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Becoming-American: Experiencing the nation through LGBT fabulation in a ninth grade U.S. history class[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This article considers “safe spaces” for students—in particular LGBT students—as a worthy goal for educators, but ultimately a vision for learning that can shelter and limit the kinds of ethical encounters that provide opportunities for students to engage with contested narratives, histories, and perspectives on LGBT issues. As an alternative, the article explores “spaces of becoming” that work beyond safe spaces to be more inclusive of competing and contentious perspectives on LGBT issues. To examine how spaces of becoming work, two concepts from educational theory informed by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze—becoming and fabulation—are put to use in analyzing data from a qualitative study of a high school social studies teacher's unit on LGBT history in the United States. Examples of fabulation are highlighted to suggest how the narration of LGBT histories in two lessons of the teacher's ninth grade U.S. History course work both for and against a space of what the author terms “becoming-American” in this social studies classroom. Some implications from this study are drawn for social studies educators, namely how social studies education can push beyond awareness and visibility for LGBT persons for more radical curricular possibilities.

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Introduction

Many classrooms in schools and universities in the United States are increasingly displaying a verity of related stickers indicating the particular classroom or educator's office is a “safe space” or “safe zone” (Mayo, 2013). The symbolic power of safe space or safe zone stickers underscores a hope invested in such stickers that their visible presence deems a particular space safe for all occupants, particularly students of minority sexual orientations in a school setting. The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) offers a Safe Space program that identifies a designated Safe Space as “a welcoming, supportive and safe environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students” (www.glsen.org).¹ The informal curricula of these advocacy programs attempt to assist in creating educative spaces where LGBT students (and, increasingly, students with diverse gender expressions) can learn without fear of ridicule, shame, or verbal and emotional abuse. Educators and students work together to channel particular frames of language and thinking that serve to structure what Pepler (2006) terms a “social architecture” built to prevent bullying and victimization. Distinct roles for teachers and

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¹ I consciously choose to use the phrasing LGBT in this article as my focus is on narrating histories of people who identify, or are identified with, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans* identities. I use the letter sequence LGBT in keeping with the title of this special issue on “LGBT and Queer Issues”.

students in designated safe spaces predominantly attend to deeds and words, encouraging or discouraging particular forms of student voice and peer relation (Doll, Song, Champion, & Jones, 2011). Such programs often do not take as their focus the planned or explicit curricula of the courses that convene in such designated spaces; rather the focus is beyond the scope of any one curricular area and is aimed at developing and practicing discursive practices for educators and students that enhance acceptance and tolerance and minimize opportunities for threatening conversational or otherwise interpersonal moments, preventing injurious speech from spreading in the safe space. The goal is to prevent and intervene in moments of abusive or harassing discourse (Espelage & Rao, 2013; Goodstein, 2013) or to help create a responsive educative space that counters anti-LGBT talk by promoting awareness and inclusivity of LGBT-related topics or issues across the curriculum (Greytak & Kosciw, 2013; Ollis, 2013).

These laudable goals, however, can be quite difficult to achieve with respect to the tensions involved with negotiating sexuality and sexual identity (Airton, 2013; Gilbert, 2014; Loutzenheiser, 2010; Weems, 2010). Indeed, my own experience teaching in both high school and college classrooms has long given me significant doubt about the effects of an educative space inclusive of LGBT issues that is rendered “safe”, a word synonymous with benign, harmless, innocent, and sheltered. Such doubts lead me to wonder if the social studies education classroom can and should be a safe space for formal curriculum related to sexuality and queerness. How much novel learning and challenging perspectives and worldviews can be cultivated in a space that is safe or restrictive in what is allowable to be said or thought? And yet, not wanting to reject the necessity of a safe classroom that prevents harm, nor the necessity of a dangerous classroom that opens up uncensored avenues of perhaps taboo inquiry, I want to share with social studies educators in this article an alternative possibility: the social studies classroom as a space of becoming. This is an educative space with a social studies curriculum oriented towards considerations of how different viewpoints, perspectives, and epistemologies for thinking of one’s place in the world are always changing, forming and reforming, and ongoing processes that are never completed. Reading a social studies classroom as a space for becoming means being alert and vigilant to observing, noticing, and describing instances in which students are confronted with external stimuli (music, images, art, literature, sounds, words, bodies, texts) that induce some kind of change in how they think with and respond to their world. It is an ethical space one that is constantly desiring change, flux, movement, and a swirling distribution of felt forces—affects, emotions, feelings, moods—that move between teacher and student, student and student, student and text, text and text, and other spaces in which the classroom exists and in which students and teachers occupy. There is very little that is meant to be “safe” about a space of becoming. What matters in spaces of becoming are not the fixed terms of agreement that we can associate with a safe space; instead, what matters in spaces of becoming are constantly negotiating interactions with ideas and forces that cannot be contained within the intentions of a teacher, the manners of a student, the mandates of a curriculum, or the pages of a lesson plan. Expect the unexpected in spaces of becoming, welcome that which pushes, prods, and probes limits of comfort and familiarity. The spaces of becoming I present in this article come from a ninth grade U.S. History course in which two lessons on LGBT histories are analyzed, drawn from the teacher’s week-long unit on LGBT minority populations and current issues since the 1990s.

The following sections examine how spaces of becoming can work beyond safe spaces to be more inclusive of competing and contentious perspectives on LGBT issues. To do so I first begin by consulting the literature on how LGBT issues are treated as curriculum within social studies education. Informed by the terrain in which social studies education engages with a curriculum of LGBT issues, I then outline a theoretical framework for LGBT histories in social studies education that makes use of two concepts receiving significant attention in Deleuzian theories of educational studies: becoming and fabulation. After defining and illustrating the utility of these concepts for social studies education, I follow the tenets of humanities-oriented qualitative research by “thinking with theory” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) across data from a qualitative research study on social studies classrooms I conducted in 2013. This section examines in detail how the narration of LGBT histories in two lessons of a ninth grade U.S. History course work both for and against a space of becoming in this social studies classroom in a suburban high school. After viewing these data through the lenses of becoming and fabulation, I discuss some implications one can draw from this study for social studies education, namely how social studies education can push beyond awareness and visibility for LGBT persons for more radical curricular possibilities.

Review of the literature

The social studies education field is increasingly devoting attention and consideration to issues of LGBT sexual identity (Mayo, 2011, 2013). We can see different areas of focus within this burgeoning research, perhaps coming into sharp relief during the 1990s when education researchers sometimes referenced social studies when calling attention to LGBT issues in promoting richer frameworks for multicultural education (Bloom, 1998; Ooka Pang & Park, 1992) or in theorizing critically about infusing sensibilities and topics of queerness into curriculum thought (Britzman, 1995; Sumara & Davis, 1999). These broad considerations of LGBT issues began to focus more sharply on specific curricular interventions LGBT issues could make within forms of social studies education that are more attentive to gender and sexuality (Crocco, 2001; Levstik & Groth, 2002; Mayo, 2007). Another fruitful strand of research born out of these developments examines the intersection of LGBT issues, sexuality, and education for democratic citizenship. The knowledge content of such curricular concerns often remains at an expansive level with a focus on the effects of particular dispositions for students, such as tolerance (Avery, 2002); trust (Niemi & Niemi, 2007); heterosexist ideologies (Bickmore, 2002; Schmidt, 2010); or on the effects of approaches to student

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