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Cutting as a Literacy Practice: Exploring the Fractured Body, Desire and Rage through Queer and Trans*+ Youth Embodiments

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Abstract

By attending to the ways in which cutting manifests in the life histories of three queer and trans*+ youth of color, I argue that cutting is a literacy practice. I focus on the life histories of three youth, Jay, Harper and Sam, who have different experiences, reasons for, and reactions to their cutting. With each story, we learn something new about the act and how it pushes us to the brink of literacy pedagogy. Jay's narrative forces us to reckon with youth who refuse to or cannot maintain their bodily integrity. Harper's story brings to the fore the violence of everyday life for queer and trans*+ youth of color. Sam's story showcases the nuanced ways in which desire and rage can exist side by side in the act of cutting. All of these stories help us to understand the larger implications of engaging with embodied literacies inside a classroom space.

Introduction

> But it kind of makes me sad that I had to leave in order for people to get better. It kind of, like, scares me for future anything. Like, I know for a fact that I'm never going to let anyone treat me like anyone has before, but does it really take me leaving for people to realize what they'd done wrong? Or is it, like… that's what I'm figuring out now. It's like can it just be communicated and is it everyone, where you have to leave in order for it? *Or is it something that can be communicated and if so, how do you communicate that?*
>
> —Harper (they/them/theirs)

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Harper and I sat together in a small library study room discussing their life history. Throughout their life they lived with multiple foster families and on and off with their grandma and mom. During their teenage years they struggled with their grandma and mom who were often dismissive of Harper's mental health, sexuality and gender. After Harper grew up, moved out and found more stability, they slowly came back around to rekindle their relationships with their family members. Their mom and grandma both apologized for their lack of support and came back into Harper's life. Harper was recounting these connections when they had the above epiphany—wasn't there some way to do this sooner? For years Harper had worn their stress and anguish on their physical body. Cutting in order to survive their harsh reality, Harper's arms and legs stood as a testament to their pain and their self-preservation. Harper had been communicating their struggle to their mom and grandma all along but it took their disappearance for the two of them to listen. Harper expressed this sentiment with a great deal of ambivalence as they were happy that they were reconnecting but hurt that their previous cries for help fell flat.

In light of Harper's stories and many other stories of queer and trans*+ youth, I have become acutely aware that embodiments speak (Perry & Medina, 2011). By way of being present in the world, queer and trans*+ youth tell us their stories by simply showing up. Many of those stories involve some form of bodily modification which can include the process of cutting and scarring. These cuts and scars are instructive on a number of levels. They give us insight into the worlds the youth inhabit and a plethora of meanings and moments embedded in each part of the skin. Cutting, in this way, is a literacy practice or a communicative multimodal text that often, as is the case with Harper, goes unheard and unheeded.

This work explores the idea of cutting as a literacy practice and, through this lens, analyzes the life histories of three queer and trans*+ youth of color who cut. Through their discussions of cutting and scarring, the youth present a rich tapestry of experiences that push us to think through the notions of finding solace in always being fractured along with the contradictory feelings of desire and rage. As we move through each story it becomes more apparent that silencing embodiment by looking away or refusing to listen comes at a great cost. After discussing the youth life histories, I move back to the concept of literacy and encourage educators to create spaces in classrooms where the critical, emotional and visceral are welcomed literacy practices that can thrive.

A Note on Terms

I use the terms queer and trans*+ in this paper because they continue to be mobile and flexible terms for youth who comprise a number of sexualities and genders that defy our traditional understandings. The youth in this study are not just queer in the sense that they take on and proudly express non-normative sexuality but in doing so they actively push against the concept that heterosexuality

is a given. Trans*+ has similar qualities in that the youth in this study may attach to it as an adjective but in general use it as a verb to describe their ever-evolving relationship with gender. Trans*+ can stand in for a host of identities (e.g. genderqueer, transgender) and ways of life that continually push against the idea that sex must define one's gender identity (Miller, 2016).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Cutting and Queer and Trans+ Youth*

Psychologists have described cutting, which falls under the umbrella of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) as, "the immediate and deliberate destruction of one's own body tissue, without suicidal intent, and not for purposes that are socially accepted" (Hasking, 2016, p. 645). Thus, while there may be socially accepted forms of body modification such as piercings, cutting is the line where pathology forms. It is clearly labeled as an unhealthy coping strategy (DSM-5, 2013). Cutting was once thought of as a predominantly female and white practice but this has since been debunked as studies continually show prevalence of cutting across lines of race, gender and sexuality (dickey et. al., 2015; Sornberger, 2013; Gholamrezaei, et. al., 2017). In recent studies, it has become increasingly clear that queer and trans* youth engage in self-harm at higher rates than their cisgender and straight peers and this discrepency has not waned over time (Liu et. al., 2019).

Scholars that discuss cutting in schools more broadly such as Toste and Heath (2010) explain that since cutting in schools was considered a contagion, psychologists used to suggest that any overt discussion of cutting or scarring is redacted from conversations with students. In fact, because of its contagious qualities, initially educators were instructed not to talk about it under any circumstances. However, the field has shifted as it has become clear that it is impossible to stop youth from having discussions around cutting. Toste and Heath suggest that instead of talking about the act explicitly, it should be implicated in larger discussions around unhealthy or risky behavior that is used to deal with stress (e.g. drinking and drugs). Then, the discussion should move toward how to deal with stress in healthy and effective ways. They encourage following the protocols introduced by Linda Lantieri (2008) who believes schools should embrace activities like mindfulness exercises, meditation and yoga, which help to support the emotional intelligence or inner resilience of students so that they can handle high-stress situations. They suggest this even though "no research has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches directly in the area of NSSI" (p.15). Until recently, the work of sequestering the act of cutting is on the student. The student needs to find methods of coping while the outside world is rarely called into question.

Scholars across disciplines who focus specifically on queer and trans*+ youth who self-harm upend the idea that the individual is to blame. They contend that school structures and issues such as bullying need to be considered in the fight

against self-harm (Lefevor et. al., 2019). They urge those who work with queer and trans*+ youth to look at the practice of cutting as one that is produced by systemic issues such as homo/bi/transphobia in schools. For example, those looking through an interdisciplinary lens such as Wozolek (2018) insist that attending to the sounds of self-harm in school, not just the physical and visual cues, can allow us to better understand the school-to-coffin pipeline that renders school a space of despair and ultimately death for some queer and trans*+ youth. Roen (2019), drawing off of her work with McDermott (2016) and the work of Chandler (2012), asks us to rethink self-harm in trans*+ youth as something that is agentic and a logical response to the violence that is caused by schools, communities, families and the larger world. McDermott and Roen (2016) further express that in order to alleviate self-harm not only do youth need informal and safe routes to express themselves (their work focuses largely on virtual spaces that have built-in supports), but they also need recognition from the outside world as human beings. They state,

> The need for queer(ed) youth to be recognized as human even while they live within the material and cultural conditions of unintelligibility, is fundamental. The harm done to those rendered unintelligible as human is not typically recognised and their suffering often goes unnoticed. Across our studies, the young people's accounts were burdened with the desperate desire for recognition and the often unbearable pain of misrecognition. (p. 190)

I quote this work at length because while recognition is of the highest importance, it does not have to be contingent on being human (Van Asselt, 2019). Those who work at the crux of gender, sexuality and race studies have noted that the construction of humanity is predicated on cisgendered whiteness and thus the opportunity to become human or almost human is a fraught journey (Warren, 2017; Hayward, 2017). I also find this humanizing argument to be limiting in my own personal work as a teacher educator. I have too often heard students say something along the lines of, "if we could just all see each other as human then…" any number of problems would simply disappear. Taking the construction of the human out of the picture allows for a far more fluid kind of recognition and also demands that any kind of being in any kind of space deserves support. Having this flexibility offers a far more promising outcome that falls in line with queer and trans*+ theorists of color (Green & Ellison, 2014).

Tying in queer theory, Roen's (2019) work suggests that in response to self-harm, our main goal should not be to try to straighten or align the subject back into normative frameworks. Instead, by attending to moments of distress and brokenness we may gain a better understanding of the potential that lies outside of the norm. Expanding on Roen's work which draws from Ahmed (2010b), I too have found that the queer and trans*+ youth of color in my research describe the process of cutting as one that actively disrupts our common understandings in queer and trans*+ ways. The cutting that surfaces in the following narratives revolve

around the contradictory and/or complementary feelings of rage and desire. Cutting is both an artifact of violence and simultaneously pleasurable in its capacity to connect. This is not necessarily because the subjects are queer and trans*+ but because their actions work against and across the grain. Queer as a performative (as opposed to an identity) is entrenched in the interplay between the subject and context. Those who actively queer our understanding of embodiment live lives that may appear, as Ahmed (2006) suggests, "oblique or offline […] which as we know involves a commitment to living in an oblique world or in a world that has an oblique angle to that which is given" (p.161). She also offers that living queer means living, "odd, bent [or] twisted," which results in disturbing "the order of things" (p.161). Reflected in the subsequent life histories as desirable or necessary for survival, cutting, as it surfaces both in practice and as a scar, queers the subject as their body refuses to meet the embodied expectations of others. This ends up frustrating family members and peers as it disrupts their notions of how youth should act. As a result, many of the youth are deemed as what Ahmed (2010a) describes as "affect aliens," or those who do not align with the proper objects of happiness (p. 37). When a cutter turns their attachment to the improper object of the blade to find a sense of relief, they threaten the integrity of the family/school/community. In this way, the queer and trans*+ youth of color who cut in this study become "blockage points" that often make family members, peers and teachers aware of their own faults and mistakes (p. 39). In response, youth are told to stop what they are doing so that everything can go back to normal thereby silencing the histories of violence that preceded the act of cutting.

Cutters also upend the promise of education which, as Ahmed (2010b) explains, "is about cultivation, whereby, through tending the soil, you encourage the [student] to grow in some ways rather than others. To educate is to orient," toward school-sanctioned happiness (p.54). As hooks (1994) argues, in educational frameworks happiness is often properly displayed through bourgeois values that reject the raw emotions associated with cutting and that are often racialized and classed. When youth (re)(dis)orient themselves toward their own bodies and couple that orientation with the blade, they refuse the sustenance the soil of education promises. In doing so, they force us to question the quality and value of that soil and this often aggravates peers, teachers and school administrators.

In response to these initiatives for happiness and normalcy, the youth in these life histories respond in ways that resemble José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) vision of a queer utopia. They seek ways of being that resist the anti-relational tides of neatly packaged identity-based and often whitewashed politics. There is no policy that can attend to the youth in this study because they refuse the administrative pull to incite themselves and instead favor community building that can be painful and joyful all at once. As the youth describe who they are in the context of cutting, they are unable and unwilling to present themselves as full subjects. In so doing they open up other ways to embody a body that is not contingent on the integrity of the skin.

Linking queer and trans*+ theory together, the cutting narratives in this piece follow along with Vaccaro's (2014) discussion of trans*+ embodiment. She uses the concept of the handmade to describe how trans*+ bodies are collectively produced and always in *process* (not in progress) in coming to the fore. Throughout these life histories, there are countless times that youth reimagine cutting in ways that stand in tension with interpretations offered by psychologists, teachers and parents. By redefining cutting, youth open up different possibilities of being that resonate on the surface of their skin and impact the people around them. Each time a youth describes their cutting experience they open up, both literally and figuratively, a mark that is made collectively as it stands as a response to their world. Finally, they don't arrive in the ways that those around them wish them to arrive, as healed and whole, both by nature of scars as those markings that persist and by the impossibility of reconciling the contradictions inherent in cutting as an act that derives from rage and desire simultaneously.

These narratives of rage and desire push us to reckon with our sense of what we should allow space for in educational settings. Cutting is a communicative text that transforms the lives of these queer and trans*+ youth of color. When they cut, they can make sense of their world and change their world, if only for a moment. It provides unsanctioned connections, reveals violence and serves as a way to understand youth struggle and victory. In many ways their stories mirror Stryker's (2006) who, upon theorizing her subjectivity as akin to Frankenstein, states that,

> You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself…May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world. (p. 254)

Like Stryker, the youth featured in this paper risk being abject in order to engage in new ways of living, loving and knowing. They rupture the sense that things have gotten better and their memories of a near past provide an archive of felt experience that contributes to a larger genealogy of queer and trans*+ youth of color experience. In this way, documenting and calling attention to these memories resists the ways in which the memories of a predominately white majority have been preserved while trans*+ and queer of color narratives have been "ripped from the fabric of time and space" (Ware, 2017, p.176). These stories, as black and trans archivist Ware explains, remind us that queer and trans*+ youth of color are here and that they will "continue to exist, continue to fight, to struggle for change, and to win" (p. 177). Their fractured bodies, desire and rage, as expressed in their cutting and scarring, are just some of many texts that deserve attention and space.

Cutting as Literacy

In the spirit of recognition and how we may affirm the lives of queer and trans*+ youth who self-harm in schools, I argue that cutting is a literacy practice as it begs for the opportunity to be storied, discussed and analyzed. To say as much is not to condone it or promote it but to acknowledge the potential it has to be a multimodal communicative device that makes us acutely aware of the rage, desire and overall embodied feelings of youth—queer, trans*+ or otherwise. Following in the footsteps of sociocultural literacy theorists that focus on literacy as a social practice, cutting has its own historical, cultural and contextual parameters (Street, 2001; Perry, 2020). It also aligns with theories of multiliteracies as it breaks with what we may consider to be typical language or typical text (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Cutting can include words (as evidenced in some of the stories below) but it is not a necessity and the medium for the cuts are the skin instead of paper. It is also a critical literacy practice that allows for the cycle of reflection, action and change (Freire & Macedo, 2005). When youth mark their bodies they write back against an uninhabitable world and gain a fresh sense and understanding about the world around them. When they speak to their cuts they can manifest new understandings and encourage others to entertain those understandings as well.

More specifically, cutting echoes the work of literacy theorists who have argued that literacy is embedded in the flesh and wounds and the concomitant stories of pain, rage and desire that emanate from those sources. Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell's (2011) work, for example, argues that "literacy itself is artifactual" (p. 133). They explain that literacy is multimodal and is embedded in material objects such as postcards, tattoos, suitcases and scrawls. These all count as literacy artifacts that "can be used to elicit stories within school and community settings" (p.134). The narratives that come out of these objects are essential to redressing the power imbalances in schools as they situate the speakers as intellectual and foreground their at-home literacy practices as meaningful.

Kirkland's (2009) work further this argument around the literacy of the flesh by examining the power of tattoos. His work focuses on a young, black man named Derrick. The story of Derrick's tattoos, at times painfully produced and "told in the workings of ink and flesh, illustrates a young man's use of texts and tattoos to revise a shattered self-portrait. At the same time, this story posits a powerful critique of the words and worlds that surround him" (p. 375-376). In the case of Derrick, his tattoos actively counter the "ominous myth about the absence of literacy in the lives of young black men" while at the same time opening up the multimodal possibilities of literacy that are often not seen as legitimate in school spaces (p. 375). As Kirkland reminds us, literacy practices that do not follow the norm or that do not benefit the ruling class are often pathologized, especially when they highlight social ills or benefit marginalized groups. Kirkland ends by suggesting that this "promiscuous textuality in the practice of literacy offers Der-

rick a reprieve from tragedy, multiple ways to read and write, and a possible release from a hijacked identity" (p. 391). Although Kirkland, Pahl and Rowsell do not explicitly link cutting to literacy, both tattooing and cutting require the tearing and healing of skin and come with unique narratives. While the two acts are not completely aligned, it is worthwhile to understand that viewing the manipulation of the flesh as a text pushes us to see and hear a different story told by marginalized queer and trans*+ youth of color.

Furthering this discussion, Elizabeth Dutro (2011) argues that stories of pain and contention, like the ones that emanate from cuts, should be considered necessary and legitimate testimony in literacy classrooms. However, she makes clear that the testimony itself is not enough and argues that there must be a witness to the speaker's story; this witness in turn shares their own testimony. This cyclical practice of witnessing and testifying helps constitute "a self-conscious attention to both connection and difference between one's own and others' testimonies," an act she calls, "critical witnessing" (p. 199). Critical witnessing offers but one way to render what Pritchard (2016) describes as a restorative literacy environment that combats the overwhelming literacy normativity found in schools. Pritchard explains that literacy normativity is "the use of literacy to create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto people who are labeled alien or other through textscapes that are experienced as painful because they do damage or inflict harm" (p. 31). When someone silences the stories that surround a cut or scar and reduce it to a pathology instead of a means of communication, they re-wound the speaker and further support the normative literacy practice that provoked the cut in the first place. Whether it was a literacy practice like name-calling or the absence of seeing a shred of themselves in any text provided by a school, queer and trans*+ youth of color are denied their embodied narratives – their stories are of no value. By storying and discussing the arrival of a cut, queer and trans*+ youth of color can work against this contentious space and create what Pritchard describes as restorative literacy or the "cultural labor through which individuals tactically counter acts of literacy normativity through the application of literacies for self- and communal love manifested in a myriad of ways and across a number of sites and contexts toward the ends of making a life on one's own terms" (p. 35). Restorative spaces for literacy are not perfect or outside of power but instead continually seek to address and listen to the different ways our bodies as texts arrive in any space.

Methodology

These findings come from a larger life histories study that I conducted with five queer and transgender youth who were members of a LGBTQ storytelling and theater program in the Midwest. The original study had a large focus and sought to explore what the life histories of queer and trans*+ youth could reveal to educators in terms of pedagogical and structural needs. I chose a life histories

research (LHR) methodology because of its focus on how subject and context inform one another (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Life histories broaden the scope of narrative research (which limits its analysis to individual experiences) in the service of a larger historical project that seeks to understand the present through a research participant's life story. At the same time, it also uses this information to think about the "critical insights into not so much the dead past as the developing future" (Tierney, 2000, p. 538). Tierney's non-teleological way of thinking affords research participants the chance to play with time and memory in untidy ways as the goal is not to underline an ordered cause and effect but instead to understand the interplay of power and potential. All of the youth who participated in the study relayed stories of self-harm and I chose three who had substantial narratives around the process for this particular paper.

While LHR can be conducted in many ways, I formulated a methodology that incorporates an arts-based and multimodal approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001). I met with each youth three to four times for around two hours per interview. The interviews were semi-structured, open-ended and dialogic (Mishler, 2004). I began the initial interview with the research participants by explaining that their stories were going to be used to impact the field of education. I also suggested different topics that they could explore such as sexuality, sex, race and gender and then asked if they thought they wanted to add anything to the list. From that point on, we started all of our interview sessions by picking a time in their life and then drawing out what that time meant to them while they listened to a favorite song from that time period. Participants would then narrate their drawings and bring up different artifacts that were typical of that time period of their life (e.g. social media posts, YouTube videos, poetry). For the last interview I brought in their transcripts, pictures of their artifacts and their drawings. We looked through all of the pieces together and the participants pointed out the most important parts of their lives and physically cut and pasted all of the different components together into a life history map. This allowed the participants to have the first say in what they thought was most important about their life history. I used the life history maps, interview transcripts and artifacts as data for this study.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the literacy practice of cutting, I first looked through all of the data from the life history maps and noted where any mention of bodily modification arose. I started with the original life history map created by the participant and then went back to find more data in the interview transcripts and the artifacts. Once I had all of the pieces, I used a Foucauldian (1990) framework to work through all of the data and followed this process:

1. Map out the multiple subjectivities that are incited into discourse throughout the research participant's telling of their life history while paying careful

attention to how they are brought to life through the language of the research participant.

2. Code for the local and communal forces that are at play in the research participant's life history (e.g. school, social media, friends, doctors, teachers) and what forms of knowledge/power they bring with them.

3. Explore how discourse is used to help enact current power/knowledge epistemologies.

4. Examine how discourse is taken up in order to intervene in confrontation, smooth out contradictory notions or rupture the current episteme.

To expand this analysis, I also employed reading practices that were inspired by Kleekamp's (2020) work around neuroqueer literacies. She contends that "asocial" literacy practices (e.g. yelling or stimming) "have rhetorical impacts, and offer possibilities […] to read these actions queerly is to consider how these embodiments shift or change the in-between spaces – spaces between bodies and things. To allow students space to create their own narratives," byway of multifaceted embodiments (p. 118). While the Foucauldian analysis strategy above gives me key insight into the youths' intention in cutting and the powerplay that rendered the cutting necessary, reading the impact the cutting has on a space and the beings that inhabit that space is also important. This mode of analysis reveals that which is outside of the youth's immediate control and the unexpected ways cutting is seen and read by those who surround the youth.

Finally, I used a combination of Sedgewick's (2003) and Ahmed's (2006) notions of beside to do the final round of analysis. I used Sedgewick's work to piece together a "map-like set of relations" to understand how cutting exists in the larger ecology of the youth life histories (p. 5). This meant going back to the data to see if there were any pieces of the life histories that echoed the concepts embedded in narratives of bodily modification. By keeping everything in tension I sought to move beyond a "drama of exposure" (p. 8). Instead of trying to reveal the culprit of cutting, I hope to showcase the twisting relationships and experiences that occur when the flesh is manipulated, when the inside and outside of the body combine and when scars are part of the discourse of the flesh. I am also looking for the ways in which cutting disrupts the order of things. For this I look to Ahmed who discusses how the interactions between queer subjects and objects as they operate in the world can lead to different ways of thinking. I searched for different orientations toward cutting and meanings that the youth presented through their stories of cutting with the hope of starting the conversation around what educators might do in order to open up the literacy potential of cutting.

The Findings section includes the results of the data analysis method above while also allowing for adequate space for the youth narratives to appear. While I was reviewing literature around cutting and queer and trans*+ youth, I always found myself wanting to hear more from the youth. I wanted a chance to do my

own analysis along with the author and so as much as I present my analysis here, I also feature longer narratives to encourage readers to analyze themselves. If not just to spend a moment with the youth and to have to contemplate your own reactions to youth cutting. This may serve as a starting point for teachers and teacher educators, especially for those invested in creating inclusive literacy classrooms, to wrap their minds around the potential of opening up these embodied literacy practices in schools.

The Participants

All of the participants grew up in the Midwest in smaller towns that were partly rural and partly suburban. Between farmland and housing subdivisions, the youth in this study figured out a way to be outwardly and proudly queer and trans*+ youth of color amongst a very normative and white backdrop.

Jay (he/him/his) identifies as pansexual, trans*+, female to male (FTM), biracial (Latinx/white) and was a sophomore at an alternative high school during the interviews. He struggled to get through a predominantly white elementary and middle school and was finally accepted into the nearby alternative school which is known throughout the community as being LGBTQ friendly. In my more recent conversations with Jay I found out that he was not able to finish out his time at the school because of other medical issues. He is currently pursuing his GED and hopes to finish soon. Jay is a phenomenal poet and actor who connected everyone in our storytelling group. He actively listened to others' stories and had an amazing sense of humor. He was an avid reader of Manga, loved the artist Melanie Martinez and was the first youth to introduce me to the trans*+ singer/songwriter Benny.

Harper (they/them/theirs) identifies as genderfluid, pansexual and biracial (Latinx/white). They had just passed the GED during the time of the interviews. They work in customer service and are considering higher education. Harper is selfless in that they would always offer rides, a space to stay (when they had one) and support to the members of our storytelling group. Youth in our group counted on Harper for emotional support and guidance. This was true even though Harper was struggling with their own issues at home and at school.

Sam (they/them/theirs) identifies as a genderfluid, pansexual, biracial (black/white) witch and was in their senior year of high school during the interviews. They went to a predominately white school where they struggled to see the point in the standardized way they were educated. They had a wicked critique of the school administration, teaching and curricular choices. They carved out a space for themselves amongst a group of friends that they had maintained since elementary school. Sam has a quick wit and is a brilliant performer. Their spoken word in our storytelling group was always something we looked forward to hearing.

Findings

The Route to Happiness May Not Be Wholeness

In many of our interviews, participants described their cutting through the reactions of their parents and peers who took their cutting personally. The imperative for the youth to cease the act was predicated on the well-being of the people around them as opposed to their own personal health. This narrative also surfaced in a popularly circulated post on several of the participants' social media pages called "The Butterfly Project" (http://butterfly-project.tumblr.com). The project, which seeks to help those who self-harm, provides a step-by-step process that people can use to stop self-harm and start healthier alternatives:

> 1. When you feel like you want to cut…draw a butterfly wherever the self-harm occurs.
>
> 2. Name the butterfly after a loved one, or someone that really wants you to get better.
>
> 3. NO scrubbing the butterfly off
>
> 4. If you cut before the butterfly is gone, it dies. If you don't cut, it lives.
>
> 5. Another person may draw them on you, these butterflies are special so take good care of them.

This process goes along with the behavioral and cognitive psychology techniques that seek to find a different and healthier release for patients. The healthy alternative here is to draw the butterfly and connect that butterfly and its existence to a person who wants you to stop cutting and get better. This is to say that the project puts emphasis on the people around the cutter as opposed to the cutter themselves. What gets lost in this equation are the reasons behind the cutter's actions, the uninhabitable worlds where the cutter must live and the focus on the cutter's feelings more generally. Furthermore, the ability to live with cuts and scars or to be broken in some way is not possible. While water and soap may wash a butterfly away, it cannot get rid of scars or fresh cuts.

In Jay's case, his parents and friends tried to keep Jay from cutting. They were Jay's butterflies. In one of our interviews, Jay drew a picture of his middle school experience. In the center he drew his arm with cuts across it and the word "está" and "stay" on his wrists. Jay detailed that:

> I have a tattoo, 'está,' on my wrist. I got that around the time when I was starting the self-harming. I would self-harm because I was so depressed. I was so depressed because I got beat up and I thought my parents got divorced because of me. And I got 'stay' on my wrist because I know people want me here... I always self-harmed because I always tried to find an artery, and I just wanted to die. I didn't want to be me, and I didn't want to exist. And I remember telling my parents. My parents were always like, 'But we care about you. We care about

> you so much.' And I would always feel like, 'I don't want you to care about me. I want you to forget about me.'

There are multiple layers to this story, but the one I will focus on is the notion of staying. To stay, to delay, to prevent, to remain are laborious tasks for Jay and stand in stark contrast to his desire to be something other than what he currently embodies. "Stay" as it is placed on his wrist and arteries insists that Jay avoid the threshold that could take him from life to death. It also tells him not to cut, the act that could, for better or worse, allow him to explore the cusp of alternative realities. Each time he goes to hurt himself, his friends and parents are there to remind him that death is not the way out. However, to stay alive is precarious as it requires battling depression and physical beatings along with keeping a body alive that is precious to his parents but not necessarily to Jay. When Jay says he wants his parents to forget about him, he wishes that their happiness was not contingent on his survival. If his parents were not in the way of his interactions with his own body, cutting could become the gateway to a different reality where Jay's understanding of self has the ability to transform. I say this not to condone the act, but to bring up the idea that the ways in which skin, parents and friends contain us can cause distress. This is especially the case when the demand to keep a sense of bodily integrity does not resonate.

Interestingly, the same desire to play with different realities and embodied emotional worlds surfaced in an earlier interview. Jay's actions as a child were met with distaste from his teachers who felt that his dynamic lifestyle did not meet the expectations of schooling or appropriate literacy practices. Jay found pleasure in exploring his race, sexuality and gender in ways that were not straightforward and that mimic what cutting offers Jay in his later life. Jay drew a picture of his childhood that displayed several different pictures: a marker, school house, the names Timothy and Juliet with hearts around them, and a hat. In Jay's discussion of this picture he explains:

> My sister was a little darker and I think my dad liked her better because of it. And I always envied her for that. So when I was at school, I would get markers, like, the brown ones, and I'd just cover my hand. And all of my teachers in grade school were kind of mean to me because I was a very hyper child. And they all wanted me tested for ADHD. My mom told them it was just child's play and that I did not need to be tested. But I just couldn't sit there quietly. And I just wanted to be outside and play. I remember this one student whose name was Timothy. He was very cute when I was little. Like, to me, I was head over heels for him. And then I met him, we became friends, and he introduced me to one of his friends, and I met Juliet. And Juliet changed my life forever, that's when I started questioning my sexuality. Juliet was, like, the first girl I ever dated, and I was like, 'What is this even called?' Because kids would be, like, 'That's not normal.' And that's when I knew. Yeah, that was around the time I got the hat. Yeah. And I had this hat, this is when I first started feeling different. I had this hat that I would wear, it was my dad's, and I would put all my hair back and I would put it on. I

> would pretend I was my twin brother that I had, I was like, 'Yeah, I'm my twin brother, his name is Sammy.' And my mom was always, 'Oh, he likes to act and stuff, so it's whatever. It's just child's play.' when it really wasn't.

This story begins with a discussion of how Jay attempts to darken his skin so that he looks more like his sister. If he looks more like his sister, then his Dad, who is Mexican American, may like him more. However, this act does not bode well in the classroom where Jay's teachers, who teach in a predominately white elementary school, find this act distracting. Drawing on his skin does not count as a communicative effort but an aberration. They define Jay's actions as hyper and hope to get a diagnosis of ADHD confirmed. While it is unclear in Jay's story what exactly a diagnosis would mean (paraprofessional support or someone to look after Jay may have been a result of a diagnosis), Jay's mom retorts that Jay does not need such a test and uses the term "child's play" to protect Jay from his teachers. Jay then asserts that neither of these articulations of himself are true. Instead of child's play or ADHD, Jay describes himself as feeling intensely and allowing those feelings to craft his relationships with students, himself and the objects that allow him to take on new roles. He writes his own wayward narrative. He becomes "head over heels" for one person and then allows his feelings for another to "change his life forever." When he poses the question, "What is this even called?" he pushes for a moment where his subject position can be recognized and where he can showcase the multiple ways in which he wants to mitigate his skin and desire for both girls and boys. This conversation is quickly squashed when the kids around him simply respond with "that's not normal." Jay uses that response as a way to then define himself against the grain of what is considered normal. Being not and being different is a pleasurable state for Jay as it defines him just enough to have the flexibility to continue to rewrite himself. He then moves to talk about the hat that allows him to change into his twin brother Sammy and experience, once again, something that is not child's play. With each embodied literate iteration Jay lays claim to not being, something that he also considers a facet and outcome of cutting.

In his last year of middle school, Jay was brutally beaten up and given a concussion by a peer. As a result, he transferred into an alternative school. When he spoke about his move, Jay always tried to make it appear as though this was his happy ending. In fact, in the picture that he drew of him in his new school, he illustrated a smiley face with the heading, "overall happier." However, each time we met for another interview he would start with the happy ending and then go into a different story when he fell into a deep depression or started cutting again. I inquired about this in one of our interviews:

> I don't know what happened. I went into this deep depression where I started cutting myself again, and no one knew about it. I didn't want to tell anyone. I didn't want anyone else to worry about me, because I was doing so good.

He then referenced a poem that detailed his feelings:

> I don't really know who I am or who I want to be. I just know I don't want to be like this anymore.

Embedded in Jay's writing and body is a message to all of us. First, it illuminates the fact that when we ask youth to be whole because of our own nervousness around their bodily experimentations, we risk ending the conversation. We risk silencing them. Jay, aware of the pain he causes others when he does not showcase his progress, decides to cut again without anyone seeing. Second, it also foregrounds that the subject that Jay wants to be still has not arrived. Jay still feels as though he does not want to be "like this anymore." Cutting acts as a way to mitigate this existence along with poetry and other forms of literacy and expression.

The question then becomes, if existence for Jay is always fractured, where can Jay exist? If his story is always unfinished, is there room for it to be told? If his existence is predicated on not being, then where can Jay find space? If his arrival at school, at home and in the world is contingent on not being fully formed and on being cut and scarred, where does Jay belong? Are we ready as educators to provide a space where the subject who resists formation or who simply cannot arrive at wholeness be present? Can we hear their story? I contend that in order to start this conversation, cutting, as it holds the narrative of the pain and pleasure of being on the interstice, must be integral to this conversation.

The Cut Body Disrupts Others Sense of Self

Jay's parents and friends were, undoubtedly, trying to be supportive of Jay. They were seriously worried about losing him. In Harper's case, others around them wanted Harper to either get better or die. Both directives were given because the people around Harper felt uncomfortable with being called out or having their straightforward lives interrupted. In this way, Harper's scarred body is a constant reminder that the outside world is not ready to change. This fear of change and transgression provoked others to isolate Harper to maintain the status quo. Yet at the same time, Harper's embodied narrative fostered other connections with those who understood Harper's self-harm. Harper explains:

> Seventh grade things fell apart and came back together. It was the start of a beautiful friendship with Ari. In seventh grade Ari became depressed. She confesses to me that she self-harms which, at that point, I was no newbie to it. I was well on my way. So, I was like, I admitted it to her, stuff like that, and then she was, like, 'Well, I think I'm gay.' And I was, like, 'Well, shit. If I come out now, it might sound like I'm copying her.' And then she was, like, 'I already know you're gay, obviously.' So, I came out that year, too. And, like, it was nice to, like, have someone else to come out with, like, someone else to, like, tell my problems to and be like, 'Hey, I did this last night.' And then she'd be upset for me, and be like, 'It's OK. We make mistakes.'

> I actually felt so great that I finally told my grandmother, because that's who I was staying with at the time. Most of the time that I got put back in any home it was with my grandma. Like, my mom, it was trickier for her to get me back. For good reason. So, I told my grandmother about my eating disorder, about my self-harm, and about me being gay. And she pinned it on Ari. It was like, 'Because Ari did this, then you do it, too? Because you're just a copycat.' My self-harm, she was, like, 'I've never seen you get any scars on your wrists, so you don't really do that.' And then, like, I rolled up my sleeves and showed her, and she was like, 'You're just doing it for attention and you're doing it because Ari does it' She was like, 'Ari has real problems. What problems do you have?' And I'm like, 'Did you really just ask that? Did you miss 14 years of my life?'
>
> Sophomore year was actually the height of all the suicide and self-harm, eating disorders and all that jazz. Simply because I was back with my mom at that point. Like, I just remember the very first week of living with her. We were watching *Family Guy*, and it was a really, really triggering episode, because someone said, 'Oh, I'm going to kill myself. Which way do you cut wrists again?' And then you heard Meg say, 'Horizontal for attention, vertical for results.' And my mom, I specifically remember her turning to me and being like, 'Yeah, Harper. Horizontal for attention, vertical for results.'

In recollecting their friendship with Ari, Harper recounts how having someone to "finally talk to" was such a relief to them. That they could finally say that they self-harm and that they're gay in a non-threatening and reciprocal manner, was a powerful moment where things came together. As they recognize their pain and subjectivities in one another, Harper and Ari build a space where they can talk. When these stories arise, Ari is upset *for* Harper and then follows up with the sentiment that "we make mistakes." The possibility of being fractured is available to Harper during these conversations. This stands in stark contrast to the narrative of "stay" for the well-being of others that Jay heard.

Feeling good about this new relationship, Harper confides in their grandma. In these discussions, Harper is met by their grandma's frustrations. In her opinion, Harper is just trying to get attention and being a copycat - a plagiarizer. Both sentiments undercut Harper as a person and reduce them to someone who does not have a mind of their own. Instead, they are needy for support that they do not deserve. Harper's grandma refuses to believe that Harper's life history justifies having an eating disorder or self-harming. This disbelief is convenient for the grandma as it negates any responsibility for Harper's actions.

Finally, Harper confronts another instance of being labeled as an attention-seeker by their mother. When Harper's mom reiterates the *Family Guy* quote, she reminds Harper that their actions were simply for attention and that if they had a real problem, they would have been dead. The act of cutting in these scenarios becomes something that is depicted by family as petty. It's simply a way to make others feel bad for you. The attention that Harper requires would mean that their mother would have to acknowledge her wrongdoing and that is something

that none of Harper's family members are willing to do. Thus, cutting becomes a means of exposing other people's issues or other people's violences. This is also apparent when Harper goes to school:

> Throughout junior year, I was skipping classes and stuff because I just couldn't deal with the eyes on me always because I moved away and came back with a shit ton of scars that I couldn't cover because the school was so damn hot. So, people asked questions, people started talking and they were, like, 'Oh, she went to a mental asylum.' So, like, that year it got really bad, to the point where people were writing shit on my locker and leaving horrible notes telling me to kill myself. They didn't understand it, so instead of trying to understand it, they more so, like, threw it at me as, like, 'You're weird, so fix it or die.' So I just started cutting more. Basically. I've never actually been bullied…super hard, to the point where it was isolating. And then word got out that I dated a girl from my old school. And while I came out in eighth grade, it didn't affect them if I wasn't dating a girl around them, but now when there was proof that I actually dated a girl, it drove them up the wall. Like, no one would talk to me, girls wouldn't invite me over to sleepovers because they all thought that I was just going to try and get in their beds and stuff, so that was real rough.
>
> Towards about May, my grandmother got crazy and would tell me to go kill myself and said I was worthless. It got to the point where my foster mom had to take me to the hospital because I was going to kill myself. Like, I had a plan, I showed her, too. I was like, 'I need help.' So, I said that I needed help, and she got me help, which was really cool of her at the time. And then I dropped out of the classes. All of them, by the end of junior year. The summer between junior and senior year I signed up for the GED program, which is like option two – you're actually getting your high school diploma, but through specific, like, troubled learning class, I guess, for people like me, who have severe anxiety or depression and just can't focus in class. It was specifically designed for kids like me. So, that was a thing, and I was looking forward to that.

Harper's scars become a site of disgust for peers at their school. They believe that Harper's experiences as they are expressed through Harper's skin are going to contaminate the school. So, Harper has two options, to "fix it or die." The problem is, Harper cannot fix it since the issue is not about Harper, but about others' insecurities. Because Harper cannot transform their flesh into useful artifact or normative text that both suggests that they are not damaged and that they are straight, they become a pariah and that pushes others to feel as though Harper should die. As their peers confirm more and more that Harper is not welcome there, Harper responds by cutting, staying alive and showing up, further showcasing the violence on their body as it occurs. Their story becomes a frustrating mainstay.

Harper's grandma reiterates the same sentiments at home and this leads to Harper moving into another foster care situation. On the edge of suicide, they receive help and at the same time find hope in the prospect of a GED class. This class gives them the promise that they can be depressed and anxious; this is some-

thing that they could not be in a regular classroom as their visible pain was simply too disruptive. Like many queer and trans*+ youth of color, and youth of color more generally, who have strategically used the GED as a way to avoid an unwelcoming and standardized school environment, Harper also figures that this is their best shot (Blackburn, 2004; Tuck, 2009). The question then becomes, why? Why is the GED class the one space where Harper's body and story can coexist with curriculum, teachers and other students?

Rage and Desire

Sam

Sam's experience with cutting has some of the same features present in Harper's and Jay's life histories. Sam's cutting is a reaction to the often cruel world they live in and a way to maintain in the face of adversity. However, their story also showcases the mixing of rage and desire that allows Sam to more fully come to terms with the violence they endure and what that violence actually means for their own self-worth. This was evidenced in Sam's discussion of a piece of their life history they described as "the carving of the weak."

In one of our first interviews I asked Sam who they considered to be part of their family. Sam responded with their immediate biological family and then their two best friends, Cynthia and David. When I asked them about Cynthia they responded by saying,

> Cynthia is my best friend. We used to joke that we're like the same person… We're both black and for a period of time we were, like, 'Oh, we're both girls.' Cynthia is family.

In our later interviews Sam told a story about Cynthia's boyfriend and an interaction that they had over something he had said to Cynthia:

> In tenth grade I started carving. It was like making a tattoo. I don't think I told you the story behind the word 'weak' carved into my arm. It's a big one. My friend Cynthia has a boyfriend, Derick. He's a fucking abusive asshole. He did something that upset Cynthia and I texted him, 'Don't you ever fucking hurt her again,' and he was, like, 'Okay, I'm sorry. Damn.' And then, I talked to Cynthia about it, it turns out I overreacted. So, I was, like, 'Alright, I'm sorry, man. It's my bad.' He was, like, 'Okay, it's fine.' But then, a couple of days later, he was like actually 'No, you know what?! It's not fine!' And then he started basically just borderline bullying. I blocked him from my phone, my kik. He's a technology dude, so he figured a way to call me, even though I blocked his number and then he would sometimes hack into Cynthia's phone and call me from her phone and it was terrible and, at one point, he was, like, 'Why do you even, why are you even alive? Like, you're just so fucking fat and ugly, no one will ever love you.' And I was, like, 'Okay, dude, like, calm down.' He was, like, 'You're just weak. You know what? Do you know what you are? You're just weak.' He called

> me weak and it destroyed me. Weakness is something that is not tolerated, ever, like, in my family especially. You can't be weak. You got to be strong. Don't cry, ever. I was not okay for two days, I was like, 'I'm weak. I'm just weak. I can't do this because I'm weak. I can't do this because I'm weak. I can't. I'm just weak. I'm a weakling.' And, so at one point, I was like I need to do something. I really want to just carve it into my arm. And, so, I did and I'm not going to lie, it helped, like, it felt good. I was, like, this is great, this is what I wanted, it's what I need. And then, it was a reminder to myself, after a while, I got over it, I was, like, you know, he's just an asshole, actually.

Sam's first assertion is that what they do to their skin is called carving. By distancing themselves from the pathology, Sam finds different words to explain how they interact with and use their own skin for the purposes of expressing their rage and desire. Cynthia's boyfriend stands for all that is normative and wrong in the world. He is an "abusive asshole," he is a "man" and "dude" who interrupts one of Sam's most important relationships. Sam's reciprocal support system is in jeopardy when Cynthia's boyfriend enters the picture. Furthermore, when Sam attempts to support Cynthia, they are first told that they are overreacting and then when they apologize, they are berated by Derick who calls Sam fat, ugly, unlovable and weak. The last designation of weak is what eats away at Sam. It reminds them of what they are not supposed to be in the eyes of their family and they explain that being called weak "destroys" them. However, instead of letting it impact everything they do, they find a way to move through the emotions and address them head on. They allow themselves to give into the desire of carving "weak" into their arm, of marking their own body the way that they see fit. For the first time in days, Sam feels good as they do something for themselves as opposed to for Cynthia. It "is what [they want], it's what [they] need." This mark serves as a reminder that they are strong and that Derick is just an "asshole." It is a contradictory reminder of the violence in the world as opposed to Sam's individualized pathology. It should make us aware of the toxic masculinity that is exhibited by Derrick and how that toxic masculinity shows up on the bodies around him in unexpected ways.

Cutting was not the only instance where Sam mentioned using their body to call attention to violence. In addition to the story of the "carving of the weak," Sam also mentioned feeling physically overwhelmed by the architecture of their school and the white, athletic people that moved in mass around their body on a daily basis. In one of our interviews Sam lamented that,

> School is meaningless. Meaningless. There's so many athletic white people, it's just that's how it is and I hate it, like, ugh. Why is everyone athletic and white? They can do things for longer than I can do things. Like, even the people who are, like, 'Ugh… I have to go up all these stairs… it sucks.' I'm, like, 'same…' And then, there's the kids who take them three at a time, it's, like, 'Can you not?' Like, I'm clutching onto the railing for dear life, jeez…

This is another moment when Sam embraces their weakness in order to make a larger point. As they stand, sometimes with others, and commiserate, they force others to go around them. This strength that is found in the weakness and refusal of not attaining a particular embodied whiteness and athleticism further reminds us of the violence embedded in schools that foster select body types and leave others behind.

Harper

Harper's story also takes up the contradictory notions of desire and rage when they describe cutting as something that keeps them alive and validates their feelings. It also allows them to change the path that has been laid out for them in life. They explain:

> My scars, to me at the time, they were more so, like, 'I went through some shit and here's the proof of it.' Like, 'I survived to tell the tale.' I feel like if I never started self-harming, I wouldn't have been able to rationalize anything. Like, cutting was a very irrational thing but it brought me back to reality. To the point where I realized what I was doing. And what I was doing was wrong and wrong again. Because awful as that sounds, I feel like it was necessary. I don't want to think of what else I would have done. Like, I could even end it all, so that was always the first thought. It was like, 'Well, time to die today.' Not trying to make it sound like a joke, but like that's just who I am. So, like that or drugs have been in my life my entire life. I don't know. Like, cutting was the only thing that didn't affect anyone else in my mind. Like, it affected only me. And that was my punishment for like thinking such thoughts or being the way I am. But then afterwards it was always the realization like, 'I really just did that. That was real. That was my emotions on the inside becoming visible.' It helped to rationalize what was going on inside, like, to realize it is a real thing. I'm not making it up.

Harper first describes that their scars count as courage and strength and pushes back on the idea that self-harm indicates weakness. They then go on to explain that what they are about to say is contradictory. They contend that cutting is an irrational thing but that it can transport them back to reality and to rationalize. Thus, like Sam's discussion of cutting as carving, Harper reframes it as something that is a *necessary* and wise thing to do for their own survival as the other options are drugs and death. Necessary is an interesting word as it suggests that there are no other alternatives in Harper's world. Self-harm brings them to the cusp of realizing that what they were doing to their body or what they could do to their body is wrong and no other act does that kind of labor. They must make that first incision to have those realizations, there has to be a breaking point where they decide to end with just a cut. Cutting keeps suicide, something that seemed like a real option to them or "just who they are," at bay.

Cutting also helps Harper feel strong and in control or that they "really just did that." When their "emotions on the inside become visible" they become a

narrative of strength and as was explored earlier, it flies in the face of others who think that they should be dead. Harper ends by saying that they are not "making this up," which is the one thing that their mother and grandma consistently made them feel as though they were doing. Cutting contends that this is real. This body, this way of living, this life is a real one and the irrational act of cutting is what allows for this realization to happen.

Jay

Finally, Jay's story around cutting as it relates to desire and rage occurred in a bathroom at school. Jay rarely went to the bathroom during passing periods for fear of being ridiculed, but during class it became the one place where he and his first love cut and connected. This narrative comes alongside other major happenings in Jay's life like coming out, getting a binder, saying goodbye to his father and losing a friend.

> I would cut in the bathroom and that also relates with this guy named Blue, who was also transgender. Blue is such a nice person. I don't even know why I ever broke up with him. They're so great. And they were, like, amazing. That was my first, like, same sex love. Like, we were both trans and it was, like, an amazing experience. We used to cut together in the bathroom. We cut and it was kind of like I felt like, I don't know, I felt like we had more of a connection at the moment. But it also really hurt me. To see someone I love do that. But then we did it to each other, which was also, like, a trust thing for me. And I was like, 'Go ahead.' I don't know. I felt I had trust there. And then I came out which is also around the time when I said goodbye to my dad, and I was like, 'I'm not coming over anymore, because you're an asshole.' And I got my first binder and then I found out my best friend Aly was going to move. And I was so heartbroken and once Aly left, I was, like, going crazy. 'Oh, this is horrible, how could this happen to me?!' All I did was just sit in my room and I cut a lot, and I cut a heart into my wrist.

While Jay's family members interpreted the cuts as suicidal, Jay was simultaneously using cutting to connect, figure out his sexuality/gender and get through some of the hardships of middle school. Cutting transforms the bathroom, a space where transgender youth often feel isolated, into a space of queer and trans*+ connection. When Jay draws his own blood and the blood of Blue, their bodies tell the same material story of pain and pleasure. At the same time, Jay imprints a heart onto his arm in response to losing his friend and, through that mark, once again represents the painful loss and simultaneous connection. These handmade cuts that rightfully concern his parents are also representative of Jay's dynamic feelings of rage and desire. They are his way of making sense of it all.

Conclusion

> When, and as, a *pedagogy of refusal* has uptake as a mediator for learning, and where once pathologizing those who *refuse* are now celebrated, trans*+ness has an unchartered permanence and as theory/pedagogy and curriculum alters minds, such an embodied praxis can and will trans*+form spaces. With refusal constitutive of literacy learning and literacy learning constitutive of refusal, identities become constitutive of refusal; thereby, refusal *is* an act of self-preservation. As compassion and mindsets are expanded and deepened, and with the development of even more resources to teach, affirm and recognize our trans*+ and gender-creative youth, (a)gender self-determination is no longer just a possibility or probability, but a *reality*. (Miller, 2016, p. 15)

After reading Dutro (2017) and Miller (2016) with my pre-service secondary English teachers, I shared some of the above findings and asked them to think about the concept of cutting as literacy. I then invited them to apply conventional literary analysis methods to the narratives. For some students it was a struggle as they immediately defaulted to worrying about being a mandatory reporter. Others engaged more readily, noting things like voice and repetition and how these literary techniques impacted the overarching theme of the narrative. One particularly strong analysis discussed the textual similarities between Sam's story about the carving of the weak and *The Scarlet Letter.* This spurred a larger discussion about the real work it takes to be literacy instructors. Just as we allow the characters in our shared readings in English classrooms to be flawed and unfinished, so too do we need to create the space for students to do this emotional and embodied work.

Miller's work around the pedagogy of refusal as it applies to literacy learning and classroom embodiments is a key piece to understanding how to engage in this work. When youth cut they refuse to uptake the normative values embedded in schools and out in the world. They refuse, in many ways, to be silenced and reveal through their skin that the processes of school and home life are not working for them. Their skin becomes a critical literacy outlet for self-preservation. If we position cutting as literacy, we give ourselves the ability to hear about the pleasure, pain, desire and fracturedness of our students who cut. That being said, and in the vein of Miller, this openness to refusal has to come through all of our literacy pedagogy. Making space for students' embodied narratives is but one way.

In order to incorporate the literacy of cutting, there need to be other support systems in place. By support systems I do not mean just school counselors, though I am sure most teachers would affirm that quality mental health care for students would be nice. Beyond counseling, it has to be commonplace that students question everything – the texts they read, what they hear from their peers and even what the teacher says. If critically examining your surroundings is a coveted literacy practice, the invitation to discuss violence may mean that cutting diminishes or ceases altogether.

Furthermore, any attention to texts as they are embodied (e.g. dress, pierc-

ings, tattoos) should continue to be fair game in a literacy space. If altering the body truly is one of the ways in which youth can practice their literacy skills, then opening up all the alternatives could prevent cutting more generally as well. What is most important here, though, is not to lose the raw and visceral piece that comes alongside stories of cutting. It may be tempting to think of making literacy spaces happy again by giving out alternative options in the hopes of getting rid of stories that push against the grain. While a goal of affirmation is a good one, it does not have to be contingent on finding one's way back to the norm (Roen, 2019).

Similar to the work that has been done by those invested in culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, growing a sociopolitical consciousness is not something that comes easily but instead is a sustained and sometimes painful effort to understand across differences and power over time (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014). There is much to be learned through this process of awareness and change; embracing it means accepting that the good and the bad will intermingle in ways that we as educators cannot predict. This unforeseen space beyond the rote literacy instruction we have come to know bares enormous potential that queer and trans*+ youth deserve.

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