatsby* (1925/2003) and *Great Expectations* (2001). But those identifications seemed more like dis-identifications with a dominant culture than identifications with subjectivity like her own.

Phi discussed *Nevada* (2013) as a novel that had two different characters she could identify with. The main character Maria, a white trans woman and the other protagonist a white man named James is a trans woman too but has not come to this realization yet. Maria scares James off without intending to. Phi argues that Maria and James represent two different periods of experience in one trans person's life. Phi described it like this:

Nevada was a good read even though it's depressing there is one of these things about a book and that is say oh that's me kind of like someone who has taken hormones suddenly gets tits someone like me. Somewhere in there certainly is female and then the second half of the book presents this figure that you used to be and they talk and she tries to convince him that he is trans but she comes on a bit too strong. And it has this total trans feminist aspect to it to explain why the masturbation aspect is so appealing but she does it in a way that is just a bit too much for someone at that stage. If some trans woman came up to me and did that I would probably feel terrified and definitely did when I was first transitioning the notion that of identifying with trans women was just like Uugh! Like get away from me I was just confronting the fact that I wanted to be a girl and when my doctor who is a trans woman herself was like "I'm just like you" That was the most terrifying thing she could have said to me at that point in time. I didn't want to be attached to something that I didn't really know yet. She comes on too strong and they go to the casino and because they just want to say fuck it! Let's go! and he decides that he's not trans after all and he goes back to his girlfriend... He just ditches her and the novel ends (Phi, November, 2013).

Upsilon also loved and identified with characters in a novel he enjoyed also. The characters in *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) is different from *Nevada* in that the novel works to depict several gay males experiences who are very different from each other in terms of racialization, ethnicity, and class. He also used the novel to relieve tension between himself and his mother about his sexuality.



One of them was “Two Boys Kissing” by David Levithan. I really liked that one, it seems very Greek, especially the chorus and the tragedy...so I really liked that. I really enjoyed it and I even forced my mother to read it. Which I think was good too because it helped her understand it more, because you learn to focalize and identify with and sympathize with the characters. It features characters in different stages, different involvement, backgrounds, it was really good (Upsilon, February, 2014).

Upsilon’s identifications with the novel stem from its wider range of gay male characters than is typical seen in young adult gay fiction which includes the spirits of gay men who have died from HIV/AIDS, young non-white gay men of various ethnicities, and a young gay trans man. Upsilon also provided a commentary about why he thought novels had a pedagogical quality that opens up space for readers to identify with characters and practice to understand people in your real life.

...Especially if it is a historical novel from a particular time period. If it's a novel from a different culture, then depending on how you are your reading the story, it will appear strange to you or the characters have a different value or moral system which could be completely bizarre. You have to check your own presumptions but what's right and what's wrong. What a person should and shouldn't do before you start. This isn't to say that you should let it wash over you uncritically. It's just like an opportunity for you to try to understand other people. It's almost like practicing to understand people except it's in a fictional realm to help you understand people in real life (Upsilon, February, 2014).

Upsilon also foregrounds a way in this commentary to gently make readers aware of their privileges and advantages over other people. Reading novels to Upsilon is a way to learn to be empathetic to other people much like Omega’s thoughts about the possibilities novels offer for identification and empathy. Also Upsilon like Phi understands reading as a way to let your own subjectivity or ego rest. There is a therapeutic function to reading Tau and I discussed *Junjou Romantica* in the interview. *Junjou Romantica* (2006) was his other favorite yaoi series. Roughly translated the title means “Pure Romance” He described the three stories contained within the novel. The romance he enjoyed most was the relationship between Nowaki and Hiroki. Nowaki (the *seme*) falls in love with Hiroki (the *uke*) when he sees him crying about his

relationship with Akihiko one fateful day. Nowaki asks Hiroki to be his tutor and eventually becomes socioeconomically equal to Hiroki to mitigate their four year age difference.

I can't remember what the translation for that is but it's actually three storylines that are loosely connected there's one of them that I really like. The three storylines differ one of them is a typical one, one of them deals with an age difference between an 18 year old man and a 28 year old man, and the third one which is my favorite. It's one of those loves at first sight novels that didn't have the stereotypical things that's why I liked it and it was more interesting I guess (Tau, November, 2013).

He elaborated about this story *Junjou Egoist* in a journal exchange and when I asked him which character was his favorite and which character he identified with most in that manga this was part of his reply : “Yes my fave character is Nowaki, which makes sense since I identify most with Hiro-san. :P.” (Tau, July, 2014).

Tau's identification with and enjoyment of this particular story in the *Junjou Romantica* series is because it is the one story in the series that does not follow the typical tropes of the yaoi genre. Tau was the only participant who described direct identifications with racialized, non-white characters. In the story *Junjou Egoist* that features the romance between Hiroki (or Hiro-San) and Nowaki, Hiroki is the *uke* in their relationship but he is very assertive and temperamental unlike most *uke* type characters that are often gentle and painfully shy. Nowaki is gentle, introverted, and also taller than Hiro but younger than him who offsets another typical trope of the genre in which the masculine *seme* is usually taller and a few years older than the *uke*.



**Figure 1-Junjou Romantica (Junjou Egoist) *Junjou Romantica* (Nakamura, 2007).**

There were other texts that the participants did not have these kinds of direct or seemingly linear identifications with. Omega described her identifications with characters in a several novels. She discussed why she identified more strongly with Alison Bechdel in *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012):

It's a really interesting relationship with a very odd person also connecting a lot of it back to literature I thought that was interesting there was also like I connected a lot less to it because I connected a lot to the psychoanalytic theory in "Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama" "I hadn't read a lot of the James Joyce texts that she was referring to...Fun Home and so yeah she's really articulate and talented and I really like her work. I

identified with "Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama "more. I think my biggest struggle was having my mom reject and then accept my identity (Omega, February, 2014).

She was also like Phi read a variety of texts identifying with characters and authors that did not fit normative expectations for someone with her subject position. Omega liked fiction that took on different forms just as Upsilon did within his selection of texts that we discussed.

I really loved *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel* by David Rakoff it's written all in rhyme. It's like one long poem that was really beautiful it centred on 5 or 6 main characters weaving through generations and like different genders and different sexualities, people from different class backgrounds it was really beautiful...He was writing it as he was dying and one of the main characters is a gay man dying of AIDS and I think he kind of mirrored his struggle with cancer with that character...it was sad I was really crying by the end but it was really beautiful...you can read in an afternoon...I also *The Tenth of December* by George Saunders – he puts magnifying a problem in current society and magnifying it in a very slight way.. It's a good dystopic novel...I find it hard to read things written by heterosexual men...I think David Foster Wallace is one of my favorite writers. His male characters are usually suffering. What does it say about heterosexual men that they have to be suffering to not be insufferable? (Omega, February, 2014).

Omega's caregiving empath character comes through in her identifications with David Rakoff, the character based on him who was dying of AIDS in *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel* (2012) and David Foster Wallace's suffering heterosexual male protagonists. David Rakoff passed away in 2012 because of his cancer. David Foster Wallace had severe depression for many years and sadly he hung himself in 2008. Omega appreciated these authors and their vulnerable white male characters. There were other novels that the participants experienced dis-identifications with. These were texts that were either heterosexist, gender normative, transphobic or homophobic and in some cases queer texts that constructed queer subjectivities in certain ways which the participants partly identified with but also found problematic at the same time.

## Dis/identifications

Dis/identification was the next most important theme in the interviews. The participants managed to reinterpret characters and situations within novels to nurture their emerging queer identities. Phi found that she identified with Harry because of his fantastic abilities and the fantastic world he lived in had strong appeal in childhood. Phi connected with Harry Potter and his story because of the affirmation it offered. Harry Potter is the story of an awkward, white, straight cisgendered boy who lives with the awful Dursleys who mistreat him. He becomes a hero once he goes away to the Hogwarts school. Harry Potter seems on the surface to be unlikely reading for trans youth to identify with. Phi explained her attachments to Harry and made it clear how someone with an emerging trans subjectivity could use the text to affirm a marginal selfhood. When we discussed *The Watchmen* (1986) she talked about her identification with the Comedian which was difficult to maintain because of his intense misogyny.

Phi could no longer identify with this character because her identifications with women in novels became much stronger. She did identify with two more likeable straight White male characters than the Comedian. Pip in *Great Expectations* and Jay Gatsby from *The Great Gatsby* were two characters she identified with despite being two heteronormative characters written by straight, white men. Seeing queerness or finding a way to identify with these characters is a creative response which pushes against the encoded meaning of these texts.

So the men I find in books the ones who narrate books are just so different from men you see every day who are under that the pressures because I think men talk to themselves in a way they feel they are neutral gender especially through texts they are just logical beings whereas in reality there are constant crisis masculinity that you have to fend off. Let me tell you I am so relieved to be free of that. I was just like no not even going to enter that anymore I'm entering femininity which is even worse. Which is like feeling like you are not good enough anyway. I had not the biggest issue relating to men it was when I became aware of their underlying misogyny that I ... Pip seems to please himself

the ways I did and has this constant string of guilt for no reason and I was in Catholic school for fourteen years and let me tell you I felt guilty all the time. I didn't know why (Phi, November, 2013).

Phi also remarked that she did not necessarily need trans women characters to identify with in fiction all the time because she did not think they were written very well in general when they appear as a protagonist or a supporting character. Phi stated her perspective succinctly and with regard to her own embodiment. Phi argues for fiction as way of losing the self, a way of forgetting parts of her own subjectivity.

I'm going to put forth the notion that maybe I don't want to read books that reflect my gender and/or sexually identities. Because to a large extent they aren't done well and maybe I'm kind of sick of reading about being trans. Maybe I hear it all the time from my own head. Maybe as I transition to be a woman and maybe I would just like to have a girl character so that I don't have to think about being trans for a second. I think about it all the time. I wake up and it's like oh I'm trans, my body is telling me "Hey! you're a boy (Phi, November, 2013).

Phi was the participant who expressed the greatest ambivalence about reading and identifying with characters who reflected her subject position. Trans women in fiction only reflected her subject position but not her subjectivity which is what makes a difference in these identifications. A character may share a subject position with the reader but this does not mean there will be identification necessarily especially when no part of fictional character's subjectivity seems to mesh with the reader's subjectivity. Tau had an interesting disidentification and attraction to a Harry Potter villain, Draco Malfoy. He described this for me. Tau also identified with Draco Malfoy the cowardly bully and a consistent antagonist in the Harry Potter series who becomes a more complicated character in each book of the series.

I'd have to say the Harry Potter series and that I realized after reading it I actually identified with the antagonist. Like, my favorite character in that series and movies is Draco Malfoy. I love Draco it was kind of an epiphany for me. Every situation he was in I was cheering for him even when it was at the expense of Harry or one of those three since then I'm always on Draco's side. I have a soft spot for those kinds of characters. Yeah there's a misunderstanding he is misunderstood so when people say I hate Malfoy

I'm like why? Especially after reading the seventh book. You really see that vulnerability in him (Tau, November, 2013).

Tau dis-identified with the ostensibly straight, insecure bully Draco in the Harry Potter novels. Draco also has a racialized, classist characterization because he is depicted as a conventionally handsome, economically privileged white male with very light blond hair. Tau had both an affiliation with Draco and an attraction to him as an anti-hero or tragic villain. Tau has the conflict with his reading and his peers reading of these texts in that he is drawn to a “bad boy” type when normative expectations might encourage a gay reader to identify more with Harry or the overtly gay benevolent mentor, Albus Dumbledore in the novel series. Omega experienced an explicit dis-identification with lesbian fiction which was similar to Phi’s criticism of trans women in fiction. Omega and her girlfriend have read a wide selection of lesbian books and Omega came to this conclusion about it at the time of our interview.

In lesbian fiction there's this yin yang duality...there's the one woman constantly looking for stimulation elsewhere somewhere. There's a focus on butch-femme relationships, almost never femme-femme. I haven't actually found a novel that's like how my relationships are or how I like to form relationships. (Omega, February, 2014).

She also discussed an older novel *Nightwood* (2006) written by Djuna Barnes in the 1920's but was first published in 1937 about two women in love: Robin and Nora. However, this eloquent love story is interrupted by a cross-dresser who is pretending to be a doctor whose dialogue made the book difficult to read at times.

My girlfriend loves reading really poetic prose. There's a book called *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes it was written in the 20's I think. It's a lesbian love story...Its very poetic and parts of it are so beautiful but there's this doctor character that just rants like it will be like a chapter (Omega, February, 2014).

Disidentification was a smaller theme that extended from identification but was important enough to necessitate its own category. Heteronormative texts became meaningful in ways that their authors would have never intended to the participants. Upsilon outlined why reading can be

nurturing for a queer person's psyche because as he said: "It helps you form counterarguments; rethink your place in the world, and to understand another person perspective even if you disagree with such perspectives" (Upsilon, February, 2014). Queer texts can also fail on some level of identification for queer and trans readers if the queer and trans characters are not people that can be identified with. Access or pathways to reading explicitly queer texts was the last theme that I recognized in the information. I will discuss this theme next.

## 4.7 Pathways/ Access

For young queer readers disidentifying with "straight" texts is one response to the trauma of exclusion and anti-queer or anti-trans prejudice. But simply gaining access to or having the space to explore queer texts that speak far more literally to your subjectivity was somewhat difficult for the participants. Upsilon discussed the difficulty he had before coming out as gay accessing and engaging with specifically queer texts.

I found this question really hard because the only ones I can think of was this book called *Imajica* by Clive Barker. It sounded really interesting to me because it's about five dimensions and there is an agender character. I heard about it a few years and I thought it was so interesting. I tried to locate it but they only had one copy at the Toronto Public Library. I could never get it because there was like four holds on that one copy. So would take six months and it never worked. I could have gone on Amazon and bought it. I will check and probably do that at some point. Not everyone has the financial resources to do that. A lot of the books that I wanted to read but I couldn't were queer fantasy texts. I couldn't read them because they're printed by small presses and not usually in libraries. If they do have it if that some small library far from where I live. And then because everyone wants one thing there will be a bunch of holds on it. So I'll never get access to it (Upsilon, February, 2014).

Tau read queer texts openly amongst friends and family once he had realized he was gay but did not describe a period of the kind of very secretive queer text reading as Upsilon did. Tau found queer texts provided him with a metaphorical pathway in that he had literature that spoke



to him and he could carry it around easily in his electronic reading device. I asked Tau: Has reading novels been helpful to your understanding of your gender and or sexual identities?

I think so, definitely the gay romance novels. I read so many of them they definitely helped me understand sexuality a lot better. Not so much gender but definitely sexuality. I guess gender too not as much (Tau, November, 2013).

Tau came out at the same time as his reading interests shifted to gay romance and yaoi. Coming out as a gay man functioned as a pathway to explicitly gay and homoerotic reading for him.

The time I started coming out coincided with the time I started reading gay romance novels so was like I wasn't worried anymore. In the e-reader I don't have to worry about a cover. Sometimes I feel self-conscious about people reading if I'm sitting and they are standing. There are some books I have though that I went and bought from Chapters and they are pretty graphic it's a cowboy story because I love cowboys. I have this fascination with cowboys. I read everything I can find about them. The cover shows a cowboy who is topless turned around and he's holding his pants just below is bare butt, he's kind of peeking over his shoulder and holding it. But I have a book cover specifically for the purpose of when I'm in public (Tau, November, 2013).

Omega also made a metaphorical pathway out of the queer texts she read because she saw how therapeutic novels can be for her and other queer women in similar situations. Coming out as gay, lesbian, or trans made accessing queer texts easier for all the participants. Now that I have discussed the themes I observed in the interviews I will begin my analysis and theorizing of these themes in relation to the research question.

## 4.8 The Role of Fantasy in Palliative Self-Care

In this section I will present my arguments based on my analysis of the information in the interviews and journals. I created a thesis statement in response to my research question: "What role does reading novels (textual or graphic) play in the survival and desires of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer) students? The statements made by the interviewees had led me to argue that reading novels whether graphic or textual is a form of palliative self-care for these queer and

trans readers. Each interviewee retrospectively realized that several novels were important to improving the quality of their lives with regard to their selfhood, their familial relationships, and also their peer relationships. Reading novels was not the singular answer to all their problems or difficulties involving sexuality or gender but it was a significant part of how they creatively addressed these traumatic experiences.

The participants realized that novels were helpful for their self-care by reading certain genres especially fantasy (a genre of potentiality and affirmation), seeking kinship with a novel (a friendship of sorts), and performing a variation of bibliotherapy by analyzing and applying the knowledge of the novel about subjectivity to their own lives. The participants did this by reading about another person's similar or parallel experiences, analyzing these experiences, and developed new understandings from this analysis to retroactively or unconsciously heal a wounded psyche.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1978/1990) Michel Foucault's exploration of the "cultivation of the self" in *The Care of The Self* is also relevant in understanding the participants' decisions to find more in reading than entertainment or information consumption. Foucault described the "care of the self" performed by ancient Greeks and Romans in this way: "...in order to behave properly, in order to practice freedom properly, it was necessary to care for the self, both in order to know one's self-and to improve one's self, to surpass one's self, to master the appetites engulfing you" (1987, p. 5).

In *Technologies of the Self* (1988) Foucault argued that care of the self involves practices of freedom including the use of journal writing, engaging in dialogue, and memories. The participants read novels and discussed them with me in a process that involved journal writing, engaging in dialogue, and the critical use of memory. What I find valuable in these

recommended practices is that a person is urged to actively nurture their own selfhood through a critical and affective use of language. In a way that was somewhat similar to ancient Greeks and Romans the participants retroactively came to an understanding of their readings of novels as a form of self-care. The participants read novels in a way that was about creating a new way of life in a world where their sexual desires and/or gender expressions are not accepted. I return to Cixous (1993) to understand this point because she argued that reading is nourishing and nurturing for the Self as it allows a person to have a secret, affirming pleasure of entering another world (p. 21).

There was no explicit education in their early life histories before they exercised the practice of freedom to come out as queer, gay, lesbian, or trans that directed them to make reading novels a part of queer and trans self-care. However they all performed this reflective, creative act anyway, they learned to find themselves or inspiration in the novels they read. The participants engagement with novels is notably different from other forms of LGBTQ specific self-care such as attending LGBTQ support groups, LGBTQ positive psychological counselling, or taking antidepressants or anti-anxiety drugs that are traditionally put forward as therapeutic.

These other forms of self-care purport to strengthen a marginal and/or traumatized self but they do not usually entail that a LGBTQ person participating in any of these acts of self-care to perform their self-care in a creative fashion. The typical model of LGBTQ support groups for example involves sitting in a circle sharing narratives such as coming out stories or experiences of anti-LGBTQ prejudice. This is not to say that such support is not needed or not helpful, these are definitely vital forms of support. These groups make LGBTQ people feel less isolated and demonstrate the widespread, varied, and systemic nature of anti-LGBTQ oppression.

These creative acts are also intimately tied to memory. Memory was a significant part of this creative way of living for the participants. Memories are animated by the affects we regenerate when we reconstruct an event or in the participants' cases what these novels mean to them currently through what affects they are tied to in a past moment. The fantasy genre books the participants spoke of are dream-like just as memories can be. There is psychic labor involved with dreams just as there is with memory in reconstructing them to be coherent and then to make meaning of these events and associated affects. Indeed, the memory of a novel that was momentarily helpful or life changing was a magical, treasured experience to the participants. Being able to find a magical experience in the reading of a novel is fantastic. Fantasy novels are dreamy, playful, and most of all your most desired wishes can come true in this genre. For each of the participants the fantasy genre was one of the most meaningful genres of novel they had read. Tau told me he loves the fantasy genre in particular because it exemplifies how imaginative fiction can be, he said:

I think so I think also the fact that it's so completely unrealistic. I don't like reading nonfiction...I like the fantastical aspect it's creative and imaginary anything can happen you know (Tau, November, 2013).

The fantasy genre, graphic novels, and unconventional forms of storytelling have a dreamy way of representing a reality. The magical powers and mythical creatures that are alive in *Eon* (2009), *Eona* (2011), *My Father's Dragon* (1948), and the *Harry Potter* series are the sort of imaginative conceptions that emerge in daydreams. Eona, the character wanted to be a respected leader and her relationship with the dragons in the novels is very much like a dream come true but with consequences. The dragons in the story may or may not be real. The protagonist of *My Father's Dragon* (1948) meets a talking female cat and sneaks away to save an imprisoned baby dragon on a far off island. Harry Potter discovers he has the potential to be a powerful sorcerer. For these queer readers entering worlds where dreams and wishes can come

true is a welcome relief from lived realities where there is no shortage of disappointment, injustice, pain, and sorrow. Upsilon argued in favor of fantasy in a way that is similar to Tau using literary terms such as simile and metaphor to distinguish between realist fiction and fantastic fiction. His most important point being that fantasy has fewer limitations than realistic texts because the fantasy genre communicates chiefly through metaphors.

The chorus of gay men lost to AIDS and homophobia in *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) are like the ghosts we may encounter in a dream. The form of storytelling can be dreamlike as well especially with regard to the nonlinear flow of the narratives in *Are You My Mother?* (2012), *Blue is The Warmest Color* (2013), and *House of Leaves* (2000). All of these examples support the argument that reading is a powerful experience for the participants especially reading fantasy and graphic novels. There is a comfort to letting your Self travel to another place, time, and psyche. Reading novels becomes a kind of intimate meeting or journey between your Self and the novel.

#### 4.9 Identifications: Making Affiliations with Novels

In his essay *Sur la lecture* or “On Reading” Marcel Proust described books as being like friends (1905/1987, p. 123). Proust’s description of books as friends is particularly striking because the way the participants and I described our favourite, sustaining books was quite similar to the way that you might speak affectionately about an old friend. The interviewees and I had read some of our most beloved books several times. Adding to this discussion Omega stated that:

Reading a novel is a very internal, individual experience...being forced to talk about a book can almost ruin it...it can almost ruin that internal experience you’re having with a book. Sometimes I feel that way, other times I want to talk about it (Omega, February, 2014).

Omega's thinking parallels that of Proust. She argued that having to discuss a book at a book club or reading group takes away from the powerful experience we had individually with that book. We hear other interpretations and perhaps our most beloved character is harshly criticized by another reader who does not understand the character or characters as we do. Then we return to the book with all these other interpretations affecting the way we originally looked at the novel.

This is a point of discussion that I doubt would arise often during a famed Oprah book club meeting. Mary Kooy's (2006) research project with female teachers in a book club elicited a more positive perspective on the experience. One of Kooy's (2006) participants, Louise came to the following conclusion about the value of book clubs:

Professionally, I enjoy seeing how others react to various elements of a text. It helps to remind me of the diversity of reactions in my own classroom. Listening to others reminds me of the need to create space for students to talk and to model and teach them the value of listening to one another (p. 219).

There is nothing inherently wrong with Louise's thinking about book clubs in this instance but book clubs usually move through a prearranged set of books. Reading to soothe a trauma is also quite different from reading the book of the month in a book club because it is not necessarily a matter of choice. Novels that an individual chooses to read for personal reasons can create different relationships than the books we are instructed to read. The novels the participants chose to read were the novels that had a positive effect on them. When individuals read a novel they chose and love the book then they have become attached to the story and it has been brought into their own minds.

In *The Group and the Unconscious* (1984), Didier Anzieu argues that whenever humans come together in groups they are unified by a purpose but a group's sense of unity can break down if individuals in the group feel their individual desires to be part of the group are threatened causing a fragmentation of the "group ego" being constructed through the sense of unity (p. 106). Book clubs can fragment these individual relations to a novel especially if interpretations of the novel become so divided. Individualized relations through subjectivity with the novel may be very disrupted by encounters with Others' subjectivities and encounters with the author, characters, and form of the text. For these reasons book clubs can be fraught with tension for the ego especially when a relation to a novel in terms of identification was built on loss and trauma.

If the memories of a novel were affirming to an individual's subjectivity are threatened by different interpretations then the ego can be thwarted in its efforts towards initiating the work of mourning. The book club discussion can be risky in this regard. A reflective and potentially healing moment for the ego could be lost. It is as if the witnessing of an Other's trauma through a novel becomes recursive as it reflects some piece of our own trauma back at us. This recursive aspect of identification may reopen old wounds but at the same time this process can be healing built up psychic scar tissue that trauma related to gender, sexuality, racialization, ability, and class helped create. Cixous ( 1975; 1993) and hooks ( 1994; 2003) both encourage dialogue around reading and writing in their work but both thinkers insist that such dialogue be critically aware, ethically considerate of a person's social differences, and inspire creativity. If a book club discussion is not set up in these ways then Omega's criticism of book clubs is not being responded to. For Omega a perceived meeting of minds was crucial to forming identifications with a novel.

The meeting of our psychic interior with those of others is a phenomenon Omega finds particularly striking within reading. Omega chose novels like David Rakoff's *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, And Perish: A Novel*, *Blue is The Warmest Color*, and *Are you My Mother?* because they provide their readers with deep insight into the experiences of their protagonists. Tau, Upsilon, and Phi also chose novels that they felt gave them opportunities to identify with protagonists who were like them in some ways. Phi had a broad range of identifications with characters in novels from straight men to lesbian trans women. Tau identified strongly with the queer men in yaoi romance stories. Upsilon identified with a range of characters in fantasy and magically real characters like those in *Two Boys Kissing* but also quite strongly with straight female singers who do not write novels. Novels were a powerful site of identification and dis/identification for the participants and talking about this particular effect novels had on them led the participants to investigate their own interiority.

#### 4.10 Dis/Identifications: Reflecting and Paralleling

Alberto Manguel, an Argentine-Canadian gay writer has argued in *The Library At Night* (2006) that : “The power of readers lies not in their ability to gather information, in their ordering and cataloguing capability, but in their gift to interpret, associate and transform their reading.” (p. 91).

The participants' most cherished novels were the ones with characters they could strongly identify with. These identifications were animated by memories of the context in which they were read. As an adolescent, Phi loved being able to enter the interior worlds of Agnes Grey, the titular character of Anne Bronte's novel as well as Flannery Culp, the female protagonist of the *Basic Eight* who it turns out is an unreliable narrator.



This was at a time when Phi began to identify more strongly with female characters and could no longer identify with men like the Comedian. Phi identified with Harry Potter as a child because he was different and part of this extraordinary group of people with unique talents. Phi stayed in at recess time in school to read a Harry Potter book. But her most powerful current identifications were with Maria and James, the two main characters in *Nevada*. Maria is a very similar person to herself but Maria is also an extreme character and for this reason Phi understands why James who is trans but not fully accepting of this unrealized trans subjectivity flees from her. Maria, Phi argues is not someone James can identify with and he retreats from her because of this. She is not the woman James could see himself becoming. Phi thought *Nevada* was therapeutic in the way that Imogen Binnie contrasted these two characters which Phi argued could represent one trans woman's life rather than the lives of two different characters. For Phi this novel had a pedagogical quality that makes it important reading for young trans women.

Omega also spoke of powerful identifications with characters in novels. But these identifications were tempered though by the fact that the novel did not quite fit the way she forms relationships and that this was a general dissatisfaction she has had with many current and previous lesbian protagonist novels. Whereas *Are you my Mother?* also felt therapeutic to Omega because the memories Bechdel has of her self-involved, homophobic mother resonated with her own history of difficulty with her own mother. Tau dis-identified with Draco Malfoy who is not particularly queer instead of Harry Potter or Albus whom are more easily read as queer because of their subjectivities. Upsilon had dis-identifications with characters that are not explicitly queer such as Karen Green, the straight, claustrophobic heroine who out of love rescues her husband from a malevolent darkness in *House of Leaves*. The participants found

traces of themselves in these characters and their conflicts which they realized after having read these novels.

The kind of transformative reading the participants did with these texts demonstrates an effort on their part to read in a way that lives beside trauma in the way Tanya Lewis (1999) conceived this process. I stress though that they came to the realization that the novels have a therapeutic function after having read these books not before. The participants did not deliberately select books as a therapy method. The dialogic relationships that unfold between readers, authors, and texts create the opportunity for a fictional story to become therapeutic for a reader and an author.

#### 4.11 Creating Pathways: When reading and writing becomes therapeutic

Books go places that politics, politicians, and activists will never go. And so it's important for gay writers to keep on producing that kind of material because it's outreach and it's a lifeline you know gay books save gay lives! -Pat Califia (Network Q Out Across America 1993, 1:09-1:23)

I get letters from young women who say these were the first lesbians I saw... were your comic strip characters and I think that's really funny because like the first lesbians I ever saw in print were "Well of Loneliness" you know- Alison Bechdel (Network Q Out Across America 1993, 1:23-1:37)

Califia and Bechdel made these statements when interviewed at a 1993 gathering of LGBTQ authors in Boston, Massachusetts (Network Q Out Across America, 1993). Califia and Bechdel both argue here that the greater visibility and proliferation of LGBTQ books can be nurturing for the marginalized subjectivities and subject positions of LGBTQ people. Califia's commentary implies that books can work as a lifesaving therapy for LGBTQ people. Bechdel regards the representations she read that featured lesbians when she was younger as limited and negative. Bechdel and Califia's novels are works that write against negative, damaging literature to provide LGBTQ readers with an affirming alternative but also using writing as a therapy for

themselves as Laurel Richardson (2011) had. The novels are creations of authors trying to work through traumas in their own lives. Bechdel's work addresses the problematic relationships she had with each of her parents. Both of her parents were abusive to her in different ways.

Bechdel's work is autobiographical and does not try to universalize the representation of her life as the "lesbian experience".

Bechdel's work is compassionate because she is working to understand her parents without being an apologist for their actions nor does she demonize them. These authors were seeking to create affirming pathways for themselves and for their readers. Omega thought *Are you My Mother?* (2012) was consoling because it showed her that she was not alone in having a difficult relationship with her mother because of her sexuality. Here is an excerpt from Bechdel's *Are you My Mother?* (2012) that could be interpreted as having a consoling message to readers, especially if they have had similar relationships with their mothers.



Figure 2-Are you My Mother? (Bechdel, 2012, p. 16).

Omega's experience also offers a kind of catharsis in that she can witness another's trauma, identify this trauma with her own trauma, and let these feelings come forward more explicitly. Omega also had similar feelings about Julie Maroh's *Blue is The Warmest Color* (2013) which is about a girl, Clementine who slowly accepts herself as a lesbian and falls deeply in love with the blue haired, artistic Emma. Clementine and Emma do have a difficult relationship and sadly Clementine dies of a drug overdose. Omega stated that: I over identified with the main character in *Blue is the Warmest Color*. Omega thought the book and the film

were both effective representations of a love relationship between two queer women. Some of the most poignant and cathartic illustrated scenes in the comic are wordless or use words to amplify the affects being depicted. The first time Clementine sees Emma she is enchanted by her, Emma's blue hair makes her a metaphorical pathway for Clementine. Clementine sees herself in the pupils of Emma's eyes and Emma's smile indicates that the attraction is mutual (Maroh, 2013, p. 17). This scene invites identification with its close ups on eyes and lips which convey the kinds of positive emotions we may experience when we first notice another person that we are attracted to.



**Figure 3 Blue is The Warmest Color (Maroh, 2013, p. 17).**

Clementine breaks up with her boyfriend and tearfully confides in her best friend, Valentin who is an openly gay young man. Valentin has accepted his own gay subjectivity and reassures Clementine about her love for Emma with the politically astute and warmly

encouraging statement: “What’s horrible is that people kill each other for oil kill and commit genocide, not that they give their love to someone. What’s horrible is that we’re taught that it’s bad to fall in love with someone who is the same sex”... (Maroh, 2013, p. 85)

Upsilon spoke about the cathartic effect we can experience after reading a novel that we can identify with strongly especially one that addresses and witnesses trauma similar to our own. David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) is a poignant work made to address the trauma gay men of various backgrounds experience because of HIV/AIDS , the trauma of experiencing homophobia, and the trauma of seeing several young gay males commit suicide in the two years prior to its publication. One of the main characters in the novel is Cooper, an embittered, depressed, and lonely young gay man who is ready to kill himself. These ghostly gay men who died of AIDS plead with him not to jump off the bridge. Levithan’s (2012) ghostly gay men ask themselves heart wrenching questions in the process of trying to help Cooper:

Why can’t we close our eyes? ...We did nothing more than dream and love and screw- why have we been banished here, why hasn’t the world solved this by now?...Why must we watch as a thirteen-year-old takes a stomach full of pills, then places a plastic bag over his head? Why must we watch as he vomits and chokes? Why must we die over and over again? (p. 189).

Writing the novel was cathartic for Levithan but also for queer readers who may have felt so traumatized they would be willing to take their own life as Cooper was about to do. Starting a journey towards self-acceptance is part of what saves Cooper. Coming out was the key factor in creating strong pathways to queer texts for the participants who either did not explore queer texts before they came out or had to do so secretly. Three of the participants remarked on how their mother’s reaction to their coming out in particular was somehow linked to their relationship to reading novels. Omega, Upsilon, and Tau each noted a traumatic aspect however small to their mother not being accepting of their sexuality. Omega felt many of her problems with her

mother were mirrored in Alison Bechdel's graphic novel "*Are you my Mother?*" (2012). Upsilon gave his mother *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) to help her understand his sexuality and the issues young gay men face. Omega later found Bechdel's graphic novel to be a source of comfort and Upsilon used his novel as a pedagogical tool. For Tau gay romance novels and the Japanese genre of male –male love comics referred to as yaoi offered him comfort and characters to identify with when he was not feeling positive about his personal life. The novels also helped him become comfortable with his sexuality and made his first sexual experiences less stressful.

For the romance novels it's whenever I'm feeling down or unhappy or something has gone wrong and I just want something to make me feel better I always go to read those usually at night. Reading them usually makes me feel better because everything is always happy right? I really love the e-reader and that's when I actually decided to search for gay romance. I had no idea I mean it had occurred to me before but I hadn't actually bothered to try. And then I got really into it....I think so, definitely the gay romance novels. I read so many of them they definitely helped me understand sexuality a lot better. Not so much gender but definitely sexuality. I guess gender too, not as much...I guess it really helped me with my understanding of gay sex in general before I had had any experience. So it kind of helped prepare me I guess. Some of the scenes are very explicit (Tau, November, 2013).

What these examples have in common is that a novel came to serve a therapeutic function that is similar to Joseph Gold's (2001) vision of how bibliotherapy should work.

## 4.12 Other Pathways: Music & Textbooks

Both Phi and Omega stated that academic works of non-fiction would actually help readers understand the novels better if read concurrently. Phi suggested that *Nevada* be paired with Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl* (2007) and Omega suggested that young queer women would benefit from reading *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) by Ann Cvetkovich along with lesbian graphic novels. Serano (2007) writes about the oppression trans women face from cisgendered people, feminists, and other queer people. Cvetkovich (2003) writes about lesbian authors, artists and activists who work through trauma in their various works. All of these works

encourage political awareness and offered palliative self-care to these readers. Upsilon noted that novels alone are not enough. He argued in favor of other sources of support in addition to novels. He wrote in his journals about music in particular. He wrote this statement:

Music is another art form, and is another medium of catharsis. One can find songs that explore themes of sadness, loneliness, heartbreak; or one can find celebratory, uplifting, motivational, inspiring, and identity-affirming (even if not specifically queer identity-affirming) songs. Music also offers catharsis more quickly than reading a novel; while a song can purge someone of their negative emotions and uplift them in just four minutes, a novel takes several hours to read. ...For specific artists: The first singer whose music spoke to me was P!nk, I think because she is both tough and willing to be vulnerable. While I was coming out, I was listening to a lot of Marina and the Diamonds. Her songs often analyze self-loathing and shame, and though our life experiences were and are massively different, she was able to articulate a lot of the emotions I felt regarding coming out (Upsilon, April, 2014).

I agree with Upsilon that music is also therapeutic to queer people. I too, have found music therapeutic throughout my own life. Theorists such as Richard Dyer in *Only Entertainment* (2002) have argued music is particularly important in queer lives in terms of identification. Upsilon also wrote that novels graphic or textual might not be the choice of every queer or trans person in terms of subjectivity affirmation. He wrote the following answer:

Yes and no. I think it depends on whether the individual in question is a reader or finds value in reading at all. If the person has little to no interest in reading, then I don't think reading queer novels will be particularly helpful because most likely they won't be able to connect with the characters regardless of them being queer (but there's also the possibility that they won't enjoy reading until finding a queer character and being able to relate to that character, and then that sparked an interest in reading). I just hesitate to say "necessary" because not all people will look to reading for this form of therapy—some will look to film, for example. I'd say that art, more generally, is necessary, or, if not necessary, beneficial and healing (Upsilon, April, 2014).

Upsilon argues that he needed the pathway created by coming out to be able to seek out queer novels and really enjoy them. He did go through a period of reading these novels secretly and then swearing to never do so again until he came out. Upsilon's experience highlights some of the most traumatic aspects of hiding a marginalized subjectivity: living a life of fear, danger,



and/or self-denial. Upsilon wrote that he could not engage in palliative self-care through novels because of the risks involved with being seen with them or having them.

I feel like for me it was the opposite in some sense. I couldn't start reading queer novels until I had come out—I was too afraid of what it might mean about me. That is to say, I would avoid reading queer novels because what if it meant that I was queer? Only after I had come out and was comfortable in my own skin could I begin to look for queer representation (in all art forms) (Upsilon, April, 2014).

Being comfortable in “my own skin” is a very powerful metaphor for him to use in this case. Queer and trans bodies are often the bodies that are absent from or written out of novels or more pejoratively they are among the abject bodies of hetero-centric novels. Coming out was a pathway to all of the participants towards engaging with texts that spoke directly rather than implicitly to their deeply felt but not yet realized identities. Identifications and dis/identifications with characters in novels were instructive pathways the participants forged towards declaring themselves queer, gay, lesbian, or trans. These pathways were a creative means through which the participants nurtured their nascent sense of gender and/or sexual non-normativity.

What are the theoretical implications of what the participants have worked to do in their reading? For psychoanalytic feminist literary theory, the participants embraced the fantasy genre to find affirmation and satisfaction of conscious and unconscious desires in ways that are reparative. Integrative feminism is focused on how power and privilege are contextual, shifting, and layered. Omega, Phi, and Upsilon found their particular reading of novels were a means of affirming their own complex identities and worked towards understanding the complex identities of others through novels. Additionally, the participants discussion of other types of texts and other forms of support indicate that a network of support for LGBTQ people would be better if it was an assemblage of affirming literature including novels, sociological texts, affirming music, and kinships and/or solidarity with a variety of people.

The implications for queer theory fall more firmly in the area of queer oriented critical literacy. The participants' reading practices in relation to novels were healing but these were practices that they had self-awareness about in retrospect that other readers may not possess. The participants also undermined limits imposed on gender and sexuality in novels within their interpretations of these novels. Their reading practices were in retrospect a way of unknowingly healing their psyche and talking back to the limits and ignorance of sexist, anti-queer and transphobic reading practices. But their readings were not only about unsettling normativities or self-care, there was also an enthusiasm for a particular way of reading as a vital part of their way of life which was evident in the way the participants spoke and wrote about their own relationships to literacy. In the next section of this chapter, I describe the fictional story and characters within it because the fictional story is a creative analytic representation of the thesis statement and my subsequent theoretical claims. To clarify this I provide a brief summary of the fictional story and some detail about the character conceptualizations. Following this I move into an analysis of the story's form and content, I will connect the themes of the interviews and journals to the proposed fictional story.

#### **4.13 Brief Synopsis of the Proposed Fictional Story “Lost in the Labyrinth: Efflorescent Ultra Violets #1” Detailed Synopsis and a Brief Discussion of the Creative Process**

One day Spring Yip-Silver, a fantasy, sci-fi and manga loving female high school student is shelving books in the school library when she discovers a glowing purple novel with a CD enclosed within it. She listens to it, looks at the illustrations, and writes comments at the end of each chapter. Spring also discusses the story with Nishihara Jitsuko, a manga author. The story is narrated by Tahvo Aberg who records his narration, transcribes it, and draws pictures to make what is happening coherent to the reader/listener. Tahvo Aberg has become the Sweet Violet of

the Ultra-Violets, a superhero revolutionary group. Tahvo reflects back on his life up until this point of becoming lost in the labyrinth. He was severely bullied and isolated at school because of his fat body, femininity, love of reading and at the time, he had a lisp. Tahvo meets Rhomi Velasquez, a gender and sexual outcast herself who befriends him and teaches him to love himself. Tahvo remained shy though and lonely for a man until he meets Yuri Markovsky. He becomes lost in a labyrinth maze looking for his friends (Rhomi and Mojun Orengo) and finds two other people Pulmonaria and Malvan Gabano who are lost in the labyrinth also. They each talk about the novels they loved throughout their lives because there are pages from their favorite books scattered throughout the maze which seemed to guide them through obstacles and challenges within the labyrinth.

Pulmonaria reveals that she never knew that her true identity was a shapeshifting alien sorceress when she was a shy, young girl named Mallow Fiore. She only recognized she was different when she fell in love with her female best friend who did not feel the same way for her. Mallow is cruelly rejected by her friend. Her parents discovered she was a lesbian and rejected her. She ran away from home and stayed with a new friend, another openly queer young woman. She reads many books such as *Blue is the Warmest Color*, *Archive of Feelings*, *Are you My Mother?* and *Fun Home*. Mallow began to become comfortable with her subjectivity and found a job at a women's bookstore. She read *Nevada* and identifies with Maria and James the protagonists of the novel more so than other books she has read recently but wonders why.

Mallow was inspired by all of these books and wants to write her own story using themes from these novels. She had dreams about a hidden ziggurat in the desert outside her city. Mallow sees humans with a violet complexion living there who seem to have magical powers in these dreams. She also dreamed about passionately kissing a tall, muscular, attractive young

woman whose nude body glows with a reddish violet bioluminescence. One night after work, she is attacked by a gang of men on her way back to her friend's apartment. She pushes them away from her and hides but discovers she is glowing violet and after a starburst of energy emanates from her body she transforms into Pulmonaria, naming herself after the flower that changes the color of its petals.

She emerges from her hiding place and stuns the gang of men into unconsciousness with beams of violet light that come from her hands at will. She returns to her friend's apartment gathers her things and leaves realizing she must go to the desert to find her kindred. She meets her people in the desert who tell her she is their leader and that they are beings from another planet who hide on Earth because their home planet was destroyed by a disaster. A corporation on Earth known as Frost Industries has captured their human allies, the revolutionary Ultra-Violets and trapped them in a labyrinth where they will die. Her ability to interpret texts, feel what other people are feeling, healing powers and direct defensive light beams will allow her to come to their assistance.

Pulmonaria and Tahvo meet Malvan Gabano next. Malvan tells them his story. He loved to read books as a child especially fantasy novels and later as a young adult he secretly read gay coming of age books and yaoi manga. He was always a good student but often lonely and ashamed of being attracted to other men. Malvan's mother disapproves of his sexuality and they have an argument. Malvan runs away to an ancient, hidden library to read books about queer people, romance, and magic. He discovers a Japanese book about mazes and learns to read it. The book helps him create a portal to an alternate Earth. Malvan meets a mysterious and beautiful, scantily clad young man at the library named Tenay whom he has a romance with. Tenay keeps recommending books to Malvan who finds them insightful and inspiring. But he

wonders how Tenay knows what he needs and how no one else at the ancient library can see Tenay. The next day Tenay pleads for Malvan's help, hands him a novel for his mother, collapses in Malvan's arms and then vanishes. Malvan returns to his mother and gives her a novel about queer men falling in love and tells her he must leave behind the life he knew. His mother is more understanding than she was initially and tells Malvan she loves him and just wants him to be careful. Malvan creates the portal again and travels to the alternate Earth where Tahvo and Pulmonaria are living. He discovers a ring inside the Japanese maze book which grants him magical powers that allow him to see in darkness, translate languages, sing beautifully, and dream about future events.

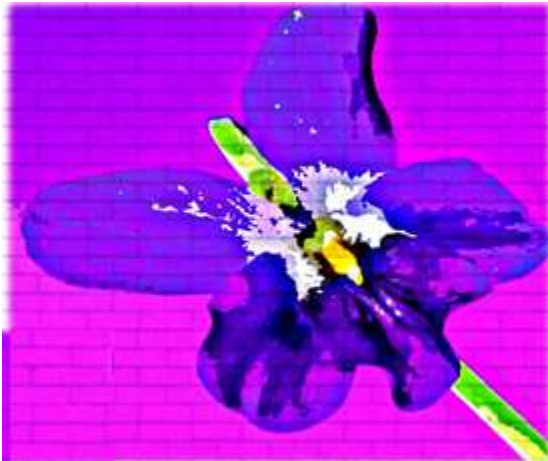
After hearing Malvan's story, the three adventurers discuss the books that have helped them throughout their lives and the insights they gain from these discussions help them find Tahvo's friends, the other Ultra-Violets and rescue them from various perils including the pyramidal ice plant which emits a chemical mist that causes depression and anxiety. Some people become so hopeless they walk into the ice plants tendrils which create an ice block around each victim. The ice plant's victims are frozen in a pyramid structure supported by the plant's deep roots. Malvan finds Tenay is slowly being trapped in an ice block and frees him before it is too late. Malvan understands that Tenay was appearing to him because he was psychically projecting himself across space and time so that he could be rescued by Malvan. Pulmonaria heals Tenay's frost bitten body. Malvan also frees a young dragon that was lost in the labyrinth that he and Tenay name Viola. Pulmonaria and Rhomi begin a romantic relationship with each other. Then afterward there is a love scene between Malvan and Tenay. The story is paused intermittently by Spring who discusses the fictional story with a female manga writer/ artist, Nishihara Jitsuko that she met at yaoi manga convention. The inner story ends with a message Tahvo has written on behalf of the Ultra Violets to LGBTQ and non-

normatively gendered and sexual people who may be fat, racialized, introverted or have a disability. Tahvo magically paints an Ultra Violet symbol on a building. The message says:

“ DEAR READER, PLEASE REMEMBER THIS: VIOLETS PEEP FROM THE SHADOWS OF THE FOREST TO GAZE AT THE STARS ABOVE, VIOLETS BREAK THROUGH THE ROCKS ON MOUNTAINS, AND VIOLETS BLOOM BENEATH THE SNOW JUST AS STARS BLOSSOM IN THE DARKNESS. WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU. OUR STRUGGLE IS NOT OVER. I HOPE YOU WILL SHARE OUR STORIES WITH OTHER FOLKS SOME DAY. THANKS FOR READING OUR STORIES”

This was a detailed description of the plot of the proposed fictional story. In the next section of this chapter there is a description of character designs. In the next chapter, I analyze the novels (graphic and textual) that were part of the inspiration for this project.

**Figure 4 Ultraviolet symbol**



## 4.14 Character Guide, Conceptualizations and Designs

### **Tahvo Aberg**

Tahvo functions as an author surrogate but also as the main character of this story. He is on a quest as I was with this research project. Tahvo also reflects the autoethnographic notes and observations I had throughout this project. Tahvo begins his life narrative by discussing the novels he loved and that functioned as a pathway to him in his adolescence. He is regarded as feminine in the story because of his lisping voice, Swedish-Turkish heritage, stocky body, and blondness by homophobic bullies. He is beaten, taunted, ostracized, and his favorite queer books are destroyed by these bullies. These acts of violence traumatize Tahvo.

Tahvo's love for these fantasy novels is a reflection of the participants' love of the genre. He meets and falls in love with a handsome young Russian-Israeli man named Yuri Markovsky, and they become lovers. Yuri is secretly a member of the magical revolutionary group, the Ultra-Violets. Yuri is mortally wounded one day saving Tahvo from an assassin squad and before he dies he puts his magical amethyst ring on Tahvo's index finger transferring his powers to Tahvo. Tahvo and Rhomi both join the Ultra-Violets. Tahvo is in mourning but eventually falls in love with Mojun Orenge, the leader of the Ultra-Violets.



**Figure 5 Tahvo Aberg**

Tahvo as the Sweet Violet

### **Malvan Gabano**

Malvan is a composite character derived from Tau and Upsilon's qualitative data. He is a romantic dreamer and an analytic observer. Malvan is twenty one years old and came from Malta. He reads the same books as Tau and Upsilon. Malvan represents the theme of pathways in that his reading and interpretation open up new possibilities for him. He falls in love with the mysterious Tenay whom he identifies with and learns from like characters in the novels Tau and Upsilon read. Tau and Upsilon both argued that part of what they learned about gay subjectivities was from the novels they read. Malvan learns to accept himself through his



relationship with Tenay and the books Tenay gives him to read. His ultimate goal aside from escaping the labyrinth is finding Tenay, the man he loves.

**Figure 6 Malvan Gabano and Malvan as the Moonlight Violet**



**Mallow Fiore/ Pulmonaria**

I conceived of Mallow Fiore/ Pulmonaria as a composite character derived from Phi and Omega's qualitative data. She is twenty-two years old and has Greek and Italian heritage. Pulmonaria is a combination of the seeker (Phi) and the caregiving empath (Omega) because in the story she seeks out people like herself and cares for other characters who are in need. She is rejected by her parents which represents the conflicts mothers had with the participants about their sexualities. Pulmonaria also represents the theme of pathways because once she leaves her family behind and declares herself a lesbian a different world opens to her. She works at the women's bookstore, has dreams like that of a fantasy or science fiction story and is attacked once again. All of these experiences lead her to discover another part of her selfhood and she joins the people who are like her (the hidden extraterrestrial people living in the desert) in the same ways that novels and academic texts offered models of subjectivity and political action to Phi and Omega. Pulmonaria falls in love with Rhomi Velasquez because she can sense Rhomi is not just the ideal woman but a person with a sincere love for the well-being of other people, a caregiving empath.



**Figure 7 Mallow Fiore/ Pulmonaria**

### **Rhomi Velasquez**

I created Rhomi to be a supporting female character in the fictional story. She is an outcast because of her height, androgynous clothing, and muscularity along with her multiethnic heritage (The Philippines and Norway) and her sexual attraction to other women. Rhomi is Tahvo's best friend and most prominent protector because they have so much in common. She represents pathways in this way because she functions as part of Tahvo's network of support with her friendship, love of novels, and her new magical power to produce and emit light is the

metaphoric representation of the theme of pathways. Rhomi is also a support for Pulmonaria who has dreamed of her and is the woman who fulfills Pulmonaria's need for love. She becomes the Red Violet of the Ultra-Violets. Below is Rhomi and Rhomi as the Red Violet.

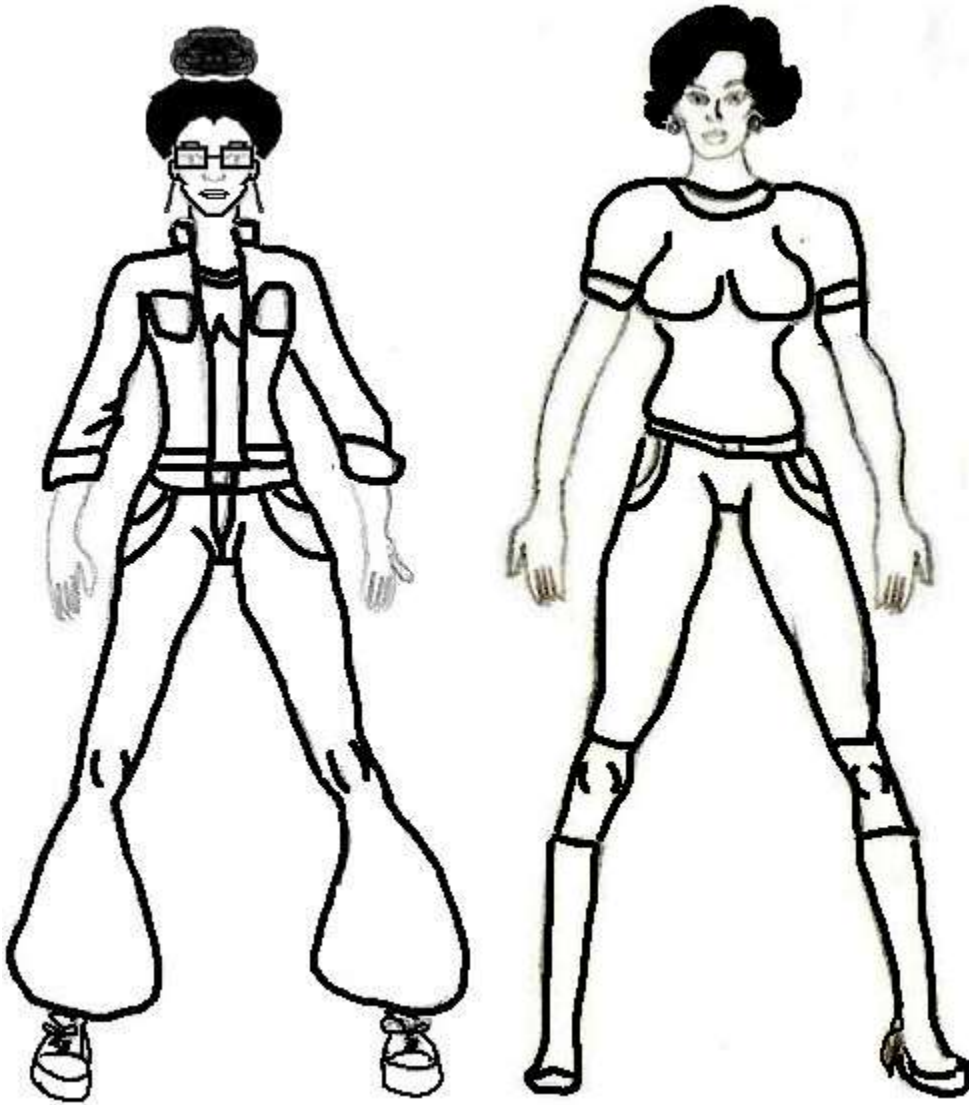


**Figure 8 Rhomi Velasquez/Red Violet**

### Spring Yip-Silver & Nishihara Jitsuko

Spring functions as an audience member listening with interest. She paused the story to infer what will happen next and to ask questions about the story. Spring is the narrator who makes the story a work of metafiction because she responds to it as a work of fiction highlighting the recursive quality of qualitative research. She listens to Tahvo tell his story and the stories of others, his interpretations and discusses these interpretations with the manga writer Nishihara Jitsuko. This demonstrates the process of a qualitative research project. A researcher has a question and goes on a journey to answer it by collecting qualitative data which is interpreted and partially fictionalized to protect participants. Nishihara Jitsuko is Spring's educated discussant who has experience as a writer and illustrator helping Spring interpret this work of fiction whose author is unknown. These characters are not in color for two fairly straightforward reasons: to signify that they are outside of the fictional world of *Lost in The Labyrinth: Efflorescent Ultra-Violets #1* and also because most yaoi manga is not printed in color. On the next page is Spring, the avid reader and Jitsuko, the successful yaoi manga author.

Figure 9 Spring Yip-Silver & Jitsuko Nishihara





**Figure 10 Tenay**

### **Tenay**

Tenay is Malvan's love interest, the mysterious and beautiful young man who is a ghostly presence in the library that only Malvan can see and touch. Tenay's body is the most like a blooming flower, he has elastic clusters of roots that he uses to move and support himself. He represents fantasy and identification because he is an apparition, a possibility of someone Malvan could be in the same way that the fantasy genre entertains possibilities of potentialities for queer subjectivities. He is also a source of motivation, a dream lover that compels Malvan to



reveal and accept his own sexuality in the same way that being able to express sexuality allowed Upsilon and Tau to pursue relationships with other gay men.

### **Tahvo's Love Interests: Yuri Markovsky & Mojun Orengo**

Yuri Markovsky and Mojun Orengo were created to be Tahvo's love interests similar to the romantic heroes of the novels the participants discussed such as *Watchmen*, *Junjou Romantica*, *Eon*, *Eona*, and *Imajica*. Both men teach Tahvo he is worthy of love after all the homophobic bullying Tahvo has been subjected to. Mojun is similar to Yuri in that he is a teacher and leader to Tahvo and to others. Mojun is a scientist who uses his magical powers to enhance machines and tools he invents. He is visibly older which is signaled by his grey and white hair. Mojun discovers the magical amethysts that imbue their wearer with unique magical abilities. Below is Yuri as the Dark Violet and Mojun in his Electric Violet costume.

**Figure 11 Yuri Markovsky, the Dark Violet**







**Figure 12** Mojun Orengo, leader of the Ultra-Violets



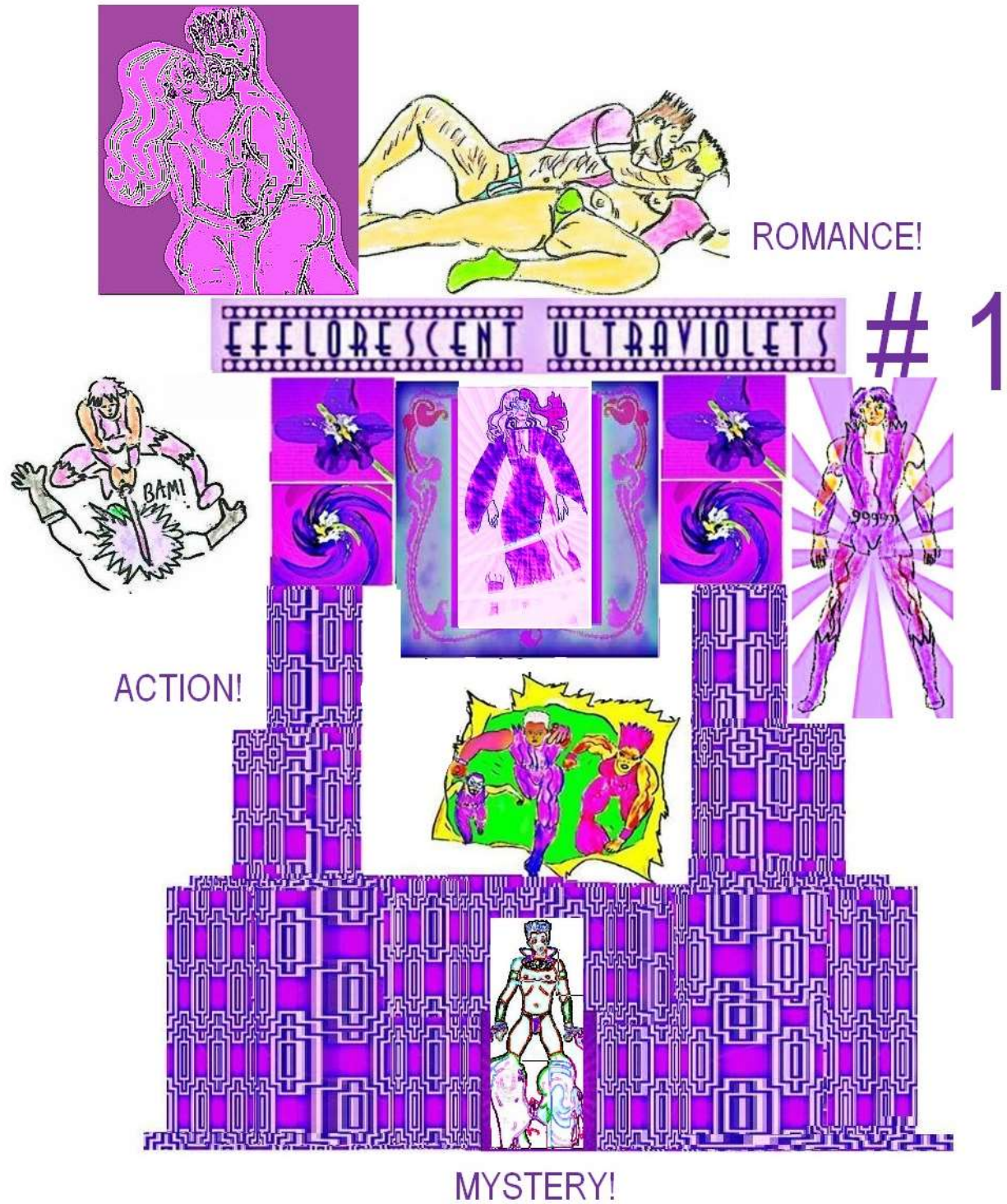


Figure 13 Fictional Story Cover





Figure 14 Collage of Illustrations from the Fictional Story

## 4.15 An Analysis of the Proposed Fictional Story

In this section, I will explain and analyze how the proposed fictional story reflects the themes of the qualitative data. I will explore this proposed fictional story in terms of form and content. The question I answer in this chapter is “how does the proposed fictional story answer your research question?” My answer is that the proposed fictional story answers the question by fictionalizing what I and the participants did to answer this question in a fantastic way. In other words, the fictional story functions as a metaphorical answer to the research question. The story responds differently to the research question because it is a multimodal response that uses visuals as well as text in a way that allows for my imaginative answers to move forward without the restrictions of traditional qualitative research. The participants and I discussed our favorite novels in terms of their identifications, cathartic qualities, and insights for subjectivity. The proposed fictional story dramatizes this process. The four themes (fantasy, identifications, disidentifications, pathways/access) of the interviews and journals are part of the form and content of the proposed story.

The fictional story is a creative analytic representation of the thesis statement and my subsequent theoretical claims. For example, in terms of the plot content, a group of queer and trans characters form a network of support and their activities include discussing affirming literature particularly novels, affirming music, and kinships and/or solidarity with a variety of other people ( the characters are also different from each other). The discussions they have about their favorite novels helped them work through the labyrinth they are trapped in and helped them find their lost allies and new friends. In the next section, I outline in detail how the

proposed fictional story answers the research question in terms of weaving the qualitative themes within the form and content of the proposed fictional story.

#### 4.15.1 Fantasy in the Form & Content: Inner and Outer Layers

I chose to have two layers within the proposed fictional story to represent the theme of fantasy in terms of form and content. I created an inner story that was fantastical meaning it was full of possibilities not tied to mundane or "slice of life" realities which would allow me to transmute metaphors within this inner narrative. I imagined having an outer narrative as the layer grounded in an analytical framework in order to create a space in which readers could be clarifying the links between the fictional story and the research data. I chose to have an older adolescent narrator to become engaged with the inner narrative and then discuss her engagements with a writer/artist who has been very successful in her career. This narrator would not have all the answers in fact she would be wandering through the story as if it was a labyrinth just as I wandered through my research question like a labyrinth. She would be reading and responding to the story just as the participants and I did with the novels we discussed.

Creating this metaphorical parallel "story within a story" allowed me to turn the fictional text into a metafictional text. A text that Roland Barthes (1974) would refer to it as a text of bliss because the reader is asked to be an active participant rather than passively consume the text without asking critical questions or ever thinking like the writer of the text. A metafictional text follows feminist research methodological principles like those of Lather (1997; 2007) in that the researcher is a storyteller and witness giving a situated account of "what things mean".

Traditional ways of knowing are disrupted when a researcher does not claim to be objective but decides to do research with their particular standpoint being made explicit and used as a guiding principle in the research project. The researcher asks a question, gathers data,

makes observations, and analyzes these observations with theory while stating throughout the process that they are not an “expert”. Instead of claiming expertise I am arguing that having a passion for insight and understanding because of your subjectivity, lived experiences and theoretical orientations can qualify a person to do a valid research project. By gesturing towards how my subjectivity and subject position are in every part of this research project and that every part of this project is constructed from my interactions and responsibility to other people I have worked towards demonstrating validity in this way. This research project was about asking a question, exploring answers with these particular LGTQ people, thinking about what insights those processes provided, and opening space for more questions about queer critical literacy.

Metafiction is a suitable vehicle to reflect this validity based in self-critique and self-awareness. A research project is a collection of questions, thoughts, and answers assembled by a certain person in certain contexts which will become static until someone else engages with similar questions, thoughts, and answers. The research project is a Mystic writing pad or palimpsest in this way as it is being written over by the ways it is reconsidered and reinterpreted. Metafictional texts call attention to their constructed quality and ask the reader for further interpretations aside from the manifest content.

I was inspired by one of the fictional fantasy texts Upsilon discussed with me entitled the *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Danielewski. This novel is metafictional with multiple narrators and some of these narrators are not reliable but this highlights that they have situated perspectives. Formally, I sought to create a text that was fictional in this way but not as complicated for readers to engage with. The proposed fictional story is a labyrinth formally because it has these inner and outer layers. In terms of content the characters are lost in a labyrinth as well. The characters in the proposed fictional story also have fantastic abilities like

the protagonists of the participants' favorite novels and they are based on character types in those novels: the romantic dreamer, seeker, analytic observer, and the caregiving empath. The characters of the fictional story are combinations of these types just as each participant had one strong set of these characteristics in their qualitative data.

Phi and Omega are combined to create Pulmonaria who is a seeker and a care giving empath. Tau and Upsilon have been combined in the character of Malvan Gabano, the Moonlight Violet who is an analytic observer and a romantic dreamer. He goes into the labyrinth for love and he makes insightful observations- he is able to see in the dark. Tahvo Aberg, the author surrogate and one of the protagonists is a romantic dreamer, an analytic observer, and a seeker. It is these characteristics that help him create an affiliation with Pulmonaria and Malvan. These characters come together to form a network of support, discuss novels they enjoyed and realize the novels had healing qualities along with the songs one of the characters sings, and that they come to genuinely care for one another. Next, I discuss how identification was woven into the form and content of the proposed fictional story.

#### 4.16 Identifications in Form & Content

In terms of form the theme of identifications can be observed in the first person narratives each character provides to the reader of the story. This first person narrative structure opens up possibilities for identification more so than third person narration because readers are seeing a filmic "close-up" shot of a character as Caulley (2008) has argued about the technique of first person narration. Spring, Tahvo, Pulmonaria, and Malvan all narrate a part of the story from their perspective just as the participants did. In terms of content, the proposed fictional story characters in the story discuss their identifications with the same novels mentioned in the interviews and journals. The scattered pieces of these novels are found in the labyrinth the

characters are travelling through. In the story these pieces of the novels help guide the characters as they did me towards finding my way through the analysis of the themes. The identifications they have with these novels are generative helping them feel positively about their subjectivities as they move through the labyrinth.

#### 4.17 Dis-Identifications in Form & Content

Formally, the proposed fictional story is a representation of dis/identification because it works on and against the conventions of fiction writing and dissertation writing. The proposed fictional story does not function as “art for art’s sake” it is present within the thesis to serve a very specific purpose of representing the themes of the qualitative data and to be part of the answer to the research question. Several of the novels discussed by the participants are metafictional including *House of Leaves* (2000), *Watchmen* (1986), *Are you my Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012) and *Fun Home* (2006). Each of these texts is working on and against the conventions of form. The characters in the proposed fictional rework encoded meaning of their favorite novels (which were the same novels that the participants chose to discuss with me) in order to navigate their way through the maze. The participants and the characters rework encoded meaning to be creative in the face of a dire circumstance: being queer or trans in a world that hates queer and trans people. The labyrinthine structure of these novels and the proposed fictional story are also about the exploration of different philosophical pathways.

#### 4.18 Pathways in Form and Content

Formally, the proposed fictional story represents a pathway because it is an act of self-care in response to the anti-LGBTQ ideas that remain in the realm of education but also an attempt to queer the way the LGBTQ stories are told and interpreted. Thinking with the participants and proposing a story that I thought dramatizes their queer critical literacy practices



which for the participants and the characters were retroactively therapeutic acts of resistance. This was my way of navigating a path out of the labyrinth that is this research project. Apart from highlighting and dramatizing the insights of the qualitative themes the fictional story contains new insights of its own in the areas of solitude, isolation, divergence, and intertextuality. The fictional story highlights the introspective solitude and isolation of LGBTQ identities and suggests that this solitude and isolation offers an opportunity to experiment with symbolization in narratives of the self. This specific queer or trans solitude and isolation is complicated by and deepened by other social differences an individual has.

The fictional story also offers the insight that being queer involves a necessary divergence very much like Bond-Stockton's (2009) concept of growing sideways or Sedgwick's (1993) "queer as practice" which contributed to the understanding of queer as both a verb and a noun. This necessary divergence is the starting point for an existential detour in order to craft a narrative of the self that refuses to grow up into a heteronormative or homonormative narrative where a linear, unicursal path of development is the only one to follow. This purposeful divergence and subsequent detour leads to the kind of creative, continual, adaptive refashioning of the self that Mari Ruti advocates for in *A World of Fragile Things: Psychoanalysis and the Art of Living* (2009). This is a way of working through trauma that makes survival and the pursuit of rejuvenating desire a risky, but exciting labyrinthine path to follow.

Lastly, this labyrinthine path of desire is intertextual for the characters in the fictional story. When I say intertextual I am thinking with Kristeva (1980, p. 69) and Barthes (1970/1974) definitions of this term because they both argued in different ways that texts are in comparison or dialogue with each other. These comparisons and dialogues amount to a possibly

endless recursive series of connections not unlike a Matryoshka doll or an onion. The scattered pages from the books and the meanings taken from these texts that guide the characters through the labyrinth are a metaphor for intertextual relationships on two levels. The first level is between the characters narratives and their favorite books and the second level is that like the fictional characters, the participants connected their own personal narratives to the novels we discussed as though the novels were palimpsests. Indeed, queer and trans people can take themselves on imaginative, intertextual detours from the normativities that threaten the livability of their existences. I consider this work more than a research project but also part of a tentative blueprint for a micro queer world making project because it was a collaborative process and a politicized act of analytic creativity. In the next chapter, I explore my autoethnographic observations and enter a discussion and analysis of novels that were inspirational for this research project.

## Chapter 5: Autoethnographic Analysis of Reading

In this chapter, I will describe and analyze the novels that have been part of the inspiration for this project and retrospectively therapeutic for me as a queer reader as I did with the participants' interviews and journals. I analyze my own reading in the same ways that I analyzed the participants. I use the metaphor of the labyrinth in this chapter as well because I see it as a way I have negotiated and navigated this research journey as finding a path after trying many different paths but never being sure of myself which ever path I chose. I compare myself to the participants and organize my insights along the same themes as that of the analyzed qualitative data.

I will start with discussing a relevant selection of books I read or that were read to me when I was a child. It is important for me to note and discuss that I am from a family that has thought about literacy in certain ways and what it is. This thinking has had a profound effect on how I thought about literacy, what I thought a novel was, and what I came to see as reading that ended up being a healing experience. My relationship to literacy is a history of identifications and desires that I can only understand by looking and feeling backward as Heather Love (2007) theorized. If I am the gay man in Love's dark room of liberation then my photo has not developed into the properly "proud and out" gay man. Instead this photo would contain the ghostly presence of my proto gay child self, the shy, traumatized adolescent not seeing a future in his queer sexuality and the ashamed "closet case" gay adult I was but also the ghostly presences of my families traumas. My brother and I recognized that our parents and grandparents had high hopes for us to have better, more successful lives than they believed they did and this was one way their traumas became part of my own trauma.

When I began this project I gradually realized that trauma was a primary motivation for the kind of research that I wanted to conduct. My identifications with my mother have often meant her traumatic memories have continuously become a part of who I understand myself to be. Her trauma does carry traces of my grandparents' traumas. I return to Freud's (1925/1984) metaphor of the "Mystic Writing Pad" for the mind because I see this metaphor as linked to Charles Baudelaire's idea that the human mind is an "ever ready palimpsest". Baudelaire's idea was referenced by Alberto Manguel (2010) as a part of a way to theorize the "library of the mind" (p. 283). Palimpsests are writings that bear the traces of other writings beneath them. If we think of the Freudian Mystic writing pad (1925/1984) and the ancient palimpsests then you can imagine that my parents and both pairs of my grandparents have written in my "Mystic Pad" or palimpsest as well as my peers, and my own engagements with representations, hegemonic ideologies and counter-hegemonic ideologies. Each of these people and ideas had left their writing on my narrative.

My mother is bilingual, she can read, speak fluently, and write in Italian and English. She came from Italy on a large boat with my grandmother and told me that in the early years of her life she could only speak and think in Italian and struggled to learn English. Despite the fact that she can speak, read, and write in two very different languages she has continually told me that she's "not a reader" because she does not read novels, does not own many books, and never goes to the library. Whenever she writes a letter or gives someone a greeting card she reads it to me because she does not want to sound "stupid" or for it to be "taken the wrong way".

Yet she reads the local news, the Life/Entertainment section, and letters to the editor in the Toronto Star newspaper every night. She reads quilting and sewing magazines, as sewing and quilting have been both labor and a hobby for her at the same time. She has spent many

nights of her life reading sewing and quilting instructions as well as patterns to create clothing, pillows, and blankets for my family, friends and neighbors. To my mother reading is a useful instructional activity or a leisure activity you engage in to relax yourself before falling asleep. My father's thinking about literacy is that it is a source of adventure, a resource for critical thinking, and that reading enables application of gathered knowledge. I have identifications with my father about reading in this way that I never consciously intended. This was part of the contrast between my father's Irish and Welsh White upper working class upbringing which encouraged him to behave and think like upper middle class White people of British descent.

However, at the same time he has maintained a level of contempt for English upper middle class and upper class people because of the hypocrisy, arrogance, and selfishness he thinks they continue to display. I attribute this partly to the divide between my father's parents. My paternal grandfather was from a humble Welsh working class family whereas my grandmother came from a snobbish Irish Catholic working class family that had clearly internalized classist, racist, sexist, and homophobic ideas. This side of the family had pretensions about rising above your class and about how great it was to be Irish which I never identified with; in fact I found them to be quite conceited and annoying.

My maternal grandparents were Calabrian Italians, they were not "readers" and lived an agriculturally oriented life where you worked all day, ate, and then went to sleep. On Sundays you would attend church services and that was your life. The idea of choice was a strange and unfamiliar concept to them. In Italy they worked on a peasant farm where someone riding a bicycle was seen as "wasting their time." When they immigrated to Canada with my mother they wanted to preserve their specific rural working class thinking and practices. My grandparents wanted a better life in Canada after several traumatizing events. My maternal

grandmother's (Nonna) eldest brother, Antonio had died in a plane crash fighting for Italy during World War I. My maternal grandfather (Nonno) was conscripted to fight for the Italian military in World War II where he saw many of his friends die horrible deaths. Nonna's infant sons had all died from anemia because she did not have access to doctors during World War II. When Nonno returned from the war he had never seen two of Nonna's sons they had died before he returned. He blamed Nonna for this and they never spoke of it again until my mother was an adolescent.

Both my maternal grandparents thought my mother was going to be a boy. My mother could not do anything right in my grandfather's eyes because she was not a boy. She was not accepted by the White northern European children living in Toronto either who called her racist epithets and excluded her based on her Italian ethnicity. Mom did not like school because of this and that at Catholic schools the teachers were mean spirited, English nuns.

She told me that at this point she realized that in social settings she and other Italian and Portuguese people would try to "pass" for a White Canadian of northern European descent and to signify this she introduced herself as "Vicky" and not Vittoria, her actual name. She liked attending Bickford Park high school much better than elementary school. Mom made some good friends there, but she was never popular and while in school she found a job as a ladies' wear sales girl at the now defunct Canadian department store, Simpsons. This is where she met my father who worked there too. She told my brother and I that she fell in love with my father because he could make her laugh like no one else had. In my grandfather's eyes the only thing she ever did right was having two male children (my brother and I).

My mother did not love reading especially for school but she did love watching television and seeing movies. She and my brother love to watch television. Neither of them consider

themselves “readers”. I have described this family history to show how a family’s history, social, ethnic, and economic position has deep effects on their relationships to literacy. The participants’ middle class and lower middle class background influenced their access to books and their appreciation for reading as it did for me.

There has always been a divide in my family because I, like my father, loved to read. Reading has always been a meaningful activity for me. Dad would walk with my brother and I to the Malvern branch of the Scarborough Public Library nearly every weekend. This was part of his time with us as he worked five days a week while my mother worked on the weekends when my brother and I were both children. I was better at reading French than reading Italian so like the participants I do not have the high fluency that is needed to enjoy a text in another language. I prefer to listen to books in other languages because I often feel hearing another language spoken helps it make sense in terms of emotion and context.

One of the first books that was read to me was *The Root Cellar* (1981) by Canadian author, Janet Lunn. On the surface this text is heteronormative meaning it features masculine males, feminine females, features only heterosexual relationships, and there’s no spinsters or “confirmed bachelors” that could be interpreted as queers. However, it is important to remember Bond-Stockton’s queer child (2009) can also reside within texts that seem heteronormative on the surface. Children’s literature in the English language has its fair share of characters that can be read queerly. My father read a chapter of *The Root Cellar* (1981) to my brother and I every night, until we finished the book and returned it to the public library. I was read to and also read on my own. Tau told me he was never read to at home and did not like being read to at school. I only enjoyed being read to by someone who could read with passion someone who could read like my father or the narrators of books that came with a cassette tape. In the novel, Rose, the

main character is an awkward outsider who has been orphaned and goes to live with her aunt. Her cousins are unkind and exclude her. She seeks refuge from all this negativity.

In the process of doing so, she discovers the root cellar at her aunt's house which is also a time portal into the past. Rose travels back in time to the 1860's during the American civil war. She befriends two siblings there: Susan and Will. Will runs off to fight for the North and is lost. So the girls go to look for him. I remember having a crush on Will because I imagined him to be quite noble and handsome. I identified with Rose because she seemed to feel as I did about certain things. She had this rich, inner world she retreated to and she needed solitude from the unkind behavior of her cousins. This was very much like my own relationships to my inner world and my own cousins and peers. I didn't reveal that I was attracted to Will, the character or that I saw myself reflected in Rose. The book itself was like a portal to another reality and my father made it really come alive in the way he read it to my brother and I. The root cellar itself, (a storage space for root vegetables during winter) seems like a symbol of the unconscious. If we follow that interpretation, Rose's time travel is a journey through her own narratives of desire. Rose, as a child protagonist works against the ideas of children as helpless and lacking in sophistication.

She is a queer child in Bond-Stockton's (2009) understanding of childhood and queer children. Rose survives her treacherous adventure through empathy and courageousness which is what has made many a queer life livable. My connection to this novel makes more sense in retrospect than it did as a child. Every message I received then about identity categories and identifications was telling me that my identifications with Rose and my crush on Will were horribly wrong. My father would also read me Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys mystery novels as a child. I, of course was in love with the Hardy boys. I thought Frank and Joe would make



great boyfriends and their lives were full of excitement. On the 1980's covers of the "Hardy Boys Casefiles" novel series the boys were twenty year old hunks that reminded me of lesser known 1980's film actors. I was not complaining about that. I thought of myself as being very much like the curious and intrepid Nancy, who always thought there was more to a story than what was presented at face value.

Also, she would occasionally team up and flirt with the Hardy boys. The mysteries of these books were so involving at the time that I was usually excited to hear what would happen next and they inspired me to write my own little stories. Now what is striking about all of these reflections is that these are all arguably heteronormative texts. Although there are exceptions in each series such as the "thinly veiled queers" like Nancy's clumsy, tomboy pal George Fayne or the Hardy boys artsy, tech wizard pal, Phil Cohen. I ended up finding pleasure and identifications in books not written for queer children but written more along the lines of reinforcing heteronormativity and normative relations with the nation-state. As a child, I would write and act out similar stories in which I would replace the straight woman protagonist in the narrative. Didier Eribon (1999/2004) offers an explanation inspired by Marcel Proust's description of this tendency in the white gay male reader: "... a particular relation to reading is established for gay men and by which they are led to identify with female characters: such is the only way for them to live out, by proxy, an emotional relation with another man (p. 30)."

I resisted the heterosexual interpellations of these texts and yet did not question the other normative aspects of these texts at the time. Inserting myself into narratives was the creative act that sustained my subjectivity even though at the time I could not name myself yet I had an idea of who I wanted to be and who I want to be in love with. I assert that out of all of the novels I read as a child these three helped excite and raise further my emergent queer desires. In contrast

with the queer novels I read as an openly queer adult I can see how I as queer child was seeing queer potentiality in that which was not intentionally queer. This was of course, before I could name such interpretations and readings as queer but I knew then that they were not the ways other children were reading and interpreting these texts.

As an adolescent I became very interested in comic books but certainly not silly or goofy comic characters. I was interested in serious human drama. The graphic novel has the potential to be of great value for queer futurity. The comic book is not high art instead it is regarded as a lower class, crassly commercialized entertainment for male children and adolescents who are not good readers or who are socially inept. Muñoz (2009) looks to the queer past to convince readers of the need for a utopian futurity that has been queered. Graphic novels are one of the sites Muñoz touches on to convince his readers of the need for this queer futurity. He links his memories of reading Marvel comic books such as the Silver Surfer and the Uncanny X-men to reflect upon his dis/identifications with these fictional outsiders and contrasts his memories with those of Andy Warhol. Warhol loved Superman, the perfect man who was an alien (Muñoz, 2009, p. 129-130). Muñoz's dis-identifications differed from Warhol's. Warhol's love of Superman may have reflected his erotic desire for and identification with a perfect man because of his struggle with a variety of disabilities throughout his life. The Silver Surfer was a nomadic hero who was lonely, exiled on Earth, misunderstood, and who longed to return to his home planet. Whereas Muñoz's fascination with the alien Silver Surfer reflected back at him how he was queered in markedly different ways: his Cuban ethnicity, being exiled in America, his sexuality, and the potentiality of outsiders to change the normative spaces they enter.

As a ten year old child I became an adoring fan of Marvel's X-men comic series because they were very different from other super heroes who were loved and admired by the people of

the world. The X-men were outlaws who were hated and feared despite their heroic deeds. I identified more strongly with the female characters especially the character of Rogue. Rogue's special power allowed her to temporarily take the abilities of anyone she made skin to skin contact with. An ambivalent side effect of her ability was that she experienced the memories and feelings of those she touched. Omega, one of the research participants had talked about how useful it would be to experience someone's life for day through their eyes. I mentioned that the character of Rogue had this experience every time she touched someone. I briefly described why Rogue is like a novel reader in this way. Rogue knew all those she touched intimately but interestingly no one could read her mind with any effectiveness at the time. Rogue is arguably the queerest character in the X-men at this point in their publication history. Rogue in an act of villainy completely absorbs the powers, personality, and memories of a super heroine, Carol Danvers.

Rogue remains a sympathetic character when contrasted with the benevolent but privileged, heroine she victimized. Rogue's history of being an overtly sexual, poor white trash girl who is abandoned by her birth family because of her frightening power is a stark contrast compared to the relatively privileged life Carol led. Rogue's sexuality is dangerous from the outset: she nearly drains the life out of her first boyfriend by kissing him. Her dangerous power with its sexual connotations is not insignificant in the context of the 1980's when she became a prominent character. She is not unlike someone carrying the HIV virus that fears being stigmatized. However, whenever Rogue has the opportunity to be alone she wears skimpy attire revealing her dangerous, queer body. Rogue's encounters allow her to see other people's lives from their point of view making her especially sensitive to them. She has an empathetic understanding of Northstar, the first openly gay super hero in Marvel Comics (when he was

closeted) after she touches him, absorbing his powers and memories. She is aware of his “secrets” long before it was officially announced (Claremont & Smith, 1986, p. 16).

**Figure 15 (Rogue & Northstar) Uncanny X-men (Claremont & Smith, 1986, p. 16).**



Rogue also develops a friendship with Storm, the female leader of the X-men at the time. Storm reaches out to Rogue in the way that some of my best friends did. This made it easier for me to be honest with them and admit my sexuality. This poignant excerpt was particularly striking for me as I identified with Rogue’s fear, isolation, and her loneliness (Claremont & Romita, Jr., 1984, p.11, 13).

Figure 16 Rogue & Storm part 1 (Claremont & Romita, Jr., 1984, p. 11).



Figure 17 Rogue & Storm part 2 (Claremont & Romita, Jr., 1984, p. 11).





Figure 18 Rogue & Storm part 3 (Claremont & Romita, Jr., 1984, p. 13).



I could identify with Rogue's experience because as an adolescent I often felt as though I was split into two different people: at home I was flamboyant and comical because my family accepted this aspect of my personality while at school I was shy, timid, and tried to be as low key as possible. I was desperately trying to conceal my emergent queer subjectivity which was being built and shattered at the same time. I feared expressing my love for other men. I knew that my voice, mannerisms, and androgynous personal style were being read as signs of gayness by sexist and homophobic peers who were working to shore up dominant masculinities.

Rogue was the one character in all the literature I read at the time who seemed to have feelings similar to my own. Some LGBTQ people revisit past moments of shame and trauma in order to understand their current conflicts and choices that must be made. Remembering that these comic stories were a refuge from the trauma of being in an education system and a world more generally that hates queer and trans people makes this process more clear. LGBT assimilationist narratives work hard to forget the loneliness, isolation; anxieties, sadness, rejection, and self-hatred that governs LGBTQ peoples' lives before and even well after they publicly declare a non-normative sexual and/or gendered subjectivity. The queer critical literacy we were doing is lost when we forget what we did to make our lives livable at such points in our lives. In the next section I discuss and analyze novels that were also inspiring for this project.

## 5.1 Queer Novelizing

In this section I will discuss and analyze novels and comics that were inspiring and retroactively therapeutic for this particular research project. The most fascinating novels I have read recently act as compelling evidence that queer protagonists must work creatively to both craft a subjectivity of their own and to defy oppressive forces that work concurrently to erase or destroy this blossoming subjectivity. This observation and argument parallels my findings with



the research participants because the protagonists of these novels perform similar acts of self-care in their fictional contexts to the acts of self-care performed with literature by the participants.

These novels became therapeutic to me because they inspired me, challenged me, and affirmed my subjectivity as a gay male. I identified with these protagonists because they reminded me of myself at various ages in my life and at various points in the construction of my subjectivity. These protagonists are inspiring to me because they work to survive by making space for their queer subjectivities in their own worlds despite dominant messages and violent messengers of these ideologies trying to make them follow normative scripts. The protagonists such as Kiran of *Blue Boy* (2009) and Raj in *A Secret Edge* (2007) for example challenged me as a White queer person to be even more cognizant of how racialized males negotiate queer sexuality amidst racism, sexism, and homophobia from a variety of people in their own contexts. Peter and Daniela of *Fruit* (2004) struggle with loving their own bodies Peter because he is fat, has prominent breasts and nipples which are a source of embarrassment for him. Daniela like Peter knows she does not fit normative standards of beauty; she is also rejected and deemed worthless by everyone but Peter. She does remain defiant for most of the novel; Daniela throws tomatoes at posters of Italian beauty pageant winners and even dates an odd boy who turns out to be problematic to prove she could. I formed a kinship with these characters; they were like me and like people who were my friends when no one else would be.

I was a witness in Oliver's (2004) sense responding to the subjectivities of these characters and thinking about how I was alike and different from these protagonists. These stories were melancholic on one level reminding me of past and current homophobic rejections and feelings of hopelessness. These texts have characters that are melancholic on one level but

on another level they creatively regenerate their selfhood by finding strength in their trauma in the same the ways that the creative melancholic described by Castiglia & Reed (2012) and Kristeva (1991) does. These characters worked to make their fantasies come true in their lives and they dis-identified with dominant cultures to rewrite the dominant narratives of their lives which told them to conform or be regarded as sick, sad failures. These characters created pathways for themselves out of their oppressive life worlds and worked to regenerate their assaulted subjectivities. Each of these characters exemplifies the fantasy character types the participants showed features of: the seeker, the romantic dreamer, the analytic observer, and the caregiving empath.

These characters are all also critically literate because they are able to re-read narratives and reinterpret them to be generative of their subjectivities. They are not unlike Bronwyn Davies's (1993) class of students who read critically and then created counter-hegemonic gender tales of their own or Rob Simon's (2012) research participant, Yusef the comic reader and artist who was reading and writing against his social contexts. *Blue Boy* (2009) features a protagonist who dis-identifies and imagines a future for himself despite everyone telling him he has no future.

## 5.2 Blue Boy: Fantasies of Queer Futurity from Dis-identifications

In *Blue Boy* (2009) Rakesh Satyal tells the story of Kiran, an Indian-American preteen boy living in Cincinnati, who is non-normative in terms of his gender and developing sexuality. The readers can safely infer Kiran will identify as queer or gay at some point in his future. Kiran's story is told from his interior, he is the narrator of his entire story. His observations are

insightful in terms of what elementary school can be like for children who are non-normative with regard to racialization, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion.

Kiran thinks like a little psychoanalyst, in this way he is very much the analytic observer. Readers can see how understanding interiority is very important to gain insight into the lives of queer children because for many it is one of the only spaces they have in which to sort through the trauma laden artifacts they can claim as their own. Kiran is queer in several ways that have an immense psychological impact on him. I question the logic that would cynically throw “plucky little queer” narratives out when they can be one element that affirms a marginalized person’s deeply felt identities and desires. Indeed these queer protagonists are “productive failures” who find the courage to fail at normativity and actually create something new. This is the potentiality that Muñoz (2009) sees in queer youth and that performance is not a simply a present moment but a “doing” that is on the horizon (p. 99).

Kiran’s humor and creativity are what help him survive a bleak existence. A bleak existence where he is caught between a hetero-patriarchal, racist capitalist American culture and a stifling interpretation of Indian-American Hindu culture which is also heterosexist and mired in an assimilationist linearity. Kiran does not truly “fit in” anywhere he goes, he is rejected powerfully by other Indian-American children as well as White American children. Kiran, being the creative, defiant queer child he is, decides the school talent show is where he will queerly defy all the negativity that surrounds him. This is where the performance becomes a mode of possibility not only for Kiran but also for the audience whether they are pro-queer or “proto-queer”.

He strikes back in a way that reclaims space and all that he identifies with in the varied cultures he dwells within. The talent show becomes his central focus because he loses the

private space he has. He is discovered putting on his mother's make up and playing with the Strawberry Shortcake doll, Blueberry Muffin (Satyal, 2009, p. 77). His father confronts him and verbally abuses Kiran, telling him that his creatively crafted subjectivity and attendant desires are "nonsense" and will send him "nowhere". Kiran's father is tyrannical in a subdued manner and he has no real love for Kiran. He knows Kiran is on a nonlinear path of queerness which Sara Ahmed theorized (2006) means no "straight" lines or "straight" logic. In Satyal's novel (2009) Kiran's father sees no capitalist productivity or socio-cultural respectability in this uncharted path which horrifies him and this drives him to use guilt to pressure Kiran into being who he thinks his son should be (p. 222-224).

Kiran's flamboyant and clever vengeance is to wear makeup and dress as a Hindu deity (because he now believes he is one), mix several dance styles (including khattak), and lip-synchs Whitney Houston's 1985 hit single "*How Will I Know?*" for his talent show performance. Kiran also suffers from the side effects of a silver supplement which causes him to collapse towards the end of his performance. A few months afterward he wisely observes that those who repudiate him are in a state of lack:

What do these bullies know of lust, of sex, of the fine line between divinity and depravity? It would be one thing if they knew what I felt and could understand it and then made fun of it. But they do not have the ability to empathize with what I feel, and that makes them completely meaningless. I live in a kingdom of one....My imagination is for creating my own private world, and I'm wasting it if I try to be a part of theirs (Satyal, 2009, p. 263).

Kiran, like some queer children comes to the realization he is different in a positive sense and that those who do not understand him are not worth his time nor should he try to be normative in any of the ways these children are nor should he be normative in his culture of origin. The two people who seem to understand Kiran and why he's special are the pundit at the

Hindu temple and his teacher, Mrs. Goldberg. Another queer child protagonist in Brian Francis's Canadian novel *Fruit* (2004) comes to similar realizations.

### 5.3 Bearing Fruitful Fruit: Identifying with a Queer Self and Queer Others

In *Fruit* (2004) Peter Paddington is fat, socially awkward, and obviously gay to readers but not to himself. Peter is preoccupied with his weight and more specifically his nipples. His nipples become a character in the book, acting as the unconscious of the novel stating truths that Peter and other characters in the novel are not ready to accept (Francis, 2004, p. 236). Peter is an outcast within his family and at school. His only friend his age is Daniela, his Italian-Canadian neighbor who is socially awkward, foul mouthed, and unkempt. Daniela is abject to everyone except Peter. Peter also fantasizes every night about Mr. Hanlan, one of his paper delivery customers, Andrew Sinclair, a handsome classmate, and Mr. Nunzio, the hairy armed gym teacher in his nightly experiences called "Bedtime Movies" (Francis, 2004, p. 17). Peter's sexually attractions are made explicit by the fact that Mr. Hanlan and Andrew both end up wearing red swimming briefs in his "Bedtime Movies". Peter's "Bedtime Movies" are the magical fictions that assure him that someday he will achieve all his goals and become a beloved, popular person.

Peter is a romantic dreamer and also the caregiving empath to the other characters in the novel. The queerest aspect of these fantasies is that more often than not Peter imagines himself as Brooke Shields or a beauty pageant contestant named Vanessa. He secretly cross-dresses too and is spotted doing so by his Uncle Ed who is a closeted, fat gay man himself. The most poignant exchange between Peter and Daniela comes towards the end of the novel. Daniela believes she's going to fail grade eight.

They've won, she said. "Who?" I asked. "Everyone," she said. "My parents. Gianni. My teachers. Everyone who told me I couldn't fuckin' make it. They've won and I might as well just sit here for the rest of my fuckin' life and watch everyone walk by the window." It was weird but for once, I knew exactly how Daniela felt... I felt like "they" had won in my life too. "They" were the people that thought Daniela and I were losers. "They" thought they were better than us, just because they were thin and had normal nipples and didn't wet the bed....And why did Daniela and I always let them beat us? I was so angry, my nipples started to vibrate beneath the masking tape. Daniela, we've got to take control of our lives! (Francis, 2004, p. 269-270).

Peter becomes much more self-aware of his own queerness and Daniela's queerness at this pivotal moment much like Kiran does at the "end" of his story and it is in this moment that potentiality and the possibility of remaking the world becomes evident. Both novels project a queer futurity, a sense that there is a new queer world emerging for these young protagonists that goes beyond pedestrian versions of "coming out" narratives. The shame and ambivalence of emerging queer identities are still evident and alive in these novels which as Heather Love in *Feeling Backward* (2007) observes is often made to disappear so that the proud gay or lesbian adult can express nothing but gay pride (p. 20). Love's emphasis on unresolved or ongoing struggles within subjectivity and identifications leads me to write about a textual book that is written very much like a comic book.

## 5.4 Identifying with a Regenerative Queerness from the Ashes

The book I am referring to is entitled "Collin's Awakening" Phoenix Rising #1 (2012) by Stormy Glen and Lynn Hagen. The plot of the novel is fairly simple: A young gay man is murdered and thought dead but comes back to life in the morgue. He returns to his older, macho lover who has turned to drinking in the days following Collin's death. The people who tried to kill Collin now know he's alive and they are chased, as you might expect, for the rest of the novel. But the twist is Collin is immortal and can actually become the mythical creature of the title. I identified with the main character, Collin, and his narrative of survival and what surviving actually entailed within the narrative of the book. Collin had to find his lover, Riojos,

accept his new sense of self, re-consummate their love , gain the acceptance of those who he loved (i.e. his parents, his brother-in-law), and stop those who sought to destroy him.

Aside from the explicit male-male love scenes and the fact that it was written by female-bodied straight women, what was so queer about the novel for me was the narrative itself. The supernatural plot devices are cover for the narrative of the queer in a heteronormative and homophobic world. Love's thinking comes into play when we think about the work queer people do to turn trauma around to their advantage and not lose sight of the pain that makes us who we are. Queers, like the phoenix, must continually rejuvenate their selfhood by several means to survive which could include: finding affirming love/sexual relationships, gain acceptance of loved ones, react creatively to dire circumstances, contending with hateful ideas and the people who perpetuate them. This is how a queer person can live beside trauma rather than forgetting trauma completely or being buried alive by these intensely negative emotions.

Peter and Kiran are both in stories that lead up to the kinds of conflicts Collin faces and the other novels manage to create the extraordinary in the ordinary. Collin is a seeker on a quest but also very much a caregiving empath healing himself and his loved ones as he moves through the story. Collin's journey is about creating a pathway for yourself when your circumstances leave with little choice but to be creative in addressing factors that threaten the livability of your life.

## 5.5 Secret Queer Pathways in *A Secret Edge*

In *A Secret Edge* (2007) we meet Jason Peele who like Peter and Kiran is on a journey of self-discovery about his sexuality. Jason has sex dreams about an attractive boy his own age with dark hair and a deep complexion. Girls in his dreams turn into David Bowie as he kisses them. Jason is different from Kiran and Peter in that he is very athletic and masculine in his

gender expression. Jason also faces a different problem than Kiran and Peter in that he can physically fight and knows how to use a knife. Jason struggles with this conflict when he meets Raj whom he falls in love with. Raj is Indian-American and definitely worldly like Kiran is. He is also the sexually assertive person of this coupling because he knows how to seduce Jason and charm him intellectually as well. Raj advocates non-violence which is at odds with the “bash back” thinking Jason has about homophobic bullies. Jason rescues Raj at the end of the novel by drawing the attention of two homophobic attackers by behaving like the most flamboyant, feminine gay man he could (Reardon, 2007, p. 234). Jason is a romantic dreamer but also a seeker trying to find the right pathway to a life that affirms his subjectivity and will bring him closer to Raj, the love of his life.

Jason is an excellent runner so he’s able to outrun them and then return to help Raj go to the hospital. This was a creative response to the horrific peril that Raj was in and shows that non-violent, performative responses can work in certain contexts. Jason and Raj are two gay adolescents who are different from each other in terms of their racialization, ethnicity, class backgrounds, religion, and philosophies who find love with each other despite the differences that might keep them far apart in America. Raj is not exoticized in this narrative; he is very human and complicated. Raj’s sister, Ajani mediates between the two young lovers adding layers to their relationship and proving that people who are queered in other ways apart from sexuality and gender expression can have great insight into what it means to be queer. The fluidity of queerness is a common thread between each novel in that the gay characters themselves are queer in a variety of ways and other people they are close are queer in similar or different ways from them.



My identifications with the novel are mostly with Jason because he is queer and an athlete in a way that I can relate to as someone who has an ambivalent love for running. His soft masculinity and sexual passivity with Raj are also aspects of him I identify with. I could also identify with his conflict about how to resist being a victim of homophobic assaults because as a small, relatively slight gay man I am quite vulnerable in this way. The recent murders of several gay men and trans women in Toronto act as a chilling reminder to me that brutal violence towards queer and trans people is far from over. In terms of kinship, Raj's intelligence and courageousness are qualities I have sought out in the men I have dated. Jason, Raj, and Anjani are all people I could see myself being friends with because they resemble the diverse and caring people I grew up with in Scarborough. Jason's story is what I wish my high school years were like had I been brave enough to come out and take control of my life rather than let other people's expectations dictate what I thought I could do. These novels are bittersweet in this way, they call attention to pain that simply became duller over the years but has never left my consciousness. It is these bittersweet memories that compelled me to investigate a research question and create some form of representation.

My interpretations of each of these novels came to be **healing** after I had read these books as the characters had conflicts and ways of addressing them that paralleled conflicts in my own life. Each novel stands as a guiding light in my navigation of this research into the kind of queer critical literacy that the participants and I were doing without realizing or recognizing it as such. I discussed my background as the participants did with me in relation to how they have read literature over their lifetime and placed it under the same analysis. I can conclude that my relationship to reading novels is influenced by my location as an Italian-Canadian, lower middle class, white gay male who is introverted and fascinated with philosophical questions that effect

everyday life. My father ensured I had regular access to books similar to the way Upsilon's mother did.

I learned novels and comic books were an inspiration early on in my life because I could identify with some of the characters and these identifications generated creative inspiration within me. I turn to novels or comic books now when I am hopeful just as when I am in despair. After I had several different working class jobs I applied to graduate school and the experience led me to become a teacher. As a teacher any money I had left over from paying for necessities I would use to buy books I had wanted for a very long time or books I thought would be affirming to my subjectivity. I took a chance on the novels I have discussed and analyzed in this chapter. I did not know if I would love them, if they would become characters whose lives I was fascinated with, or if the authors would really share parts of their subjectivities with me through their fiction.

I am a gay romantic like Tau who has continually sought out queer love stories that gave me what I thought was missing from every straight love story or even other gay love stories I had enjoyed. The worlds authors create in fantasy and science fiction open up space to think through questions of social change for queers and trans people which is something I have enthusiasm for just as the participants did. Fantasy and science fiction with a queer slant also asks questions about subjectivity and subject positions that other texts do not explore. The graphic novel or comic book may be viewed with much more legitimacy now than when I was younger.

Currently, reading comics has become part of the better understood and newly theorized types of literacies (multiple and critical) that are developing and being taken in a queer direction by LGBTQ authors who can now openly produce work that reflects their lives. I have come to realize that I am like my mother in that I have always loved reading material (i.e. comic books)

that is not considered “real” literature not unlike her sewing and quilting magazines. Also I now have comic books that feature openly LGBTQ characters that have complicated lives and their gender expressions and sexualities are a part of their story not marginalized to a very minor aspect. LGBTQ people no longer have to search desperately for themselves in a dominant narrative. I share a love of the graphic novels with Tau and Omega who introduced me to works that I now identify with and find to have been healing.

This autoethnography has allowed me the opportunity to highlight the solitude, isolation, divergence, and intertextuality of my own reading experiences. This method also reveals that comparatively the experience of reading for the LGBTQ people in this study including myself was about our sustained silences, being silenced, and breaking silences. Our experiences of reading and (for myself writing also) are about the stories we could not tell at certain points in our lives or the stories we hoped we would live to tell. Insults silence us and tell stories about us that are injurious and distorted, designed to add or deepen the trauma we already have. The reading experiences of LGBTQ people are also about secrets and the secret worlds we enter silently in front of others without them knowing and when we are alone every time we read and interpret a text.

Dis/identification is at work in my own autobiography because my various child, adolescent, and adult selves within it were working on and against the heteronormative texts I engaged with throughout my life as well as complicating or critiquing counter-identifications I have been developing. The selection of textual and graphic novels in my autoethnography contributes to understanding the larger themes and dynamics of previous chapters by highlighting how these texts are about defiantly narrativizing queer experiences in a heteronormative world, these texts also work to honor individual and collective queer desires in

expansive ways that promote dis/identification and queer kinships as survival strategies. It is these themes and dynamics within the novels that I analyzed in my autoethnography that laid down some of the motivational foundations for this research project. In the next chapter, I will discuss my conclusions.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

### 6.1 Conclusion

When I began this research I observed problematic, yet well intentioned “damage centred” research on LGBTQ people in schools. I was not seeing the agency that I thought LGBTQ people do exercise in a variety of ways in these accounts of their experiences of oppression in schools. I eventually decided I was going to pursue questions about reading and writing for LGBTQ students. This is how I came to the research question: what role does reading novels (textual or graphic) play in the survival and desires of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer) students in education? I wanted to know if reading novels can help make a life livable. Could a queered bibliotherapy be an important kind of self-care for this particular set of traumatic experiences? I set out to find the answers to the research question through interviews, journals, autoethnographic observations, and creating a proposed fictional story based on this qualitative data. I analyzed the interviews, journals, and the fictional story derived from all of this data using psychoanalytic, queer feminist theories.

My conclusion was that this particular group of queer, gay, and trans people retroactively came to understand their reading of certain novels as palliative self-care. My exit from the labyrinth involves a retracing of my steps so that I can contemplate and share what contributions I have made to this growing field of research. I am following the red thread out of the labyrinth by returning to the theoretical and research fields which helped bring this inquiry project to life. In this next section of this chapter, I am stating and exploring the contributions I have made with this research project. I have divided these contributions into two different but related areas: critical pedagogy and livable lives. I frame these insights within three more generalized

categories that stand above three of the specific qualitative data themes of fantasy, dis-identification, and pathways: Dialogue, Identification, and Critical Distance.

## 6.2 Dialogue

Dialogue about novels was the method through which these insights became clear and it is the way in which certain insights are understood, there needs to be internal dialogue as well as dialogue with others. In chapter four Omega discussed having the super power to inhabit someone else's mind for a day to understand their subjectivity better and she felt the novel offers us one of the only ways to do this with another person. The inner monologues of a novel bring us into dialogue as contradictory as this may sound.

Upsilon also made similar connections in chapter four by describing how a novel allows us to consider our view of the world alongside the view of another within a novel. Phi also stated in chapter four that reading gives the ego a chance to escape by becoming so involved in the thoughts of another person within a novel. She also described the experience of comparing herself to characters in novels as a form assistance for her with the formation of a subjectivity that felt more coherent as when she felt strong identifications with a character and when she did not. In a similar fashion, Tau like Phi, needed to give the ego a rest, turning to gay romance to help him recuperate from wounding relationships through fiction that offered more hopeful possibilities for the realization of desire for the Other.

The participants argued in favor of dialogue about fiction even though this dialogue can be quite difficult at times and may feel less threatening if the ego is affirmed and perhaps rejuvenated through such a dialogue. Omega expressed the greatest ambivalence about discussing a book especially discussing a favorite book in the context of a book club. Book clubs can ruin the intimate relation you may have had with a novel. If we follow Cixous's

(1993) argument that “reading is eating on the sly” (p. 22), then in a book club all of our “eating on the sly” could be exposed. Our nourishment has to be shared in a book club which can diminish the effect of those memories and may shift us away from the contexts which made our first experience with the novel so nurturing for the ego.

When I say first experience I mean more specifically the healing experience a reader may have understood ourselves to have had retrospectively with a novel may be under threat in conversations with Others about this novel if it was to be the featured text in a book club. The one to one interview and the journal entries I did with the participants are less threatening though not without difficulties. These dialogic exchanges were more akin to discussions between fans of graphic novels or textual novel series where a less anxious relation has the potential to develop. I say this because in my case I have a subjectivity that is similar to all of the research participants and I share subject positions with Tau and Upsilon.

Freud (1955/2001) reminds readers in his paper “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego” that: “In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent...” (p. 69). So when people read they are never alone, they are forming kinships and involved in conversations as Proust (1905/1987) would argue as well. As a person reads a novel they are participating in a conversation between their individual subjectivity, the author’s subjectivity, and the imagined subjectivities of the characters within particular contexts. It is in this process of engagement and interpretation that readers are seeking insight about their selfhood and that of the Other. Identifications are ever present in any dialogue between people because they are part of how individuals construct subjectivity and work as a way to keep this subjectivity alive especially when this is a threatened subjectivity that is compelled to defend a marginalized subject position. The threatened subjectivities and

marginalized subject positions of queer and trans readers entail that a conception of identification with novels is intimately tied to memory and trauma. Identification is the next category which I am using to situate my contributions to this field of research.

### 6.3 Identification

Identification and dis-identification have been vital concepts for this research project, for theories about reading novels, and what this means for queer and trans people's subjectivities. Identifications with characters in graphic and textual novels for the participants were the first step they needed to take to bring themselves into a novel. These identifications with protagonists in the novels did not dissipate because the novel had been read long ago or even a year ago. The novels the participants discussed had identifications powerful enough that their significance became clear in retrospect.

Identifications operate on conscious and unconscious levels and so they do not necessarily feel "natural" or "right" at the time. These identifications may indeed be invalidated by peers once you discuss your identifications with a character. But that is if a reader chooses to discuss these identifications with anyone especially if they are silenced by queerphobia, transphobia, sexism, and racism. In chapter four Phi and Tau described identifications that seemed contradictory to them but also did not make any sense to their peers.

Phi's identifications with the misogynistic Comedian in *Watchmen* (1986) were about that character's philosophical views but Phi's emerging sense of herself as a woman meant that over time this did not sit well with her subjectivity. Phi was less ambivalent about her identifications with Jay Gatsby or Pip because her identifications with these non-trans, gender normative straight white men made sense to her on certain levels. Her romantic and sexual attractions to women have remained consistent which is one reason she cited that enabled her to



still identify with and read these characters despite the fact that they do not share her subject position. Tau's identifications with and attractions to "bad boys" like Draco Malfoy, a white, arrogant bully were troubling to his peers who identified with the "good guys" who were more obviously coded or actually queer in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels.

Tau is able to see the queerness in characters like Draco that on a manifest level of analysis appear to be only extreme enforcers of normativities. Dis-identifications as conceived by Muñoz (1999) provided me with a way to think about such identifications with characters in novels that defy normativities particularly in the contexts of homophobia, transphobia, racialization, and heteronormativity. Muñoz (1999) and Fuss (1995/2013) are in agreement that identifications are a site of some intense ambivalence but this ambivalence is what makes this psychic labor such a fascinating process to explore. Fuss's (1995/2013) thoughts on identification explain why identification is a necessary but perpetually troubled aspect of subjectivity:

Identifications startle us by the apparent suddenness of their emergence, the violence of their impact, the incalculability of their effects. Identifications are the origin of some of our most powerful, enduring, and deeply felt pleasures. They are also the source of considerable emotional turmoil, capable of unsettling or unmooring the precarious groundings of our everyday identities. These ghosts from the past can be neither casually summoned up nor willfully conjured away. They are shadow others, the phantasmal relics of our complicated psychical histories. Identifications are erotic, intellectual, and emotional. They delight, fascinate, puzzle, confuse, unnerve, and sometimes terrify. They form the most intimate and yet the most elusive part of our unconscious lives. While we tend to experience our identities as part of our public personas— the most exposed part of our self's surface collisions with a world of other selves— we experience our identifications as more private, guarded, evasive (p. 1-2).

Our experience of novels and identifications especially if you are queer or trans reader begins as a very private, guarded, and evasive aspect of their subjectivities. Upsilon's secret trips to the library and his subsequent hiding of queer fantasy books before he came out to his family are one example of this. Phi's private search for subjectivity that did not have "holes" in

it was a problem she tried to resolve partly by reading novels. Both instances are similar to Omega's attempts to reconcile her interest in psychology with her subjectivity and political orientation. This reparative act was realized in her view through her identifications with Alison Bechdel's psychological graphic novels that have what I might describe as a "lesbian feminist psychoanalytic consciousness." Omega, Upsilon, Tau, and Phi all remarked on needing the right conditions for an identification to unfold.

Phi and Tau needed novels as a break or rest period from their own subjectivities whereas Upsilon and Omega described a need for distance or detachment from a text to be able to identify with it. Upsilon said this about identifications while reading novels: "As much as you identify with it you're never completely immersed you have some level of critical detachment that's like observing the events" (Upsilon, February, 2014). This critical detachment is what I will explain next before I bring these thematic categories into my discussion of this project's contributions to critical pedagogy and livable lives.

## 6.4 Critical Distance

In *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction* (2011) Keith Oatley describes Thomas Scheff's theory of "optimal aesthetic distance". When an emotion is too close in our conscious mind as an everyday experience is and we then need a certain distance from it to be able to live with it. Oatley agrees with Scheff's thinking that becoming immersed in fiction can be a therapeutic experience and describes the process:

The function of drama and other kinds of fiction, says Scheff, is to enable us to relive, and hence assimilate, emotions from our past which, although they are not fully conscious, can continue to have serious effects on our lives, and particularly on our relationships. Fiction, with characteristics that are more controlled than those of everyday life, enables us to re-experience such emotions at what Scheff calls an optimal aesthetic distance. In Scheff's treatment, the job of the writer is to present emotionally significant events at an aesthetic distance that enables us to recognize them, experience

them, and assimilate them to ourselves. In the theory of relived emotions, a fictional story is enjoyable because it is therapeutic. Therapy derives from a moving forward in our sense of ourselves, and of being able properly to experience emotions that have been problematic for us. Our experience of emotions as we read or watch a piece of fiction, then, says Scheff, is a reliving of the emotion from our own past at a better aesthetic distance (p. 126-127 ).

Caruth (1996) also reminds us that when trauma is experienced it is difficult to know all that the traumatic experience has done to our subjectivity in the moment a traumatic event occurs (p. 3). It is only afterward that we begin to process what we have come to know from such experiences and also that we try to protect ourselves from what we cannot bear to know. According to Oatley (2011) fiction offers the psyche a space or repository for much of what is too difficult to know or work through (p. 127). Fiction is what the queer or trans people I spoke with and wrote to turned to for that “relief”. Phi described these instances as reading when you “need to not be yourself” and for her specifically to “not see trans women in fiction” because there was not enough distance for her at that point in time and for a certain livability with trauma.

Upsilon described a time when he could not read queer fantasy texts for a certain period because he could not bear to know himself as queer. Television, the auditory and visual medium was too public for Upsilon. So reading for Upsilon really was like Cixous’s (1993) conception of reading as “eating on the sly” (p. 21). Being caught watching a queer centred television series would be similar to being caught watching and enjoying a gay pornographic film. Such instances are too risky and not distant enough when you have not reached a certain level of self-acceptance. Upsilon needed to have these private moments to give him the confidence to eventually come out and read queer texts without the same level of fear or shame.

Yeah I think it was helpful because TV was rarely an option for me. If you watch TV it’s very public and your family could ask you what you are watching. I couldn’t watch TV shows with queer characters because people would draw the dots. Whereas with books I

could get them from the library and hide them on my bookshelf like you did. People were less likely to ask you what you are reading than what you are watching because reading is more of a private activity. Television is a much more public art form and even in your own home. Whereas reading is a solitary excuse to withdraw and to have that experience for yourself. Again, because it is a more solitary activity. There is room to think for yourself and to work out your own identity I guess. I'd say the older I've become the more comfortable I've become with my sexuality. I started to take out queer fantasy books once a year and then run away from it and not do it again. Now I'm more interested in it and willing to demand it. I asked "Why are there not more?"

Upsilon's ambivalence led to a creative response namely to find more queer fantasy novels somehow and also to be a writer of queer fantasy himself. In this way Upsilon is several steps ahead of Bronwyn Davies's student writing group in *Shards of Glass* (1993) in that his experience of marginalization prompted him to first creatively seek out texts and then to write his own. Upsilon was practicing a queer critical literacy before being able to name this act and doing the kind of symbolically creative work that Willis (1990) advocates, Upsilon and Phi are creative in the face of oppressive circumstances which did not allow for them to assert or be consciously certain of a subjectivity and both of them worked to develop a livable life for themselves. This self-actualizing project included reading novels as part of this refashioning of a self, a self they could live with. In *Tendencies* (1993), Eve Sedgwick argues that queer children enact "queer" as a practice when they demonstrate the ability to:

...attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, [which] became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learn to invest these sites with fascination and love (p. 3).

In a sense the texts the participants discussed and described with regard to identification align with Sedgwick's understanding of what they as queer and trans people do when they enact queer as a practice. Phi had *The Great Gatsby*, *Great Expectations*, and *Harry Potter* to do this with and she described her identifications with these texts in chapter four along the same lines that Sedgwick draws. These manifestly heteronormative texts had thematic qualities that were

undeniably appealing to Phi. Gatsby and Pip transform themselves to achieve a transformative yet classist desire, in each case their pursuit of love with a wealthy, aloof woman which becomes the most important aspect of their narratives. The desires of these men this paralleled Phi's own search for love with another woman after her relationship with her girlfriend ended.

Tau's attachment and sympathy for Draco is a creative way of both queering *Harry Potter* and a way of finding space within this heteronormative text to bring his desires to make the text work towards his desires rather than against these desires. Omega had a dis-identification not only with texts that featured straight, white male protagonists but also with popular lesbian texts that at first seemed like good narratives of counter-identification but ultimately disappointed her in that regard.

So for Omega some texts had the optimal aesthetic distance while others were too far away from her experience despite being about characters who shared her subject position as a queer woman. This was like Phi's preference to be distant from her ever present subjectivity as a trans woman and expressed a desire to attach to a non-trans lesbian story or novel instead of a trans woman's narrative. Different aspects of subjectivity shift when these identifications unfold for these readers.

#### 6.4.1 Identifications, Critical Distance, and Racialization

I noticed that in general that the participants did not describe many direct identifications with characters that were racialized. I decided I had to note what was unsaid or "hidden" or what some would say is beyond the qualitative data to address this unremarked tendency to centre whiteness. However, Tau and Upsilon had identifications with Japanese male characters in yaoi, and they appreciated these texts in ways that did not exoticize or colonize these texts. Their interpretations of these texts did not deviate from what was in the manifest image and textual

content. Neither Tau nor Upsilon saw yaoi manga as reflective of real same sex relationships between Japanese men. Yaoi is not a genre known for its ethnic diversity, as the characters are mostly Japanese or European in terms of their nationalities and ethnic background. There are a small number of yaoi stories that feature African-American or Arab male protagonists. This is a greater problem in general with North American LGBTQ fiction. LGBTQ protagonists in fiction tend to be White, thin, able-bodied, and middle class. So I sought to address this in the proposed fictional story by having significant non-white characters that push against the racist exclusions of “monochrome casts of characters” and the condescendingly racist inclusions where racialized characters reproduce stereotypes and only serve to fortify whiteness as a norm further. There are no “white saviors” or “white leaders” in the proposed fictional story.

The protagonists work together collectively to find their way through the labyrinth and find their missing friends. I also had the white characters demonstrate an explicit awareness of their own ethnicities. Generally, I sought to have characters that were varied in terms of their gender expressions, body sizes, and disabilities because the fiction discussed in interviews in journals did not always include the most marginalized LGBTQ people. In the next section, I elaborate on the links these three broader themes (dialogue, identification, critical distance) have to the contributions of this research to critical pedagogy and livable lives.

## 6.5 Critical Pedagogy & Dialogue

This project extended the kind of “engaged pedagogy” that bell hooks (1994) conceived of but in a different way specifically because the participants and I were not in any teacher-student roles within this research project. An engaged pedagogy is described by hooks (1994) in these terms:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin... Progressive, holistic education, “engaged pedagogy” is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students (p. 13-15).

Our discussions though followed hooks’ conception because I engaged in a dialogue with the participants with the goal that each one of us would find greater knowledge about subjectivities, subject positions and the relations to literacy through this project. I performed this variation of engaged pedagogy through my methods which I outlined in chapter three and also highlighted the influence of hooks and Freire in these methods which included: open-ended questions and journal questions which were responded to over time. I also performed this variation of engaged pedagogy by valuing the participants’ observations, analysis and recommendations as much as I valued my own as the researcher, storyteller, and witness. In chapter four Omega and Phi recommended that feminist theory texts and novels should be read together in ways that are reflective of hooks’ (1994) and Freire’s (1970) conceptions of praxis. Praxis as Freire (1970) described it, is “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (p. 126).

Omega and Phi both remarked on how reading these texts together would yield important insights for trans women and queer women respectively. When Omega discussed what novel was most important to her, she highlighted the pedagogical qualities of *Are you My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012):

I think it's essential for like A) for anyone who identifies as a lesbian and B) for some who has a very strong interest in psychoanalysis and having that re-appropriated by a

lesbian challenging a lot of the sexist ideas in psychoanalysis. She does it in a very empowering way, it wasn't necessarily "mom blaming"... (Omega, February, 2014).

Omega described why she thought Cvetkovich's *Archive of Feelings* (2003) had a pedagogical innovative quality that made it important reading alongside Bechdel's works. She described Cvetkovich's project and its significance early on in the interview:

This one is about trauma, sexuality and lesbian subculture...I think it's an interesting way of mediating between psychology and cultural studies...to link...lesbians in helping professions, lesbians working through trauma with other people and how lesbians experience trauma. She looks at a lot of cultural forms to reinforce her thesis. Like I've always looked for a way to reconcile psychology and cultural studies...I like the way she mediates between the two areas (Omega, February, 2014).

Phi had this to say about *Whipping Girl* (2007) and *Nevada* (2013) in terms of each text's pedagogical value:

I think *Whipping Girl* should be required more importantly because it's a trans feminist book. I think *Whipping Girl* is more important personally but *Nevada* is a novel you should read at a certain point in your transition. I think if you come to terms with yourself as a trans woman for a year...you can read *Nevada* better than when you're just starting is when you're starting you aren't in a place where you can get a lot out of it. I think maybe I'm being elitist that way. I think when I was first starting (to transition) my mindset was not ready for a text like *Nevada* (Phi November, 2013).

*Whipping Girl* (2007) and *Archive of Feelings* (2003) as academic texts use autobiography and social contexts to illustrate their different arguments. Serano uses examples from her lived experiences, debates about gender within feminist and/or LGBTQ activism and spaces, and connects these areas to create trans feminist theory and praxis. Cvetkovich also uses her lived experiences, the lived experiences of other lesbians with different backgrounds, and theorizes their creative work/activism. Serrano and Cvetkovich alternate between being researchers, theorists, witnesses and storytellers. Their works read in tandem with *Nevada* (2013), *Are you my Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013), and *Fun Home* (2007) also represent methods of queer feminist knowledge production. These five



different yet related texts demonstrated through form and content how gender and sexual normativities are traumatic but also how to live beside these traumatic experiences in the sense that Lewis (1998) described.

The trans and queer women authors ( Imogen Binnie, Alison Bechdel, and Julie Maroh) of these novels (graphic or textual) raise questions about and challenge heteronormative theories of subjectivity and subject position in a similar vein to Dunlop's *Boundary Bay* (1999) and Gosse's *jackytar* (2005). I discussed both texts in chapter two raised questions about racialized and queer subjectivities. Those two texts also enacted challenges of what constituted "proper" representation of academic research. My discussions with the participants have led me to argue that there is a compelling case for the use of graphic and textual queer and trans centred novels as part of an "engaged pedagogy". These works do more than share information about what it means to be queer or trans, the reading and analysis of these texts can be a way of initiating palliative self-care.

## 6.6 Critical Literacies: Identifications & Critical Distance

In this research project I have worked towards imagining a more explicit integration between queer theory and critical literacy. This project highlighted how developing a queer critical literacy can offer potential opportunities for healing a traumatized subjectivity and challenging the limits of knowledge production through the interpretation of the form and content of a novel. The participants discussed certain texts that they thought would be good pedagogical tools in anti-oppressive literature education for example in chapter four the participants mentioned *Nevada*, *Are you my Mother? A Comic Drama*, *Two Boys Kissing*, *Eon* and *Eona*. These novels and graphic novels were mentioned because each one has value as a pedagogical tool because these works provide opportunities to think through subjectivities,

subject positions and oppressive societal structures in ways that mesh with the way Kumashiro (2002) and Britzman (1995a) think about how a revised critical pedagogy can work.

*Nevada* (2013), *Are you my Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), *Two Boys Kissing* (2012), *Eon* (2008), and *Eona* (2011) all trouble normative ideas about gender and sexualities. The concept of “normal” itself is either seriously disrupted or proven to be a falsehood in each text. The points of view in these texts are not perspectives that provide normatively gendered and sexual readers opportunities to feel confident in their own “normalcy” because such views are not privileged in these texts.

These novels in the sampling I discuss here have ambivalent (self-critical or self-effacing) narrators who feel the weight of trauma and oppression in different ways. The characters in these novels reveal how their oppression exerts pressures that govern their existence psychically leading them to work through it in particular ways. The protagonists of these novels respond creatively to dire circumstances and defy the rules of their life-worlds. Upsilon highlighted the pedagogical value of reading and the power of identification in the teaching of literature. Upsilon emphasizes the kind of “optimal aesthetic distance” theorized by Scheff and extended by Oatley (2011) within his conception of how reading and identifications can be educative.

In general reading frees your mind, helps you develop your imagination, gives you access to other people’s subjectivity. This is usually focalized through characters, you have to focalize yourself through them. Whether or not you agree with that character does or what they think it forces you to understand the motivations and the “why?” to what they do. So I think that's one of the most important parts reading because I think that forcing you to put yourself to someone else's shoes use that expression. I think it helps you question your own assumptions more and your own way of being in the world. It helps you become more empathetic compassionate or even just sympathetic to other people's perspectives... (Upsilon, February, 2014).

Reading novels especially fantasy graphic novels can indeed function as a pathway into deeper insight about your own subjectivity and the subjectivity of another. Novels provide examples of interiority (a person's innermost thoughts, emotions, fears, hopes, and dreams). Fictional novels ask philosophical questions about specific social and historical events in order to imagine possible worlds and this is a key aspect of social justice movements. Furthermore, novels create a plausible reality that author and reader co-create through the act of reading just to name some of the actions relevant to my argument that fictional books are capable of. Books are a powerful technology in this way as David Finkelstein (2006) and Nicole Howard (2009) have argued. Perhaps one of the greatest technologies because according to these authors the book has changed social worlds and other environments.

The graphic novel offers some "relief" as Omega stated from large amounts of text. Graphic novels by virtue of their form make it so the reader is less likely to skip over certain sections or fall into too many laborious periods of the reading experience where they may be identifying with characters but find a plot point to be less meaningful or engaging. When a story is engaging and challenging in certain ways readers check their presumptions with less negative emotionality than otherwise. Upsilon said one of his most favorite novels of recent fame was David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013). As I have stated *Two Boys Kissing* had a diverse group of gay male characters including racialized gay men and a trans gay man dealing with different conflicts amidst a gay kissing activism event. He liked *Two Boys Kissing* because of how similar it was to classical Greek literature. Upsilon gave the book to his mother to read as a pedagogical tool to improve their understanding of each other in reference to his sexuality. Tau recommended *Eon* (2008) and *Eona* (2011) by Allison Goodman to teach about sexism, restrictive gender expressions, and trans people's experiences.

It was a young adult series; my sister introduced it to me. It was called *Eon* and *Eona*. And it was like male to female, it was one person. The same character in both situations. That kind of deals with trans identity. Not only is that character going from male to female but there are a few other characters. One of the main characters is a transgendered woman, Lady Della. So it is pretty interesting and one of the male characters falls in love with Lady Della. So that was interesting. I thought it was a really good young adult book and I think it should be read in schools. I was impressed so I was thinking of researching the author (Tau, November, 2013).

Omega and Phi argued in favor of the pedagogical use of *Are you My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012) and *Nevada* (2013) because both texts were in their view effective at capturing some aspects of what being a lesbian and being a trans woman respectively can mean in the world and more specifically for subjectivity. Phi had this to say about *Nevada* in particular:

Nevada helped my Self reach a level where...I've just become one of the group and I'm not co-opting anymore" Before reading the book she felt like she was "...co-opting or invading it (femaleness and femininity). I'm not sure what else I could say about that (Phi November, 2013).

The participants argue for these books because of the potential to affirm marginalized identities and create opportunities to discuss subjectivities and subject positions and how novels make such discussions possible.

## 6.7 Livable Lives: Identifications, Dialogue, and Ambivalence

I can contribute to a discussion of livable queer and trans lives by stating that some LGBTQ people may need literature in a variety of forms to have sustaining queered "bibliotherapeutic" experiences of identification, catharsis, and insight. The participants stated the identifications they had with characters in their favorite novels, described the cathartic moments in these novels, and the insights they felt they discovered after having read these novels. This is not to say they could not have lived without novels but I seriously doubt that any of the participants if they had the choice would choose not to have read the novels they discussed with me. The participants had exercised critically queer literate practices of identifying or dis-identifying, experiencing

catharsis through these identifications, and quests for insights from literature beyond entertainment aided them in finding healing or therapeutic qualities in the novels they read whether they were graphic or textual.

Nevertheless, there were strong, ambivalent tensions for the participants and myself in terms of identifications with novels with regard to what they meant for our subjectivities. The participants' statements reflected the tensions between two theories of reading in this thesis: critical literacy and psychoanalytic literary theory. While the two theories cannot be reconciled a reader can juxtapose the two theories of reading to contemplate the tensions that arise during and after reading with regard to identification, ambivalence, and resistance. In my thesis I have worked to strongly recommend that space is made within the curriculum and classroom to enable dialogue between these theories of reading.

On the one hand I argue that critical literacy asks important questions about the implications of a narrative, a narrative structure, and about a fictional character's subject position. Critical literacy can inadvertently reinforce the heteronormative reader's position of dominance by presenting marginalized people's narratives as "damage centered" narratives of victimization or by believing that merely including marginalized people's narratives in the classroom and curriculum is a sufficient strategy for educating against queer phobic and transphobic ideologies. Psychoanalytic literary theory can both enhance and critically challenge the assumptions a critical literacy approach makes as well as the conclusions that result from a critical literacy analysis of a text. The psychoanalytic approach involves unsettling any easily reached conclusions about a narrative, structure of a narrative, a fictional character's subject position, and subjectivity by asking about unconscious motivations of the author and characters.

Psychoanalysis also reveals the complex inner dialogues that unfold within the reader that reside at conscious and unconscious levels.

The participants and myself found ourselves in the ambivalent position of promoting the critical literacy approach of shining a spotlight on the narratives of marginalized people (in this case LGBTQ people) and hoped by doing so that straight readers would identify with LGBTQ characters and start working through their own homophobia and transphobia. However, we were also aware that we have identifications with narratives and literature from heteronormative culture and that our straight peers may very well be likely to identify with the queerphobic or transphobic character in one of our favorite novels rather than the LGBTQ protagonists. What is just as important is that the participants also noted instances when they identified with normative characters and heteronormative storylines but they cleverly dis/identified with these characters in creative ways. This remains an important tension to keep thinking with which is why I propose a carefully considered queered critical literacy approach which prioritizes psychoanalytic and queer feminist interventions into the normativities of knowledge production that critical literacy can inadvertently reinforce.

## 6.8 The “Persistence of Memory” in Identifications and Dialogue

I would add that the participants used memory as part of this queer critical methodology which Castiglia and Reed (2012) used in their project to demonstrate how a forgetting of a queer past has left LGBTQ activism and academic scholarship in a problematic state (p. 178- 179). For Castiglia and Reed (2012) the memory of a loss means an ideal was tangible and achievable which they argue is part of a case for a politics of ideality based on memories of loss (p. 178). Tau’s positive, affirming memories of texts for example are what he found supportive to his own

subjectivity especially keeping his hope alive for a better relationship and in general a better life as a gay man.

I still remember how I loved My Father's Dragon, I don't have the book anymore but it's something I always loved... Whereas the gay romance books it's more like consoling more satisfying not just entertainment I actually feel a need to read them. Like sometimes I'm just like damn! I need to read those. They're short reads too I read them in a few hours. I've gone through two today (laughs) they're pretty short so it's nice. That's why I read those (Tau, November, 2013).

The advancement of reading technology has made access to such queer texts much easier, which is also another way of being literate as the New London Group (1996) and Simon (2011; 2012) have argued. Tau's discovery of his love for romance changed his outlook as he developed the sexual aspect of his subjectivity. Discussing his identifications with and love for these novels with me provided Tau with an opportunity to articulate how the memory of a novel becomes meaningful for subjectivity in a present context and helped him imagine a more livable future. As Freeman (2008) has argued memory is dependent upon prompts and props (p. 161). My dialogues with the participants were part of this prompting and the novels were like the "props", in a sense.

I like my E-reader, like I would go to the library but it was annoying always going back and forth and they didn't have that great of selection, and I didn't want to spend that much money in the book store either. I didn't want to have a bunch, a million books on my shelf I like I literally love the E-reader. That's when I started to search for gay romance. I hadn't even I mean it had occurred to me before but I hadn't bothered to actually try it until then and then I read some and I got really into it (Tau, November, 2013).

For Upsilon it was an unexpected love story too that was one of books in his life he said he would not want to have missed or lived without having read and this novel was *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski. The novel is a brilliant work of metafiction. Danielewski sets up a complex series of narratives within the novel. Readers become acquainted with the story of Will Navidson and Karen Green through a young man named Johnny Truant.

Truant is a self-confessed unreliable narrator and he discovers the story of the Navidson family and their haunted house through the writings of an elderly, blind man named Zampano who died recently. As readers there is no single, stable reality to hook into within the story. Roland Barthes (1973) would argue this is a text of bliss because: "...the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (p. 14).

*House of Leaves* (2000) certainly discomforts any reading of the novel that is straightforward or easily accomplished. The novel is always in a state of becoming. A reader could interpret the novel as a horror story about a haunted house which drives people to insanity or envelopes them in its consumptive darkness. The readers could also read the novel as a biting satire of academic literary and film criticism. Danielewski mocks academic critics and other authors for a section of the book. Harold Bloom, Camille Paglia, Jacques Derrida, Anne Rice, and Stephen King are some of the people who are mocked in this section. These authors are imitated in a way that would be amusing for anyone who has read books written by any of them.

Or perhaps it is simply the story of Karen Green's undying love for Will Navidson. The novel could very well be all of these stories or actually a series of stories about narrative and its role in how human beings co-construct and navigate realities. Danielewski's creation is open to a variety of interpretations. Danielewski was inspired by Jorge Luis Borges (represented as the character of Mr. Zampano) who was fascinated with creating labyrinthine texts that readers would work to interpret rather than merely consume. Upsilon described the novel for me before I read and explained why he loved it.



So after that this other man finds the text written by the blind man and he actually prepares for publication, he includes his own notes and we hear his own life story. The other layer after that is there are the actual editors of the text who have created footnotes on top of footnotes. It is also ergodic literature so how it appears on the page is different too so it's graphic, the text goes backwards, so it really plays with that, the word house is written in blue ink throughout the entire text because it's like the magical house. The reason why I was attracted to this text and why it was a pivotal text for me because on the surface it seems to be a horror story or it seems to be a criticism of academic discourse with all the fake footnotes and endnotes. It seems to be satirizing everything but then you reach the final part of the text the filmmaker who brought everyone into this dark room they are swallowed by the darkness and he is left on his own. Then his wife who is claustrophobic who left him earlier, she goes into the darkness and she rescues him. This is why this book was so amazing. When they get reunited in the end you realize it wasn't actually an academic critique, it wasn't actually a graphic ergodic text, it wasn't really a horror story, and it was really a love story. I thought that was so interesting it has changed what I think about text because a love story is the most basic story there is and then there are all these other stories around it, at the end it still goes back to that basic story (Upsilon February, 2014).

The form of the novel is queer in that the expectation that this novel fits into any particular genre category makes it a text that questions normativity, questions reading practices and studies limits as Britzman (1995a) has argued about queer pedagogy. So in terms of form the novel disrupts "straight reading" at this level, time, memory, and space are not stable in the novel, which is indeed a queering. But the question remains about what the novel offers in terms of queer content to queer and trans readers. On the manifest level this is a straight love story between a feminine heterosexual white woman and a masculine heterosexual white man. I argue that despite this queer and trans people can find a familiar story of how to survive with your subjectivity and subject position to find love against all odds. Karen Green asks for help from various people who are proven to be unreliable and useless, so she boldly faces her claustrophobia and enters the abysmal darkness inside the house to rescue the man she loves whom she left because of his threatening obsession with the house.

She returns before he is enveloped by this all-consuming darkness. Reading for the participants was a process like Karen's narrative and like that of entering a labyrinth : Entering a space which makes a person feel lost and subsequently rejected, then retreating from this traumatic knowledge and later finding the courage to re-enter the risky territory of a novel hoping to find some affirming aspect of your Self within the text. A search for an affirming way to read that does not leave you lost or trapped inside a confusing maze or consumed by trauma. This is one way a queer or trans person can live beside trauma as Lewis argued (1998) rather than forgetting trauma completely or being buried alive by intensely negative emotions. At the very end of our interview Upsilon asked me about the question of reading a novel that reflected your gender and sexual identity that you did not or could not have access to, I replied:

When I thought of that question I was thinking of my own experiences but I also was thinking about girl who would go to the bookstore in her town because they had the *Rainbow Boys* (2001) trilogy of books by Alex Sanchez who has written several gay bi, and lesbian teen novels. The girl would go to the store and read all of his books inside the bookstore because she could not bring them into her parents' house because she was afraid of what they would do to her if they found them. I found that story very touching. That story reminded me of my own adolescence when I read comic books because comics like the X-men had characters that were not normative, the female characters were strong, and there was a lot of homoerotic imagery of men... At the same time I loved reading George Pérez's modern version of Wonder Woman she was an immigrant who had to learn English, acclimatize herself to the United States, and for a certain period she had to work a minimum wage job at a fast food restaurant. I could identify with that experience. I didn't like to read novels with male protagonists... I could only enter the text through female characters... I would often write my own stories which were similar to these where I would insert myself into the story because I got tired of just identifying with the female characters no matter how cool they were. I wanted to see myself in this narrative. So I would go to the library and for the first time I took out an erotic story collection called *Aqua Erotica* (2000) a collection of erotic stories edited by Mary Anne Mohanraj and *How to Write a Dirty Story: Reading, Writing, and Publishing Erotica* (2002) by Susie Bright. The librarian gave me a dirty look and then she hissed at me sarcastically: "Enjoy!" I just walked away with the books silently, filled with sadness and anger. But eventually I just didn't care what some person like that thought. I found the books so cool and encouraging that I started writing my own stories with Susie Bright's erotic writing tips. Having a job, a library card, my own money and having come out- all of that really helped me too. I didn't have to squirrel books away or hide them behind a bunch of books on my bookshelf (Jeff, February, 2014).

It was cathartic for me to share these memories and identifications with another avid reader. A livable life is one where you can have dialogue about reading, discuss and think through identifications. This dialogue for the self and for others enables the kind of working through needed to make trauma around gender and sexuality an experience we can survive and even turn it into a reservoir of creativity as Kristeva (1991) and Castiglia and Reed (2012) have suggested. This is a queer way of re-thinking Gold's (2001) bibliotherapy. Cixous (1993) also reminds readers that they are always already potential writers which the participants certainly are. As queer and trans readers they were pushed to re-inscribe texts as if these texts were like palimpsests or Freudian Mystic Writing Pads (1925/1984) with meanings that were nourishing and healing for their subjectivities.

Following Goldstein (2001; 2010; 2012; 2013), Goldstein and Sykes (2004), and Muñoz (1999; 2009) I see the potentiality and insight that creative representations of the exploration of these processes has to offer. I extended the insights of such work by turning this research into a proposed graphic novel that follows Simon's (2012) and McCloud's (1993) insights about how the graphic novel or comic book form speaks in multiple ways and that reading is a multidimensional experience for our subjectivities because of this blending of text and image. I also followed Granger (2011) when I highlighted some of the specifically queer and trans silent moments in education. I am contributing to the conversation Jen Gilbert (2014) began in her recent work by asking in a similar fashion that LGBTQ peoples' existence and differences are acknowledged and celebrated in schools and curriculum in ways that that go beyond their current problematic state. I also did this by putting a focused spotlight on the micronarratives of four queer and trans youth who speak about their survival and desires with reference to the reading experience from their own perspectives. I did this work amidst other qualitative work such as

that of Taylor and Peter's (2009) national study that discusses LGBTQ trauma in education at a more generalized, macro level.

Comparatively speaking I think of this in filmic terms: Taylor and Peter (2009) gave us a compelling wide angle shot of homophobia and transphobia in Canadian schools. I see my work alongside such large scale studies like theirs as a series of five close-up shots that allow for a prolonged first person narration which provides readers with the opportunity to zoom in on the lives of the participants and myself to see how we worked to survive and pursue our desires for the moments in time this study tried to capture and analyze for insights about the LGBTQ people and the reading experience. Furthermore, queer and trans students at all levels of schooling need access to texts that enable the kinds of queer reading Sedgwick (1993), Britzman (1995a), and Kumashiro (2002) advocate in their works. Also, there needs to be a variety of texts graphic, textual and digital for the wide range of literacies and readers that exist. Educators need to acknowledge that LGBTQ readers and potential writers in all their diversity are searching for ways to feed a troubled subjectivity and need opportunities to illustrate what a troubled subjectivity looks like and how a marginalized subject position is experienced.

The research participants' views about novels and what they can mean for palliative self-care offer compelling evidence for such practices. It is my hope that this research project will encourage further research within critical curriculum studies into the kinds of reading and also writing that LGBTQ people do to address the existential forms of crisis in their lives. This study has left me thinking about the strength of different components of LGBTQ networks of support. I see the importance of evaluating the strength of various literacies that queer and trans people in all their diversity are developing in order to survive and pursue their desires in livable ways. I think there are future projects derived from this research which could be guided by the

psychoanalytic insights of Donald Winnicott (1965) with regard to the relationships between queer and trans people and creativity, LGBTQ people and introversion, queer and trans cultural work, and the concept of the true self. This study also raises further questions about how LGBTQ people care for themselves and one another with a focus on how aesthetic approaches to addressing individual and collective trauma can be generative and when they are not.

On a final note, I leave my readers with a quote from James Baldwin who became a great writer in spite of the forces that work against a person who is racialized, gay, and poor. In *Teaching Life: Letters from a Life in Literature* (2008) Sawak quotes Baldwin when he stated why books were so important to him in his life:

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive” (p. 61).

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Call for Participants

Hello, my name is Jeff Lloyd and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education which is affiliated with the University of Toronto. I am conducting a study about the role reading novels (graphic or textual) might play in the survival and desires of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer) people in education. I am undertaking this study because I would like to find out what role reading novels plays in the desires and survival of LGBTQ students. I'm looking for participants who fit the following criteria:

You identify as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, Two Spirited, or same gender loving

You are currently a university student

You like to read novels (graphic or textual)

You like to write

I will invite you to an interview about this topic and after that I will ask you to write a journal about a novel. I may invite you to a follow up interview or contact you via email for any further questions I may have. If you are interested please contact me at this email address:

[jeff.lloyd@utoronto.ca](mailto:jeff.lloyd@utoronto.ca).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

How would you describe yourself in terms of identities? (I.e. gender, sexual, ethnic, ability, racialization, age, class, religion, occupation)

Did you read many fictional books as a child and why or why not?

If you did what was your favourite book as a child and why?

Do you read in more than one language and why or why not?

Do you read novels (graphic or textual) in different languages and why?

Why do you read novels (graphic or textual)?

When do you read novels?

How does reading novels affect your mood? What novels have you been reading recently?

What type of reading do you find the most enjoyable?

Where and when did you first find this type of reading?

Please tell me about a book you wanted to read but could not and explain why.

What novels have you been reading recently?

How does reading novels affect your mood?

What did you read if you could not find any books that reflected your gendered and/or sexual identities and explain why or why not?

Has reading novels been helpful to your own understanding of your gender and/or sexual identities?

## Appendix C: Journal Questions

1. For this question it will be helpful to re-read the novel or novels you are thinking of writing about. Describe the first novel (graphic or textual) you read that you identified with a character and their desires in the story. Your brief description of the novel must include the following: title, plot, main characters, settings, historical context, and the name of the author. Also I would ask that you describe what your life was like at the time you were reading the novel. Where did you live? Where and when did you read this novel? How old were you at the time? How and why did you end up reading the novel?
  
2. For this question it will be helpful to re-read the novel or novels you are thinking of writing about. Describe the first novel (graphic or textual) you read that you think reflected your gender and/or sexual identities and state at least two reasons why the novel worked in this way for you. Your brief description of the novel must include the following: title, plot, characters, settings, historical context, and the name of the author.

## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Hello, my name is Jeff Lloyd and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education which is affiliated with the University of Toronto. I am conducting a study about the role reading novels (graphic or textual) might play in the survival and desires of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer) people in education. I am undertaking this study because I would like to find out what role reading plays in the desires and survival of LGBTQ students.

You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview of about forty minutes to one hour in length, which will be recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed exactly as it was said. The results from this interview will be analyzed using qualitative research methods. I will also ask you to write two journal entries about a novel you read that you think helped you address anti-LGBTQ oppression in your own life. I plan to create a fictional set of stories from all of the interviews and journal entries along with journals I write in response to the journals you have written to me. All of the data accumulated from the interviews and journals will be protected with encryption in accordance with University of Toronto human research policies. You can request a copy of the interview transcript and the final draft of the thesis and you can meet with me again to discuss the dissertation if you would like to.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not wish to answer a question in an interview or a journal you are not obligated to do so and you can leave the study at any point. If you do not wish to be recorded, I will take notes instead for an interview. If you decide to withdraw at any point in the project the data gathered from this session or journal would be destroyed. You will not be penalized, or discriminated against by the researcher, the University of Toronto, or any other group in association with this study at any point in time. The risk of participating in this study is that you may feel emotional discomfort with certain issues that may



be difficult to discuss in the context of an interview or journals. There are a few benefits to this study. One of these is that discussing your personal relationship to reading novels may be useful source of personal insight. The other benefit is that this research project will provide you with an opportunity to discuss reading novels as something more than entertainment.

The information you provide is confidential and none of it will identify you, your colleagues, families, or friends, as well as organizations and institutions you may mention. Pseudonyms will be given to all of these persons and institutions to maintain confidentiality. I would advise you to read this form carefully before agreeing to participate in this study. If you have any concerns or questions about this study generally or specifically regarding your participation you can contact me, Jeff Lloyd at [jeff.lloyd@utoronto.ca](mailto:jeff.lloyd@utoronto.ca) or 647-408-2867. If you have any further questions or concerns you may contact my Graduate Supervisor Heather Sykes at [hsykes@oise.utoronto.ca](mailto:hsykes@oise.utoronto.ca) or (416) 978-0073.

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement.

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_