

Troubling Education

Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy

Kevin K. Kumashiro



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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

Being an activist is a very strong part of my identity.

—*Pab, a student activist*

I look at high school students and I think, “Oh my God, how could I even spend one day being in the closet with these kids doing what they risk every day?”

—*Sam, a teacher activist*

I dedicate this book to those who insist on challenging oppression and who, day by day, are making our schools and society better places for all.

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Permissions

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An earlier version of chapter 1 first appeared as "Teaching and learning through desire, crisis, and difference: Perverted reflections on anti-oppressive education," *Radical Teacher*, 58, 6–11; ©2000, Center for Critical Education.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Queer Desires in Education

In the spring of 1999 I had the opportunity to work with future teachers at a large university in the Midwest. I was teaching an introductory course on the relationship between school and society to thirty-three undergraduate students, most of whom were working toward certification in the teacher education program. We spent the first few weeks of the semester examining the paradoxical nature of schools that strive to give students equal educational opportunity but function to maintain various social hierarchies. As we discussed examples and theories of how and how often this happens, my students seemed to move, at least in their discussions, from feeling surprised to critically reflecting on their own schooling experiences to strategizing ways to address these problems. For this reason, I believe my students, just as I, honestly desired to teach in ways that were not oppressive.

Although I did not realize it at the time, our desires, while perhaps well-intentioned, revolved around affirming ourselves and remaining the same. For example, my students' desire to learn about issues related to social justice seems to have been limited to those issues that did not confront them with their own complicity with oppression. Some students (as written in their response papers on this topic) felt that schools are not

responsible for social change and, instead, should follow the course set by others in society, as one student noted:

I don't think that schools are responsible to initiate change. I think that artists, writers, lobbyists, activists, performers, the news media, thinkers of all types, spiritual leaders and political leaders are all responsible to initiate the social change attitude. Education can then take it from there.

Another felt that teaching in ways that address different forms of oppression will detract from that on which schools are supposed to focus—namely, academics:

All the approaches deal so much with integrating racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism into the curriculum, but will this take away from the true intention of schools to teach children academics?

In order not to detract from academics, some felt that teachers should be morally neutral. One student wrote,

There are only eight hours in a standard school day. If cultures, races, sexual orientations, etc., are going to be added to the curriculum, what is going to be taken out of the present system? The school day is already jam-packed with the basic classes. How can a curriculum incorporate all ideas and still leave room for math and science? Will not it seem like teachers are teaching their values on different ideas to their students?

Some felt that teachers are not part of the problem, as exemplified by this student's comment:

I don't think that I have ever experienced a situation when students were directly oppressed by teachers in any way. The teachers were there to teach, not to impregnate their own beliefs or biases upon the students.

Many of my students acknowledged and condemned the ways schools perpetuate various forms of oppression, but asserted that, as teachers, their jobs will be to teach academics, not disrupt oppression. By separating the

school's function from the individual teacher's role, they were able to maintain their belief that they do not—and, as future teachers, *will* not—contribute to these problems.

Some of my students did agree that teachers need to address issues of inequity through their curriculum. However, they equated doing so with teaching about “minorities” and the disadvantaged in society, not about their own privileges and about themselves. They seemed to believe that their privileges did not make a difference in their education, and instead would shift the focus of our conversations to the people who were different from the norm at their school—they wanted to talk about *them*. As several students kept repeating in class discussions and in their final projects, if people can learn about different groups and develop empathy for them, then ignorance and the prejudice based on it will be effectively combated. For example, students who felt they were becoming more “open-minded about homosexuals” talked about realizing that there is “nothing wrong” with them, that they are just like normal folks, and that they hurt just like everyone else. As one student noted,

This article made me sad. I had an uncle who was gay. I realize that he wasn't treated equal when he was in school. He was one of the greatest guys I ever knew. He died last year, so it really hurt me to know that other gay people are experiencing what he had to experience.

The expectation that information about the “Other” (i.e., groups who traditionally are marginalized in society) leads to empathy is often based on the assumption that learning about “them” helps students see that “they” are like “us” (Britzman, 1998a). In other words, learning about the Other helps students see the self in the Other and, thus, does not change how they see themselves.

This is especially the case when students learn about the Other in comforting ways. For example, one student stated,

I started the semester much more close-minded about the issue of homosexuality. After hearing many stories and reading the class materials, I finally have come to realize that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality. I think it helped that I got to know Kevin before he told us his sexuality, by that time it did not matter if he was gay or not.

Significantly, this student, like most of the other students, referred to me as “gay,” despite that I had discussed, in some depth, my bisexuality earlier in the semester (when I described my own experiences in school as a prelude to their autobiographical essay assignment). As I will soon argue, this tendency to think of sexuality as either/or often reflects a desire to stabilize and normalize a person’s own sexual identity. To see me as gay is comforting because doing so put me on the “Other” side of the gay-straight binary (or on the same side for those who identify as gay/lesbian), while seeing me as bisexual or queer is to acknowledge that sexuality is more fluid. Students are not always willing or able to trouble their own identities, and in my class, perhaps some desired seeing me as “gay” because they could not bear the implications of seeing otherwise. This is not to say that such a change is insignificant; for many people, it is a big step. However, as my subsequent experiences illustrate, education cannot stop there. The desire to learn only what is comforting goes hand in hand with a resistance to learning what is discomfoting, and this resistance often proves to be a formidable barrier to movements toward social justice.

As we moved to the next section of the course, we studied how teachers and schools might address the ways they function to maintain social hierarchies. At the end of this section, I asked students to read an earlier version of what is now this volume’s chapter 2, and had planned an in-class activity to discuss and extend what I described in my essay as four approaches to challenging racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression in schools (in other words, four approaches to “antioppressive” education). While planning my lesson, I had assumed that my students knew little about addressing oppression in schools but were committed to doing so, could implement the four approaches if they learned them, and therefore, should read about them and discuss their definitions and applications in depth. However, when the class session began, all did not go as planned. Almost immediately, we got stuck at my use of the term *queer*. One student wrote,

You use the term “queer” throughout the article and it struck me as derogatory and actually really upset me until you clarified why you used it on page 11. As a suggestion, maybe you should explain how you use the term “queer” for a feeling of “self-empowerment” at the beginning. It

would make the reader feel more comfortable. The more I think about it, maybe you should not use the term at all. I don't really think it's appropriate for this type of paper. I know that I personally cringed every time I read it.

Another said,

Really don't like the word queer. I understand better why you chose the word queer but it's still a bit much [when said] over and over again—it just has a negative feel to it.

I had hoped to discuss the range of ways in which various forms of oppression play out and can be challenged in schools, but in a conversation where even some of the normally quiet students were speaking, many kept expressing feelings of discomfort and even anger at my use of a term that often meant something derogatory. Although I neglected before assigning the essay to discuss the history of the term, I did explain in the essay that *queer* has been claimed and appropriated by some people to emphasize a conscientious distancing from what is considered "normal" and a sense of self-empowerment (I will define the term in more depth later in this chapter). Nonetheless, many were offended that I used a term that they had been taught was "politically incorrect." For some, this may have meant reading the essay and disregarding the queer applications, while for others, this may have meant feeling no need even to read the entire essay. What they kept repeating in the class discussion was the notion that *queer* meant something negative, and that I should instead use *homosexual* or *gay* since those terms will not upset the (presumably) predominantly straight readership of my writing.

I believe there are two main reasons why we were stuck on *queer*. First, the notion that the term can be an affirming self-identification for some people reveals the socially constructed nature of identities. It can remind us that identities—including queer sexualities, but also including heterosexualities—can change in meaning and sociopolitical value in different historical and cultural contexts. To understand *queer* as an affirming and politically transgressive self-identification, my students would have needed to acknowledge the similarly socially constructed nature of heterosexuality,

which for many of them was a self-identification considered normal and natural. Such a move is often difficult to make. Second, it is difficult to hear or see the word *queer* without feeling reminded of the culture and history of ignorance, bigotry, and hatred that often surround that term. In other words, *queer* often reminds us of the *existence* of heterosexism/homophobia, the *severity* of heterosexism/homophobia, and, if we have ever used the term in a harmful way (or failed to intervene in such a situation), our *participation* in heterosexism/homophobia. The preferred terms *homosexual* and *gay* do not stir up such connections, since the use of such terms does not carry as many harmful intentions and effects that *queer* does in everyday speech. By silencing the oppressiveness around the word *queer*, my students were able to more easily disregard heterosexism/homophobia as a significant form of oppression. Indeed, several students asserted that they did not believe that heterosexism/homophobia was as much of a problem as racism, classism, and sexism, which were the other forms of oppression addressed in my essay. As one student noted,

I saw the title about Anti-Oppressive Education, but the majority of the examples used to explain the approaches dealt with homosexuality. I do not see homosexuality as the main problem. I would find it more helpful if more oppressive topics were discussed.

It is true that heterosexism was discussed in the essay more often than any other form of oppression, but only slightly. I could not help but wonder if the reason students felt that heterosexism was given “too much emphasis” was because it was not given the kind of emphasis that it is normally given, by which I mean only marginal attention. I do believe my students desired to learn. However, I also believe their desire for normalcy and for affirmation of their belief that they do not oppress others was stronger, preventing many of them from confronting and tolerating these new yet discomfoting forms of knowledge. In desiring a sense of normalcy, they desired a repetition of silence surrounding heterosexism/homophobia, including their complicity with it, and thus, entered a crisis when they met *queer*.

Our getting stuck on the term was a crisis for me as well. I was completely surprised by their emotional reaction to my piece and unprepared for the resulting conversation. Ironically, this lack of preparation resulted

from my desiring to be what many educators would call well-prepared. I had planned a lesson that proceeded rationally: first, summarize the essay; second, extend the theories in the essay to other forms of oppression. Furthermore, I had planned a lesson with a clear, desired end result: the selected reading and activity would help students think critically and teach subversively (the manner in which I try to think and teach). Finally, in trying to tailor my lessons to my students, I presumed to know my students: what they already knew, how they would respond to the lesson, where they needed to go, what would get them there. By leaving little room for what is uncontrollable and unknowable in education, and by expecting my knowledges to be affirmed and replicated by my students, my preparation also left little room for addressing ways that learning can be unexpectedly difficult, discomfoting, and even emotional. While I did anticipate a crisis, I was expecting a different kind of crisis, one based on learning about the many ways oppression played out in their schooling years, not one based on resisting the very theories being presented.

There were a few students who expressed support for my use of the term *queer* and who thought positively of their experiences reading the essay. As one wrote,

Upon reading the essay, I felt very happy. For once, I was reading an essay that dealt directly with the topic of discrimination in schools (especially with homosexuality).

Another even felt the essay and its queerness was educationally useful, and wrote,

Personally, I had no problem with the use of the word "queer." I was not offended by the word. I was actually intrigued to read on and find out what the actual meaning of the word "queer" is.

Another wrote,

This is a voice that I've never heard before. This brought a whole new dimension to my frame of thinking. I'm not sure what it is but information like this gets my mind going. It has been true for me that when I had

to work through a crisis, I grew and gained from the experience like no other time in my life. This is what life's all about for me: learning.

One student wrote of not initially understanding why I was using *queer*, but reasoned that feeling discomforted was perhaps part of the learning process of reading my essay. According to the student, wanting to learn meant wanting to learn something new, hear a different voice, imagine what has yet to be said, do the "unexpected." "Learning" meant learning things that are uncomfortable because they complicate a person's "frame of thinking."

As the class discussion ensued, I encouraged my students to enter into discomforting places and to think of learning as taking place only through crisis. Modeling my own advice, I forced myself to enter an uncomfortable place, departing from my lesson plan and teaching the unpredicted. Such a move, I should note, is very difficult for me, as it is for many teachers who desire control over the direction of the lesson and over what students learn. Patti Lather (1998) tells us that educators often try to avoid crises and close off stuck places in order to maintain a sense of control over what students learn (and, for that matter, over how they behave). Yet, we can never control what students learn. In fact, as my experiences show, attempts to control education can actually hinder antioppressive change.

Not until the end of the lesson did we discuss the four approaches. In retrospect, not expecting to address crisis not only led me to plan a lesson that could not be "achieved," but also, had I not departed from it, could have prevented me from working with my students where they were. This experience has led me to question what it means to teach in ways that challenge different forms of oppression. I am curious about what it means to address our resistances to discomforting knowledges, and about what it means to put uncertainties and crisis at the center of the learning process. I wish to explore new ways to think about antioppressive education. The goal of this book is to address such questions.

Troubling Educational Research

Educational research has contributed much to our understanding of the dynamics of oppression in school and the promises of some forms of antioppressive curriculum and pedagogy. As the above section suggests,

more must be done to disseminate this research to classroom teachers and future teachers who traditionally respond to calls for antioppressive education with resistance, defensiveness, and fear. This is not to say, however, that existing educational research is itself unproblematic. Although some researchers speak with certainty and confidence, suggesting that they have found the answers to our problems, the “strategies that work,” I will argue that every educational practice makes possible some antioppressive changes while closing off others. Furthermore, much in education remains unknown and underexplored, including perspectives that can significantly contribute to, critique, and offer alternatives to existing theories and practices in antioppressive education. Educators, therefore, have an ethical responsibility not only to learn and use the troubling or discomfoting research already in existence, but also to engage in further troubling or complicating that research by looking beyond the theories and methods that we already know.

To this end, this book describes what I see as four primary approaches to antioppressive education suggested by the current field of research. Simultaneously, this book looks beyond these dominant frameworks for conceptualizing and addressing oppression, and explores insights and changes made possible by some of the theories and stories that are traditionally marginalized in educational research. One set of theoretical perspectives that I will explore is the recent feminist and queer readings of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis. As I will argue in chapter 2, I turn to these theories because they offer ways of thinking and talking about education, oppression, identity, and change that I find helpful for working against traditional ways of thinking and acting, teaching and learning. My exploration of these theories should not imply that these theories are the best theories for antioppressive education, since this body of writings is but one of many possible frameworks that can be helpful to such research. Poststructuralism and psychoanalysis will not give *the* answer, the panacea, the best practice; rather, they will help us imagine different possibilities for working against oppression.

Similarly, one set of stories or voices traditionally marginalized or silenced in educational research that can help us imagine new antioppressive possibilities is the stories of queer activists working against multiple forms of oppression. What do I mean by *queer*? In a narrow sense, I use the term *queer* to mean gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirited (this last term is

specific to Native Americans; see Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997); transgendered, intersexed (neither male nor female; see Chase, 1998; Kessler, 1998); questioning, or in other ways different because of one's sexual identity or sexual orientation. (A catchall abbreviation for these identities that I will use here is GLBTsTgIQ.) Although *queer* often refers to sexual orientation, I do not limit its definition to that of gay, lesbian, or bisexual, partly because of the interconnectedness of sexuality and sex/gender (Butler, 1990), and partly because of the interconnectedness of heterosexism and gender oppression (Wilchins, 1997). The term *queer*, after all, like *fag* and *dyke*, derogates and polices not only people who feel attraction for members of their same gender, but also people who exhibit physical and behavioral traits that society deems appropriate only for those of the "opposite" gender (e.g., boys who "act like girls" and girls who "look like boys"). The range of reasons for identifying or being identified as queer suggests that being queer is as much a performance or identification (what we do) as an identity (who we are).

I should note that I sometimes use the term *queer* in the broader sense of nonnormative (i.e., not who we are supposed to be). While discomfoting to many people because it reminds us of bigotry and hatred, it is exactly this oppressive history that gives the term its activist, in-your-face quality. For many queers, the term has come to mean a rejection of normative sexualities and genders, a reclaiming of the terms of their identities, and a feeling of self-empowerment (Butler, 1993; Capper, 1999; Pinar, 1998; Tierney & Dilley, 1998). For some, the term *queer* is expanding to include other marginalized groups in society (such as those with queer races or queer bodies), and the term *queer activist* is expanding to include those who do not identify as GLBTsTgIQ but nonetheless challenge heterosexism and gender oppression. Such expansions are important since the term has begun to normalize only certain ways of being queer, as when people equate "queer" with, say, "white, sexually active gay male." All of this is to say that this disruptive, discomfoting term, with its multiple meanings and uses, seems appropriate for research on changing oppression.

Although I similarly use the term *activist* to identify people engaged in many different forms of activism, I limit my analysis to antioppressive activists—those who work against the forms of oppression that I describe in chapter 2. Right-wing or conservative activists (such as pro-life, anti-gay rights, and anti-affirmative action activists) are not antioppressive since

they work to reinforce or conserve the norms of society and stabilize current social hierarchies. They work to repeat rather than to change social dynamics that privilege certain groups in society and marginalize others. They use power as it has traditionally been used to benefit some and limit the opportunities, threaten the safety, and subordinate the identities of others. While I believe that educators have much to learn from the experiences of activists who work to contribute to oppression, as well as from the experiences of nonactivists, I focus the analysis in this book on activists committed to challenging oppression. As I will argue in chapter 2, multiple forms of oppression are constantly played out in schools. The norm or status quo, which manifests in the traditional operation of schools, for instance, or in traditional pedagogies, is what is oppressive. Changing oppression, then, requires constantly working against this norm. This book looks beyond a repetition of the status quo, and even beyond good intentions and a critical awareness, in order to examine the particular kinds of *labor* involved in antioppressive activism and change.

Why focus on queer activists? As with poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, queer activists do not offer the “best” stories or voices for insight on oppression or education. They are but part of the many communities that have yet to significantly enter the conversation among researchers about antioppressive education. However, for several reasons, I feel a sense of urgency to focus on queer activists who work against multiple forms of oppression. I focus on queers and their oppression because queers remain “arguably the most hated group of people in the United States” (Unks, 1995a, p. 3); because queer sexualities continue to incite wide public panic, anger, and resistance, especially when discussed in the context of schools (Epstein & Johnson, 1998); because educators do not often feel the need to address homophobia and heterosexism in schools; and because my experiences as a queer researcher, teacher educator, and activist make me feel all the more capable of bringing about significant change in this area. I focus on activists because they are doing the kind of work that I would like to see educators and students doing (that is, not only voicing support, but also acting to bring about change); because they have never, to my knowledge, been invited into this conversation by researchers; and because they bring life experiences of becoming and being activists that can provide models for antioppressive education. I focus on activists who work against multiple forms of oppression because I hope to theorize approaches to antioppressive-

sive education that can address multiple and interested forms of oppression. And I focus on activists who are queer because they inspire me to continue to do the work that I do.

Calling Activists

I sought out a particular type of antioppressive activist. Since my focus was what it means to change *multiple* forms of oppression, I wanted activists who were engaged in projects or efforts that worked against more than one form of oppression, including heterosexism/homophobia (such as antiracist and antihomophobic activisms, or feminist and queer activisms, or queer Asian-American activisms). Since my focus was education, I wanted activists who were working with youth or were somehow in the field of education, be it formal education such as that gained in schools or informal education such as that experienced through community outreach. Since my focus was on queers and their oppression, I wanted activists who identified as GLBTsTgI, or queer, although I hoped to and did find at least one activist who identified as heterosexual but who engaged in antiheterosexist efforts. Since I wanted to interview them in person, I wanted activists living in close proximity to where I was living at the time, which was in the Midwest.

Of the adults, I wanted activists who were students of or had graduated from a college or university. There were three reasons for this. First, college students or graduates are more likely to have had the experiences of leaving their homes and maybe even their hometowns as they began their university-level education. Queer students living independently at college often feel a freedom to explore, research, and discuss their sexualities in ways they never felt they could while at home (Rhoads, 1994). Also, queers (as well as students of color) often have told me that they were not activists until they went to college. I wanted to see what it was about going to college that was helpful, if at all, in preparing activists to work against oppression.

Second, students and graduates who are activists are more likely than individuals who did not attend college to have taken courses in studies of oppression—such as ethnic studies, women’s studies, and queer studies—and thus, are more likely to be conversant in theories about oppression. Having already acquired a familiarity with discourses, languages, and theories that are critical of various aspects of oppression, they will be better able

to collaborate with the researcher in developing theory, a process known as "collaborative theorizing." Sue Middleton (1993) makes a similar argument about her choice of participants for a study on feminist pedagogy. She writes that

the process of collaborative theorizing was helped by the women's theoretical sophistication; all had done some higher education studies in the social sciences and had been involved in academic and/or grassroots feminist theorizing. This helped in avoiding what Liz Stanley and Sue Wise have termed "conceptual imperialism." (p. 69)

As I will explain in a moment, I wanted the participants to provide and analyze data with an awareness of my research questions and theoretical framework.

Third, students and graduates who are activists represent the type of students I believe schools need to help produce. Rather than produce "happy failures" because they have compromised academics in order to advance social justice (Metz, 1992), I argue that schools need to pursue excellence both in academics and in social justice. In part, this requires reconceptualizing excellence in academics and what is necessary to get there. But it also requires rethinking the purposes of schools. "Success" in school must involve, I argue, a balance of these two goals. Thus, I do not seek students achieving in higher education who are complacent about oppression, nor do I seek students active in antioppressive projects who did not succeed in and do not value academic education. Rather, I seek students who pursue and achieve both intellectual and political goals. They provide models for antioppressive education that cannot be criticized for not trying to "teach" students.

I began soliciting participants in April 1999, and did so in several ways. Primarily, I contacted, over the telephone or via e-mail, people I knew who fit these criteria and/or who I thought understood my definition of antioppressive activism and might be able to refer me to other possible participants. My initial contacts included friends and acquaintances, teachers in local schools, and students, staff, and faculty of the local university, including staff of queer organizations, multicultural organizations, and health organizations. I also contacted leaders or members of queer organizations in the local area, such as youth groups, support groups, community organi-

zations, churches, and education-related groups. To each of the potential participants, I sent out a letter or spoke over the telephone and described the goals and method of my research. As Kathleen Casey (1993) did in her research with feminist teachers, I wanted my participants to have a "brief description" of the context and purposes of my study before beginning the interviews.

Out of the twenty-plus individuals who volunteered to participate I chose seven activists who, when put together, constituted a diverse (though not necessarily "representative") group. They identified with six racial groups (African American, Asian American, Latino/a, Mixed Race, Native American, White American), six sexual orientations (bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer, straight, unsure), three gender identities (female, male, transgender), and ages from almost every ten-year bracket (teens, twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, and seventies). I felt that seven participants would offer a manageable number of stories to use in my study and at the same time provide a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. My attempt to assemble a wide range of stories was part of my attempt to always look beyond what I expected and look for perspectives that my own perspectives and assumptions may close off.

Feminist, Activist, and Collaborative Interviews

In designing the interviews, I used several research traditions: I drew on feminist researchers who work against detachment; activist researchers who explicitly work against oppression in the lives of the participants; and collaborative researchers who ask the participants to help them answer their research questions.

Feminists have long critiqued calls for objectivity and detachment (i.e., calls for the researcher to refrain from disclosing personal opinions and feelings to the participants), arguing that fears of biasing the interview are not only misguided, but also harmful (Fine, 1994; Gluck, 1991; Lather, 1991; Richardson, 1997). As Ann Oakley (1981) explains, "Personal involvement is more than dangerous bias—it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives" (p. 58). In fact, the call for detachment actually dehumanizes the people being researched: it expects them to interact with an inhuman, "objective" questioner; it denies

them humane responses to their emotions, their desires, their insecurities, and even their bodies (Honeychurch, 1998); and it denies them the opportunity to relate socially to the researcher as two people normally relate to and interact with one another. Many feminists have thus aimed to facilitate more personal connections and disclosure, and to minimize power differences between researcher and participant (Stacey, 1988). I should note that this movement toward a more egalitarian research process results not only from the affirmation of traditionally "feminine" capacities, such as compassion and caring (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), but also from the recognition that the researcher can never be fully detached from or outside of the research process. As Michele Foster (1994) and James Scheurich (1995) have argued, the research interview is a dialogical, interactive event. What the interviewees say is often highly influenced by how they read, feel about, respond to, and relate to the interviewer at any given moment. Thus, the researcher should not pretend to be detached nor pretend to be interested, but engage in the process as honestly as possible. As I will explain momentarily, I tried in my interviews to make explicit the goals of my study, the assumptions and perspectives that I brought with me, and even my own experiences with education, oppression, and activism.

Activist researchers also critique calls for detachment and objectivity, but rather than focus on disclosure and the one-on-one interaction during the interview with the participant, they focus on action and intervention in the community, classroom, or situation of the participant (Gluck, 1991; Lather, 1991; Leck, 1994; Tierney, 1994). Concha Delgado-Gaitan (1993) argues that learning about oppression and about how to work against oppression go hand-in-hand with actively working to challenge oppression within the participant's community or classroom. What is important, here, is the recognition that, in the processes of researching and constructing knowledge, the researcher cannot help but impact the research context and the people in it. Faced with the impossibility of detachment, researchers should aim to ensure that what they do works against rather than contributes to oppression. As William Tierney (1994) argues, "if research is to be praxis oriented, if our purpose is somehow to change the world, then of necessity we must get involved with those whom we study" (p. 110). In Tierney's study of a colleague with AIDS, he "undertook the research not merely to collect empirical data but also to aid the individual under study" (p. 110). I should note that the term *activist* applies not only to the interac-

tions researchers have with participants, but also to the knowledge produced through research. Because this knowledge is supposed to be accessible to both researchers and participants (through conversations, publications, and so forth), the value of the knowledge, and consequently the purpose of the research, must be determined at least in part by how the participants can put the knowledge to use and, in particular, how they can use it to work against oppression (Gluck, 1991; Lather, 1991). Researchers have an ethical responsibility to their participants to conduct research that will be useful to them; to do otherwise is to expect them to participate in and contribute their labors to a study that benefits only the researcher. In my own study, I tried to engage the participants in learning different perspectives on oppression and change that they can later use in their own activist efforts.

Collaborative researchers also believe in trying to have a positive impact on the lives of the participants and argue that doing so requires entering into a less hierarchical relationship (Bickel & Hattrup, 1995; Lather, 1991; LeCompte, 1995; Ulichny & Schoener, 1996). Traditionally, researchers assume control over the design and implementation of the research project, and their views of social change are often imposed onto the participants' stories and lives. Even feminist and activist researchers can act in ways that patronize or conflict with the desires of the participants. Collaborative researchers advocate a more cooperative or participatory approach in which the researcher does research *with* rather than *on* the participants. Collaboration can take place on many levels, including research design, data collection and analysis, and write-up (Ulichny & Schoener, 1996). Middleton (1993) argues that, especially when conducting analysis, collaborative theorizing helps to ensure that participants do not become merely the objects of study; such was the central goal of my interviews with the participants.

Unfortunately, I did not collaborate as much as I had originally hoped. A primary barrier was time. Although the participants expressed to me a shared commitment to activism and an interest in helping me with my project, most were unable to spend time outside of the interviews to do some of the background work needed for collaborative theorizing, which in this study meant reading my summary of the four approaches to antioppressive education and my preliminary data analysis (instead, I had to quickly summarize them verbally during the interview). Furthermore, the process of

constructing their stories was not collaborative since most participants did not have a chance to look over, coconstruct, or even “approve” the ways I excerpted and presented their stories in the research write-up. So, my research was collaborative only to a point. This is not to say that more collaboration would necessarily make the project “better,” since a collaborative construction of the stories would give not a “truer” reading but a different one, namely, a joint or shared one. Some of the stories that I represent in chapters 3 and 4 show participants grappling with theories of antioppressive education, while others do not, and yet I will argue that they can all help educators and researchers to trouble educational research and practice, though in different ways. In fact, while collaboration is desirable, it is not unproblematic; James Ladwig (1991) argues that it can be exploitative since the researcher is the one who often benefits significantly from the labors of the participant. Every methodology makes certain kinds of interactions, knowledges, and changes possible and others impossible. My methodology is not the “best” methodology, but simply a methodology that closely fits the goals of my project.

I interviewed each participant once or twice for a total of two to six hours in the summer of 1999. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. I began the interviews by introducing myself and reiterating the basic premise of my study—namely, that researchers have conceptualized antioppressive education in certain ways, and that I will be asking them for help in rethinking these approaches. As they introduced themselves, I asked my participants how they wanted to be introduced in future write-ups. I wanted to resist introducing the participants with a list of identity categories that function to give the reader a presumably fixed lens through which to understand the stories of the participants (as if the stories make more sense *because* the reader knows this person is, say, gay). Some decided to list the ways they identify, while others had different choices, as will be seen in the following chapters. My first set of questions focused on what I called “moments of significance,” or, moments of their lives, either in or out of school, that were significant in helping them either to address different forms of oppression or to become the activists that they are today. I also asked them to describe the forms of activism in which they are currently involved.

I did not conduct the interviews with the intent of learning about the participants, who they are, what they do, or why they do what they do.

Rather, I conducted the interviews to see what difference their stories can make to *my theoretical framework*, to see how they can help educators think differently about antioppressive education. I wanted to see how their stories confirmed the theories I describe in chapter 2, how they illustrated them, how they showed them in practice. And I wanted to see how they disconfirmed them, how they troubled them, how they stretched them or pointed to their gaps. I also wanted to see what the participants thought of the theories. The insights from their stories that troubled and exceeded my theoretical framework are the heart of chapters 3 and 4. The participants themselves were not the objects of inquiry; rather, they were resources who helped me trouble the theories. It was, then, the theories themselves that were the objects of inquiry.

The methodology I used as I collected and analyzed data and interrogated and reconstructed theory was a limited version of the extended case method, which, according to Michael Burawoy (1992) “derives generalizations by constituting the social situation as anomalous with regard to some preexisting theory (that is, an existing body of generalizations), which is then reconstructed” (p. 278). The “preexisting theory” is the theory that I describe in chapter 2: the four approaches to antioppressive education. The data that we put up against the theory were the stories that the activists told about activism and moments of significance. In the second interview (or for those interviewed only once, the second half of the interview), we talked explicitly about the theory, in light of my preliminary data analysis. Did they agree that certain of their experiences illustrated these approaches? Did they agree that certain experiences troubled, disrupted, or expanded these approaches? Did the way I defined the approaches fail to account for certain other experiences? To those participants who had a second interview (there were five of them), I offered to send each a copy of the transcript, my initial analysis, and my literature review to be looked over, appended, and commented on. Two of them agreed to look it over before the second interview, and although they offered no changes to the transcripts, they were able to begin the second interview by discussing the four approaches to antioppressive education without my having to explain them (as I did for the other participants). I believe the academic backgrounds of many of the participants enabled them to collaboratively theorize and analyze with me in much depth, as several of them had already read some of the writings I drew on and could refer in detail to theories and theorists.

The goal of presenting my theoretical framework to my participants was not merely to ask them for help in rethinking theory. I hoped that my framework could be helpful to them in rethinking their own practices and activism. In other words, I hoped that my relationship with the participants was not only one in which I benefited from their labors, but also one in which I gave something back. After all, collaboratively theorizing required that the participants learn the range of theories I am grappling with, read and interpret their experiences against this framework, and explore what new insights are made possible for education as well as for themselves. Therefore, I was excited when, after the interviews, several talked about having a clearer idea of how they came to do the activism that they do and felt encouraged to do more. Several also expressed interest in learning new ways to think about activism and change, especially when hearing about the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches, and urged me to hurry and finish the write-up so that they and others could use it.

Re-presenting the Stories

Another way my research aims to be activist is in the changes it works to bring about in the readers of this book, and I hope this happens not just through what it says, but how it says it; not just through what is read, but how it is read. In other words, I hope that antioppressive change will result when readers read the voices and stories in this book in untraditional ways.

Traditionally, researchers have presented the voices of participants in the form of block quotations from the interview transcripts as if to convey to the reader what the participants were really saying, and allow the reader to verify the validity of the researcher's interpretations of and claims about what the participants were really saying. Poststructuralist researchers (e.g., Britzman, 1995; Fine, 1994; Kumashiro, 1999b; Richardson, 1997; Scheurich, 1995) have offered three main critiques of this practice. First, the interviewee's statements are always mediated and therefore influenced by the interviewer and context. Sometimes, what interviewees say can be less an answer to the interviewer's question than a speech act that solicits a particular type of response from the interviewer, as, for instance, when interviewees "test" interviewers to see whether or not they are "really" insiders (Foster, 1994). Second, interpretations by researchers within the

write-up are always partial; they can never tell the whole story. Knowledge itself, after all, is always partial (Haraway, 1988). Third, the way readers read texts is always influenced by their own identities and life experiences (Richardson, 1997). Thus, presenting voices as if they are "literal representations" (Britzman, 1995) or transparent and stable "mirrors" of reality (Scheurich, 1995) obscures the history and context in which the text was and is produced, and the multiple labors involved in that production. Michelle Fine (1994) writes,

As Joan Scott has written on the topic of "experience," the presumption that we can take at face value the voices of experience as if they were the events per se, rather than the stories about the events, is to dehistoricize and decontextualize the very experiences being reported. Scott argues that researchers who simply benignly transcribe social experiences fail to examine critically these constructions which seem so real to informants and are in such dire need of interpretation. (p. 21)

Researchers must reflect on ways in which the "voices" are both "an interpretation and in need of an interpretation" (p. 21). My goal, then, is to move away from a modernist representation of my participants' experiences, to a poststructuralist re-presentation of their experiences, one that makes explicit ways in which the participants' voices are contextualized, the researcher's interpretations are partial, and the reader's reading is situated.

I agree with William Tierney (1997) and Laurel Richardson (1997) that poetry can offer one such form of writing. Discussing a poem she constructed based on an interview, Richardson argues,

When we listen to or read [it], rather than being swayed into thinking we have the one and only true story here, the facticity of its constructedness is ever present. By violating the conventions of how sociological interviews are written up, those conventions are uncovered as choices authors make, not rules for writing truths. The poetic form, moreover, because it plays with connotative structures and literary devices to convey meaning, commends itself to multiple and open readings in ways that straight sociological prose does not. The poetic form of representation, therefore, has a greater likelihood of engaging readers in reflexive analyses of

their own interpretive labors of my interpretive labors of [the interviewee's] interpretive labors. (pp. 142–43)

In other words, while both forms of representation are constructions, poetry, more than prose, makes explicit, through its unconventionality, many ways in which the story is constructed. Poetry, in contrast with "straight" prose, can offer queer representations of my participants' experiences.

Some forms of poetry can also more closely resemble speech patterns of everyday conversation than does formal prose (Richardson, 1997; Tedlock, 1983). As Dennis Tedlock (1983) argues, both "good syntax" and "good scansion" are "more likely to be obtained in dictation than in continuous discourse" (p. 7). Everyday speech involves nonstandard sentences, broken phrases, frequent and meaningful pauses, changes in volume and rhythm, and stresses on particular words, and these communicative devices are intrinsic to a form that makes substantial and unconventional use of breaks, stanzas, spacing, punctuation, capitalization, repetition, and so on. Drawing on Tedlock, I argue that, although the written word can never be an exact substitute for oral speech and thus can never move an individual in exactly the same way that the spoken word can, the closer resemblance to speech of some forms of poetry makes those forms a more useful vehicle for capturing qualities of speech and reproducing the power of speech to move the listener. My choice of poetry, then, is an attempt to have my participants and me speak to the reader. Readers cannot read stories as mere recordings of the participant speaking to the researcher, but they can read stories as events where the participant and the researcher are speaking to the reader. The mode of address changes, the audience changes, and as a result, the reader's response can also change. I do not want the readers to read the stories in ways that they have always read stories; I want the readers to read these stories in ways that disrupt traditional reading practices and that call on them to respond in different ways.

To this end, in chapters 3 and 4, I re-present the words and experiences of my participants in the form of poetry. There are, of course, many forms of poetry, and I have chosen what might be called *narrative poetry*, by which I mean poetry in which the speaker narrates a story using everyday speech. The lines in every poem are quotations from the interview transcripts. The stanzas are abridged versions of the interview (what would oth-

erwise be a block quotation, but without ellipses). The selection, construction, and ordering of the stanzas reflect my interpretation of my participants' stories. In other words, for each participant I combed through the transcript to find instances of their discussing a particular topic, then pieced together these instances to reflect my understanding of their story. I have also put to use my admittedly limited understanding of such literary devices as pauses, cadence, repetition, connotation, and mode of address as I try simultaneously to guide the readers in their interpretation while reminding them of the constructedness of this process.

I do not purport to say, "this is *the* story," or even, "this is my participant's story." Rather, I claim only a partial interpretation. Furthermore, I purport neither to give the reader an unbiased window through which to understand my participants' experiences, nor to provide the reader with presumably objective data against which my claims can be "tested." Rather, I present a literary lens that I hope will force readers to acknowledge their own lenses and interpretive labors in understanding my participants' experiences. My goal is to work against ways in which imposed interpretation and purported objectivity often do violence to the words and lives of the people being researched. This is not to say that poetry is the way that all researchers should represent and use data. As I try to argue throughout this book, there is no one best way. Rather, different approaches with their different strengths and weaknesses can each accomplish different things. For my project, I believe it is important to resist feeling knowledgeable about who the participants are or what they are "really" saying.

Of course, this is not to say that learning about others by hearing the voices and stories of people traditionally silenced in schools and educational research is unimportant. On the contrary, I believe hearing such stories is very important. "Critical ethnographers" (e.g., Anderson, 1989; Fine, 1991; LeCompte, 1995; Simon & Dippo, 1986; Weis, 1990; Willis, 1977) have critiqued the tendency of researchers to speak *for* the Other, and have advocated "giving them voice" or "liberating their voices" through multiple, long, block quotations that reflect not only diversity but also contradiction, opposition, and complexities. Such research helps to disrupt simplistic understandings of the Other.

However, in this book, my goal is not for the reader to know the Other. In fact, using voices to speak as the Other in an effort to learn about the Other can be problematic (Talbut, 2000). My goal is also not to amplify the

stories of the Other; that is a different project. My goal is not even to have the reader listen to the language and words that the participants use to tell their stories, since the process of constructing the poems required me to completely rework (and, perhaps some might say, violate) their language. Poetry is not useful for all projects and goals, and it is not useful for “hearing stories” or “giving voice.” But my goal here is quite different. In this book, my goal is to *use* their stories. My goal is to treat my poetic constructions as *cultural texts* that I read in multiple ways and then ask, How do the different ways that I read the text help me to think differently about antioppressive education? What is important in this book is not as much the “meanings” of the texts as the process of “reading” the texts, and the poetic form of representation seems to fit this goal nicely.

Queer Activist Reading Practices

In this book, I will juxtapose insights from educational research on antioppressive education with stories of queer activists as I explore different ways to challenge multiple forms of oppression in schools. As I look beyond existing theories and practices, I will work toward developing new conceptual and cultural resources for educators and researchers committed to social justice.

In chapter 2, “Theories and Practices of Antioppressive Education,” I review the developing literature on antioppressive education by summarizing and critiquing what I see as the four primary approaches that educational researchers have taken in conceptualizing (1) the nature of oppression and (2) the curricula, pedagogies, and policies needed to bring about change. These approaches are: education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and Othering, and education that changes students and society. I will argue that engaging in antioppressive education requires more than just using an amalgam of different approaches. In order to address the multiplicity and situatedness of oppression, and the complexities of teaching and learning, educators also need to make more use of insights from poststructuralism, feminist and queer readings of psychoanalysis, and other theories that remain marginalized or unexplored in the field of educational research. Both students and educators need to “look beyond” existing theories and practices. I conclude

chapter 2 with a preliminary examination of the implications of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic notions for classroom instruction in the “core” disciplines (social studies, English, mathematics, and science) in K–12 schools. These notions of unknowability, multiplicity, resistance, and crisis suggest approaches to antioppressive education that are paradoxical in nature in that they constantly work to queer their very center.

In chapter 3, “Readings and Rereadings of Identity, Culture, and Oppression,” I discuss different ways to think about oppression and the identities and cultures that situate it. I pay particular attention to the complex and contradictory ways that multiple forms of oppression intersect and play out in everyday life. I begin by drawing on my own life experiences and on the four approaches in chapter 2 as I describe three dominant frameworks for understanding multiple oppressions, or three “reading practices”: a focus on difference, a focus on normalcy, and a focus on intersections. I then turn to the stories of four queer activists—Pab, Christopher, Matthew, and Beth—who live and work at some of these intersections (of heterosexism, racism, gender oppression, religious oppression, and so forth) as I complicate these reading practices. With the first three participants’ stories, I incorporate poststructuralist insights into my earlier “reading practices” as I explore how different routes make possible different insights into the complexities and contradictions of oppression. With the fourth participant’s stories, I take poststructuralist insights one step further by exploring yet another route of reading, one I call “looking beyond,” as I explore how some routes can help not only complicate our understandings of oppression but also change our very senses of self. I suggest implications for education throughout the chapter.

In chapter 4, “Addressing Resistance through Queer Activism,” I draw on the previous chapters as I turn more explicitly to the implications of queer activism for addressing resistance in education. I turn to four queer activists—Sue, Debbie, Matthew, and Pab—to see how their stories of activism help me address students’ desire for repetition and resistance to crisis and change. As I read their stories, I search for elements in each story that suggest a different way to “read” that story, and explore what insights are made possible when I read these stories through these suggested routes of reading. I will argue that my readings of the stories suggest to me four useful antioppressive practices: doing “homework”; inverting and exceeding binaries; juxtaposing one text with another; and catalyzing for action

and change. Throughout the chapter, I will try to model each of these four practices. In other words, what will be important in this chapter is not only *what* I read, but also *how* I read it. Each of my four readings will both describe a practice (insofar as I discuss and interpret the story) and model it (insofar as I discuss and interpret the story in a particular way). Following each story, I will suggest practical implications for classroom teachers.

In chapter 5, "Conclusions," I briefly reflect on how different ways of concluding this book can invite as well as disinvite readers to look beyond my own arguments and analyses. I draw on the stories of Christopher (an activist from chapter 3) about how schools seem to want to "dispose" of some students, including his own adopted child, as a way to remind myself of my goals as well as my limitations. I then call on readers to continue this paradoxical work involved in antioppressive educational research and practice.

As I suggested earlier, I do not aim to offer strategies that work. Rather, I hope to offer conceptual and cultural resources for educators and researchers to use as we rethink our practices, constantly look for new insights, and engage differently in antioppressive education. I encourage readers to read this book in a way that resists looking for answers and that instead invites them to reflect constantly on their own assumptions, identities, theoretical frameworks, and educational practices and puts to use whatever insights are gained. Looking beyond themselves and their own practices, and even looking beyond my theories and arguments, readers need to engage in a reading practice that always asks, What difference is made possible in my own practices by this book?

To this end, I intersperse short vignettes throughout this book. These vignettes are selections from my interviews with an antioppressive educator, Sam. My hope, in juxtaposing her stories with the chapters of the book, is that the reader will feel invited to look beyond what I say in the book and to see how the ideas and practices of an antioppressive educator trouble my own analyses. Of course, the vignettes are no more the "real" story than are my poems. They appear with no context, no discussion, and no interaction between the speakers and the listener/reader. They are partial stories. And my hope is that reading my partial readings alongside these partial tellings will incite theorizings by the reader that not even I could have imagined. Including the vignettes—with contents and a form (block quotations) that overlap, extend, and contradict my own arguments—is my attempt to refuse to present this book as final, complete, and *the* answer.

I encourage readers to think of reading this book as an event that constitutes the kind of antioppressive educational practices that I articulate throughout its discussion. It is queer in its unconventionality and it is activist in the changes it aims to bring about. In this way, my book is not a mere exercise, and not a final product, but a resource that I hope can be in some way helpful to the reader, as it was for the researcher, and as I hope it was for the participants.

VIGNETTE 1

KEVIN: You get to pick your own pseudonym.

SAM: I always wanted to be called Sam. Short for Samantha. Instead of my name. So, Sam.

KEVIN: How would you like me to introduce or initially describe you in the book?

SAM: Well, let's see, an aging lizard [*laughter*]. No. You know, that's the name of older lesbians? Lizards.

KEVIN: I knew there was a group.

SAM: Yeah, the Lizards. 'Cause we all are, you know, our skins are all weathered. I guess I would describe myself as over fifty. And, a parent, you know, a mom. An educator. A lesbian, of course. And an activist. Yeah. I'm pretty middle class, that's important. And a feminist, definitely, feminist.

KEVIN: Can you describe a significant moment, such as a success story, related to your queer activism? Something that you did, who or what did you do this with, how do you think they or it changed, why do you think this is significant or successful?

SAM: Well, as far as dealing with youth, I feel the most significant event that happened was three years ago, when a student came to me, a gay student, and introduced himself and said that being in the support group was not enough for him. He wanted a way to be social with other kids. And I was like, "Okay, well, we need to start an alliance or a club"—of course that's a scary word, *club*—"in our school." And he's just such a terrific kid. So a bunch of us got together, some teachers, and we invited some key people that we knew would help us in any adversarial task. We ended up forming a gay-straight alliance at our high school. And this has snowballed and now there are ten gay-straight alliances in [the county], and I feel that the one that this young man helped us start at this school was really the foundation of that. And it's incredible to me that by being kind of a risk taker, and our high school is seen as suburban, conventional, conservative, so when other schools looked at us, and thought, Oh my God, look what they did! then they took the risk and

they did it. And this was done with another friend of mine, who's also a teacher at the same school, and we're really close. And I think having somebody to do it with was instrumental. I know I could never have done it alone. I see that as so incredible. We had a conference for the kids last fall, and there were 150 kids, or 120 kids, I guess, that attended from all these schools. And I thought, This is incredible. This started from one kid talking to me. And I get calls all the time, "I want to start one, what did you do, how did you do it?" So I think that's probably it.

KEVIN: How do you think this student was changing as a result of helping to form and then being a part of this gay-straight alliance?

SAM: I think it gave him connections, especially, well, with other gay, lesbian, questioning, or bisexual kids. Not just [in] his school, because that was pretty few. So he was able to broaden his social experiences, which is so lacking for gay kids. And I think it made him a lot stronger, I mean, he was a really strong kid anyway and happened to be also an excellent student. And I've seen him since, he's transferred here [to the nearby university]. And when I see him come back and visit, just the confidence he has. I think that's probably a lot of what it did. And having that interaction between student and teacher in creating something and knowing that students have power.

KEVIN: What was it about the student-teacher interaction that was significant or helpful? What do you want other teachers to know about that relationship that would help them help students in similar ways?

SAM: That you have to maintain your, let's see, how should I put it? Your professionalism. Yet you have to let that student in to your human side. And with me, because I am a lesbian, and I have my own children, I think it was easier, because I could connect to him, on that basis, too, not just what I'm teaching in the classroom. I mean he didn't happen to be a student of mine, but yet, I think teachers are, especially gay and lesbian teachers, are so freaked out about getting close to students that they just close them out, they just shut them out. And I think there are ways to do it. And I know it's an advantage because I'm older, because they see me more like the mom. I know it's been harder for my colleague who's very young, and it's been harder for her to make that separation for the kids? And so I think, you know, letting them into your life a little bit, letting them know your history, your struggles, what you've done, as far as changing society. And another thing is, kids like

to see that we're a family. You know, that's really important. They like to look at the pictures on my desk. They see, Oh my gosh. I'm gay, but maybe I could have a family. You know, [my teacher] does it. And being able to share that, too, instead of, "Where do teachers live? In a broom closet? You know, Do they just, like, float suspended? Or do they really feel, and . . ." you know?

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