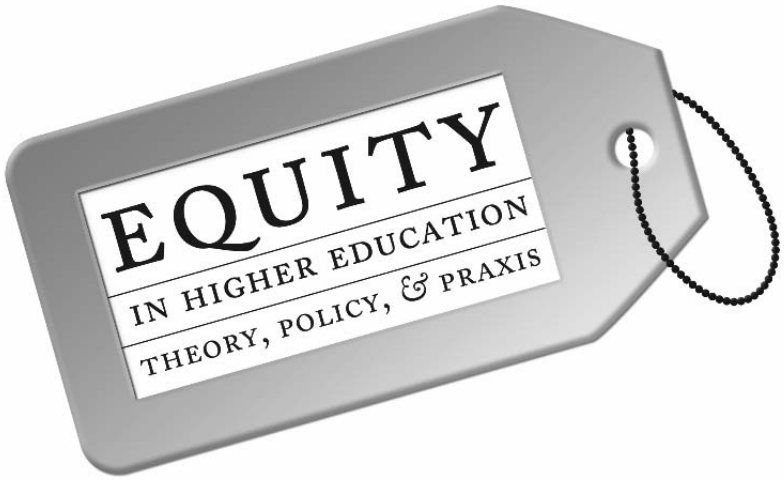
A Guide to LGBTQ+ Inclusion on Campus, Post-PULSE

Edited by Virginia Stead



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vol. 7

The Equity in Higher Education Theory, Policy, & Praxis series
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stead, Virginia, editor.
Title: A guide to LGBTQ+ inclusion on campus, post-Pulse /
edited by Virginia Stead.
Description: New York: Peter Lang, 2017.
Series: Equity in higher education theory, policy, and praxis; vol. 7
ISSN 2330-4502 (print) | ISSN 2330-4510 (online)
Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017025675 | ISBN 978-1-4331-4628-2 (hardback: alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-4331-4625-1 (paperback: alk. paper) | ISBN 978-1-4331-4648-0 (ebook pdf)
ISBN 978-1-4331-4649-7 (epub) | ISBN 978-1-4331-4650-3 (mobi)
Subjects: Sexual minority college students—United States.
Homosexuality and education—United States.
Education, Higher—Social aspects—United States.
Gay college students—United States.
Lesbian college students—United States.
Bisexual college students—United States.
Transgender college students—United States.
Classification: LCC LC2574.6 .G85 2017 | DDC 378.0086/640973—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017025675
DOI 10.3726/b11502

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.**
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data are available
on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de/.

© 2017 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York
29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

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CHAPTER TEN

Embodying Queer Pedagogy ON Campus

Autoethnographic Explorations after Orlando, FL

KERRI MESNER

OPENING WITH QUESTIONS

[Autoethnography starts] I start my day, as I often do, slowly waking up with a cup of tea and spending some time perusing Facebook. Facebook is an enjoyable but slippery slope for me … one thread leads to another and suddenly an hour has passed in idle browsing.

Today is different, however. My newsfeed is peppered with posts and headlines about a mass shooting at a queer nightclub in Orlando, Florida. 49 people are dead, and 53 more are injured; most of the victims are Latinas and Latinos (Latinx) as it was a Latinx night at the club.

My response is visceral. Shock. Grief. And simultaneously, not-shock. As a queer Christian theologian and educator, I've long been aware of the climate that makes the US ripe for an attack like this. A part of me, disturbingly, is not surprised. Another part of me is reeling. A queer club. While I'm not a club goer myself, I celebrate our long history of creating sanctuary in clubs, and today, this sanctuary has been violated. If they were not safe at Pulse, who's to say we are safe anywhere?

I cry. Read queer commentary voraciously. Try to make meaning.

The next day, I am walking to the local courthouse in the small Pennsylvania town where I live, to submit paperwork for a replacement passport. It's a sunny day in this bucolic town. People move with a sense of ease, running errands, enjoying the gentle warmth of summer's arrival.

And I am wary. As a Trans/genderqueer person, my body is constantly read as different, as unintelligible, as disturbing. Normally, I hold that embodied space with pride,

even defiance. Today, I feel the risk of my body's expression. Today, for the first time in years, I would rather blend in. I realize that in the wake of the Pulse attack, my genderqueer body feels profoundly unsafe in the world. My world has changed. [Autoethnography pauses]

This auto-ethnographic chapter seeks to explore the gifts and challenges of embodying my work as a queer educator after the Pulse attack in Orlando. In this chapter, I ask: what are the particularities of being queer identified and teaching gender/sexual diversity content after the Orlando shootings? What are the implications of choosing to bring my embodied identity into my teaching as a location/site/educational context? Even more specifically, what particularities of my experience as a Trans identified educator are impacted by the Orlando attack?

POSITIONALITY

As a queer performative auto-ethnographer, I hold a pedagogical commitment to the value of reflexivity. Indeed, as an educator, I believe that awareness of my own positionality, that is, my sociocultural location and how that location informs my beliefs, is vital for effective pedagogy, and I encourage the same kind of self-reflection in my students. In the spirit of that kind of pedagogical Transparency, I offer here a few thoughts about my own current positionality.

As a White, upper middle class educator with a doctorate, I'm aware that I hold a great deal of privilege. In a country (and continent) riddled with systemic racism, my White skin allows me both access and reprieve. I'm also aware of the gift of being able to partake in many years of university education that many do not have access too. As queer, genderqueer, and lesbian, my positionality becomes more complex. My lesbian self might seem fairly "mainstream" nowadays (although I would argue against the notion of a "post-queer" society, I simply don't think we're there yet). At the same time, my gender-queerness, my Trans-ness, means that I am consistently "read" as different, as difficult to pin down.

As a queer Christian, I seem to have a foot in at least two worlds, one the hegemonic (and oftentimes oppressive) world of contemporary Christianity, and the other in the liminal space of queer Christianity, wherein I try to subvert that same hegemony. As someone who has lived in Canada, the United Kingdom, and now the United States, I'm also aware of my sense of belonging to whilst simultaneously being an observer of American culture. Intersectionality, then, infuses my lived reality and informs my pedagogy. All of this undergirds my passionate belief that teaching is both personal and political, embodied and theoretical, and that education is a space where profound activism can take place.

NATIONAL CLIMATE

In approaching this chapter, I also locate myself contextually within the current political climate for queer folks living in the United States, particularly for Trans and gender nonconforming folks. I attempted to embody this particular contextualization in a recent performative auto-ethnographic piece, *Carry the Weight* (Mesner, 2016). In this arts based, multi-researcher live installation at the Kennedy and King Monuments in Washington DC, I worked to make sense of the current anti-Trans legislations sweeping the American political scene. The following excerpts from *Carry the Weight* illustrate that national context:

> *[Stage Directions] I stand near the entrance to the King monument with the pile of stones in between me and the gathered audience. The wind is blowing fiercely and passers-by pause, some joining in on the performance.*
>
> Kerri: I tried to imagine myself into a moment at these monuments. I tried to imagine myself into a conversation with Martin Luther King Junior. What might he have to say to me, to us, now?
>
> Kerri: Somehow, there was simply no way for me to avoid looking to North Carolina as I shaped my piece for today's presentation. And I wonder not only about King, but also about Bayard Rustin, a key advisor and organizer with King, who was gay. What would Rustin have to say to me, to us now?
>
> Kerri: And as I looked to North Carolina, somehow, there was simply no way for me to divorce my body from the words that needed to be spoken. The reference to North Carolina in this piece points to the passing of The Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, officially called An Act to Provide for Single-sex Multiple Occupancy Bathroom and Changing Facilities in Schools and Public Agencies and to Create Statewide Consistency in Regulation of Employment and Public Accommodations (commonly known as HB2), the infamous "bathroom bill" that impacted Trans, gender nonconforming, and LGBTQ communities.
>
> Kerri: I acknowledge, as a White, genderqueer woman, that I have access to privilege that many of my Trans siblings do not, Trans women of color, for instance, are at the greatest risk of anti-Trans violence, and nonetheless, I feel HB2 in my body. On my body. Attacking my body and the bodies of my Trans siblings, known and unknown.
>
> Kerri: And so, I researched. Because this is so recent, much of my research was online. And as I gathered text from the Bill, from headlines and ideas from other online sources, I felt the toxicity of this research, the way that even seeking it out, reading it, and now performing it, affects my body.
>
> Kerri: But there are words that need to be spoken. Maybe these words aren't tidy or coherent, but really, that reflects the day to day barrage that we, as Trans folks, experience from the media, from politicians, from religious leaders, sometimes even from friends and colleagues. There are words that need to be spoken.

[Stage Directions] I hand out large stones, about the size of an apple, to audience members and passers-by. There are 100 in total. Each stone has the text of anti-Trans legislation recently proposed or passed in the United States, statistics of anti-LGBTQ violence, and Biblical phrases often quoted in support of homophobia. Together, as I pass out the stones, we read some of these statements out loud.

Audience Member: "… in no event shall that accommodation result in the local boards of education allowing a student to use a multiple occupancy bathroom or changing facility designated under subsection (b) of this section for a sex other than the student's biological sex." (General Assembly of North Carolina, 2016, p. 2)

Audience Member: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (King James Version Bible: John 8:7). Love the sinner hate the sin.

Audience Member: "78% of Trans or gender nonconforming K-12 students experience harassment." (Grant et al., 2011, p. 3)

Audience Member: "Kansas State Bill 513: "Creating the student physical privacy act", introduced on March 16th, 2016: Students can sue their school for $2500 each time they encounter someone of the opposite sex in the bathroom. (Kansas State Legislature, 2016, p. 1)

Audience Member: "19 year old and 14 year old teens plead guilty to beating Transgender woman at Rosedale McDonald's. The video that was recorded by a McDonald's employee on his cellphone and posted online captured part of attack. It showed Polis being kicked and struck in the head, then dragged by her hair across the floor. She then suffered an apparent seizure as onlookers laughed." (Siegel, August 4, 2011)

Audience Member: "Seventy percent of Trans/gender nonconforming respondents reported being denied access, verbally harassed, or physically assaulted in public restrooms. These experiences impacted respondents' education, employment, health, and participation in public life." (Herman, 2013, p. 65).

Audience Member: "Human Rights Watch reports that dozens of Transgender women, including asylum seekers, are locked up in jails or prison-like immigration detention centers across the country." (Human Rights Campaign, 2016)

[Stage Directions] I invite the audience and passers-by to take a stone with them, to "share the weight" of the necessary work of change. It's brutally cold, an icy wind cutting through our clothing as we move into this third hour of presentations. I sense exhaustion from the group, and it's unclear to me if this is exhaustion borne of the weather, or of the issues under discussion. I carry many stones home to Pennsylvania with me.

MOMENTS OF IMPACT

As an explicit ethical authorial choice, all examples of students and teaching moments in this chapter are fictionalized composites drawn on multiple experiences from my work as an educator.

Months before Orlando …

[Autoethnography resumes] It's the first week of classes … and, as I did in my other two classes this week, I talk with my students about the multiplicity of genders, and ask them to share what they would like us to know about their own pronouns. I use myself as an example, explaining that as a woman and a genderqueer person, I am comfortable with female (she/her) pronouns, as well as gender-neutral (they/their) ones. Then, I invite them to share around the circle. As we go round, it becomes apparent that I'm the only one in the circle who (from my limited perspective at least) challenges gender normative pronouns. This is often the case, but I continue the practice in my classes, both as a pedagogical act, and also because occasionally there is a student who (explicitly or implicitly) is supported by this practice. As we reach the final student … if I'm really honest, a tiny part of me, deep inside, sighs with the recognition of my difference … I take a deep breath and carry on teaching. [Autoethnography pauses]

This moment, one that repeats for me in many of my classes, reminds me of both the importance of these conversations, as well as my own vulnerability each time we do this go-round. If I'm really honest, when a student does self-identify as queer in some way, I feel a little less alone, a little less exposed. I choose to use my body as a pedagogical site. As someone who incorporates substantive content about gender and sexual diversity into most of my courses, I believe that one of the most accessible ways for my students to learn is through the power of story, my own story and the stories of others. And so I choose to make my queerness visible, to make my queerness a point of discussion and learning. As Warren and Fassett (2004) put it, "I offer my body as a site for my students to question their own assumptions, their own ideas, and their own narrow-minded ideals" (p. 26).

Indeed, were I not to make this intentional curricular choice, I'm aware that my gender identity and sexuality would still nonetheless be on display, would be read and misread, by my students, colleagues, and even by strangers. Like Warren and Fassett (2004), I'm aware that:

> the classroom space … is never safe, never free from that question about who we are, what we do, and our collective worth. Sexuality, our performance of identity, is always at play. What does it mean to be sexual in the classroom, to be a being marked by sexuality? (p. 21)

I love the discussions that emerge with my students. I'm passionate in my commitment to opening up dialogue. I'm very clear that I don't want to get pulled into a "don't ask, don't tell hegemonic undertow" (Barton, 2011, p. 440). Resisting that pull, engaging in courageous conversations with my students and colleagues, is perhaps the most important work I can do as an educator. For me, education is activism. Indeed, as a spiritually rooted minister, theologian, and practitioner, education is one form of what I think of as a "contemplative" frame of mind (Mesner, 2014a). These conversations are real ways that my activism Translates into praxis.

And yet, at the end of the day, I often find myself exhausted, a kind of soul-exhaustion that runs deeper than the typical tiredness of a professorial day. I have come to recognize this exhaustion as resulting from a kind of emotional labor. Sender (2014) states that GLBT people engage in emotional labor that "includes expressing Transformations of feeling from shame to pride through coming out narratives, managing their own emotions and relationships in their roles as queer ambassadors, and training others to be more emotionally accepting of GLBT people" (p. 221). Sender also suggests that "people in less enfranchised social positions, such as women, GLBT people, and people of color, are all unfairly burdened by the work required to handle their own feelings as well as the feelings of those around them" (p. 221). I work hard to cultivate deep roots of community and support to nourish me in this kind of labor, and most of the time, I find my work of queer pedagogy sustainable.

Summer 2016 … after Orlando

[Autoethnography resumes] Today, I feel the risk of my body's expression. Today, for the first time in years, I would rather blend in. I realize that in the wake of the Pulse attack, my genderqueer body feels profoundly unsafe in the world. My world has changed. [Autoethnography pauses]

My worldview has radically changed. I recognize, of course, that I am still privileged with far greater safety than many in the world. I remember the deeply personal shock and outrage many Americans felt after 9/11, and, living in New York at the time, I remember being troubled by this apparent "loss of innocence." Millions of people around the world never had the luxury of that kind of innocence to begin with, oftentimes because of American interventions.

Nonetheless, amidst this intersectional complexity, my worldview has radically changed. I've never felt a naïve idealism about the state of LGBTQ activism; while there has undoubtedly been significant progress in recent years in the United States and beyond, it's always been clear to me that this kind of progress does not always trickle down to the young gay boy being harassed in a rural Midwestern town, or to the Black Trans woman in New York City. I tend to maintain a bit of cynicism about our progress in terms of queer human rights. And yet, even with this self-protective worldview, somehow, the Pulse shooting changes things for me. This shooting cuts deeply to the heart of my fiercely beloved community. It reminds me that it's dangerous to relax into an assumption of safety, that my people can be murdered anywhere, anytime. My world has changed. Warren and Fassett's (2004) description of one student's violently homophobic evaluation comment resonates here, and like the authors, "I know, I know that this moment is an attack on my body, on my soul, my spirit" (p. 27).

[Autoethnography resumes] I'm teaching another segment on gender and sexual diversity in education. This is familiar territory to me. It's material I've researched, written about, and taught, for many years. Generally, I love the material … I love the conversations that unfold … I love the discoveries by and with my students … and I even love the sometimes difficult and awkward moments that inevitably emerge in my classrooms while teaching this content.

My students often have questions, statements of challenge. They want to know why we need to focus in so explicitly on gender and sexuality, amidst the range of "isms" in the world. I often need to challenge the various iterations of "we are all people" or "we are all the same," reminding my students that this is just as dangerous as approaching anti-racism work with a lens of "colorblindness." I know that encountering resistance is not uncommon in this work. Usually I have a good sense of resiliency, humor, and efficacy in meeting student resistance and engaging in these difficult conversations with compassion.

This summer, however, is different. Usually, my choice to embody my queer pedagogy is a particular strength that I bring to my work. This summer, it almost feels like a liability. How in the world do I teach this content with honesty and groundedness when, in the midst of grief and feeling my own body at risk, it's a struggle just to navigate through the day? How do I respond to resistance, and sometimes even to subtly coded homophobia and Transphobia, when I really want to respond with outrage? I try to breathe deeply. [Autoethnography ends]

Navigating the space between pedagogical ideal and immediate lived reality proves challenging post-Orlando. I strive to strengthen what performative auto-ethnographer Spry (2011) calls:

> … practiced vulnerability … strategic surrender to an in-betweenness of self and other, to a relation, to a letting go of a single story … a space of active reflection where one inhabits the intersections of his [sic] own personal experiences with the intimate politics of others. It is the practice of being vulnerable to meaning making, to the collision and communions of our experiences with others; it is the practice of being vulnerable to the process of becoming. (pp. 168–169)

I take heart from Spry's reminder that "practiced vulnerability does not leave the performer exposed, but rather opened to the strength gained through critical reflection" (2011, p. 167). Like Warren and Fassett (2004), I strive to "teach from the heart, teach from the position of an exposed mind, body, and spirit, a mode of engagement with our students that is honest, available, and socially just" (p. 29).

NAVIGATING OPEN-HEARTEDNESS AND SOCIAL POWER

There are times, however, when my desire to teach from this open-hearted space collides with the socio-cultural realities of my classroom. Adams and Jones (2011)

remind us that, "rather than being sacred spaces of pedagogical equality, our classrooms are microcosms of our culture, and we would do well as teachers to remember that fact" (p. 101). I do, indeed, try to remember that my classroom does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped and influenced by the structural and systemic forces of homophobia and Transphobia that infuse our world. My students and I, knowingly or unknowingly, are shaped by these forces.

In light of these forces, now, more than ever, I sense the vital importance of thinking deeply about social power in the classroom. I'm concerned not simply about my own wellbeing, but the wellbeing of the lesbian undergraduate, the Trans doctoral student, the master's student with a gay son. I concur with Wilcox's (2003) suggestion:

> Rather than treating each student equally from the start, this may imply not only encouraging disempowered students to speak of their experiences but also teaching students who are heavily empowered by mainstream society to recognize that power and cede the floor … as well as to privilege in the course materials those voices that are less commonly heard in college settings. (p. 102)

And so, I find myself wrestling with multiple intersecting threads here … my commitment to embodied vulnerability as a pedagogical location bumps up against the realities of social power in my classroom … bumps up against my own grief, lack of safety, and outrage in light of the Orlando attacks. Adams and Jones (2011) remind me that, "… perhaps this is what a reflexively queer auto-ethnography adds up to, just stories, texts that tell and don't tell about 'bodies literally affecting one another: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought'" (Stewart, 2007, p. 128). I find deep wisdom and even comfort in Adams and Jones' claim that:

> The auto-ethnographic means sharing politicized, practical, and cultural stories that resonate with others and motivating these others to share theirs; bearing witness, together, to possibilities wrought in telling. The queer means making conversations about harmful situations go, working to improve the world one person, family, classroom, conference, and essay at a time. The reflexive means listening to and for the silences and stories we can't tell, not fully, not clearly, not yet; returning, again and again, to the river of story accepting what you can never fully, never unquestionably know. (pp. 111–112)

CLOSING WITH QUESTIONS

I began this chapter with questions, and I close it with deeper questions still. How does the communal trauma of an event like the Pulse shooting continue to shape and inform my experience as a Trans/genderqueer lesbian? How does it shape me as a teacher? And can I really even separate my queerness from my teaching? Would I ever want to? If not, how do I navigate my own landscape of grief, trauma, and inherent bodily risk whilst still remaining present to and with my students?

I return to the power of story. I remember, along with Adams and Jones (2011) that "stories can be insurrectionary acts if we make room for our (all of our) selves and their desires, for making trouble and acknowledging the implications of doing so, for embracing the texture of knowing without grabbing on to sure or fast answers" (p. 114). I reconnect with my commitment to make room for all of myself, all of my queerness, all of my passion for teaching, and all of my humanness. I reconnect with the frustrating beauty of the questions.

In my play, *Intervention*, (Mesner, 2014b), I tell stories of queerness and life … trauma and grace … humor and grief. At the end of *Intervention*, in a final moment of prayer between Kerri-the-queer-minister and God, I settle deeply into this space of ambiguity, uncertainty, and spirit. It seems a fitting closing (or perhaps opening) for this chapter.

> *[Stage Directions] The stage lights dim just slightly. Kerri looks around the empty church, pauses, then resumes the conversation with God.*
> Kerri: God, the sanctuary is silent …
> I open my eyes
> And the sanctuary is silent.
> God, maybe silence is the only breath deep enough to give voice to what I know now …
> And yet I don't want to rush to resurrection
> I want to practice a spirit of remaining … (Rambo, 2010)
> Remaining in this strange place that trauma survivors know well
> A Holy Saturday kind of place … a waiting kind of place
> With a Spirit that will not answer me, or triumph, or redeem this experience …
> But instead a Spirit that simply remains with me
> And I breathe. I breathe and am breathed with.
> And the breath opens a space and names something without words.
> And it is enough. (pp. 166–167)

Perhaps remaining with the questions is indeed enough.

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