

Introduction

Theoretical, Empirical, and Contextual

It was the middle of March 2015 in an LGBTQ+-themed literature course at a grassroots charter high school in a midsize city in the Midwestern region of the United States. It was first period, and the students were juniors and seniors—mostly seniors, so one might expect the energy to be low. I was teaching. We were shifting from one novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012), to another, *Brooklyn, Burning* (Brezenoff, 2011). *Aristotle and Dante* follows two Mexican American teenage boys through the end of their high school career in El Paso, Texas, in the late eighties as they come to understand themselves both individually and in relation to and in relationship with each other. *Brooklyn, Burning* describes a transient teen community and focuses on one teenager's love, loss, and love again, with a deliberate and consistent evasion of gender markers. Both books were, by spring break, read aloud in class in readers' theater style, where each student read either a narrator's part or a character's part throughout the reading. For the earlier book, *Aristotle and Dante*, I really had to pull students to volunteer to read parts, but that was not the case this time, with *Brooklyn, Burning*.

This time, I had multiple volunteers for multiple roles. One was for Fish, a local bar owner and a matriarch for transient queer youth. Darby and Sherry both wanted this role, so I said, "y'all rock-paper-scissors. Best of three." They were sitting on opposite sides of the square in which we had our desks. Sherry stood up first, then Darby stood up and walked over to Sherry. All students were engaged. They were watching. Darby and Sherry began, "One, two, three, shoot. One, two, three, shoot." I said, "Okay, so you're even. This is a tiebreaker." "One, two, three, shoot." Sherry

won. Darby walked back to her seat. I moved to the next role. Multiple students were interested. The class got quiet, watching me. Darby put her head down on her arms folded on her desk, but her face was up, looking at me, until Sherry said her name.

Sherry said, “You can be Fish. I’ll be Scout.”

Darby replied, “Are you sure?” Her voice sounded shaky.

Sherry nodded. “Yeah, you wanted Fish. You can be Fish.”

Darby’s voice was undeniably quivering. “Thank you.”

The class as a whole seemed to sigh with relief as some students laughed, others chatted, and gazes moved around, from me to one another. Someone commented on how much Darby wanted to read the role of Fish; Sherry said, “I felt that. I saw the look on her face, and I felt that.” Darby whispered to Sherry across the room, “I’ll bring you coffee tomorrow.”

I moved to the next role, asking who wanted to read one of the narrators. Three students wanted the role, including Parker and Rhys. They were sitting next to each other, so I told them to “rock-paper-scissors.” Parker said, “Can’t we just arm wrestle?” Rhys said, “Yeah, let’s do that.” And they both slammed their elbows on their desks and clutched each other’s hand. Several students leaned in to get a better look. One student’s jaw dropped. Another student said, “We are arm wrestling now?” She sounded almost appalled. Cobalt, the one whose jaw was dropped, jumped up and ran over to referee. Parker won.

Up until this point, the students competing for roles were queer identifying in various ways. In the next two rounds, however, people who had claimed queer identities and those who had embodied straight ones were competing against one another. In each of these cases, students moved together from across the room. Jokes were made about arm wrestling, but they were friendly, even warm. The students played rock-paper-scissors to determine readers. The final round went past the bell, but no one moved to leave until the round was over; only then did students gather their things to depart for their second-period classes.

In this brief classroom encounter, I saw students using their reading about diverse, LGBTQ+-themed literature to move closer to one another, both physically and interpersonally. I saw queer students moving closer

to one another, as Sherry gave Darby the role she wanted most and as Parker and Rhys clutched hands to arm wrestle. But I also saw straight and cisgender students moving closer to queer ones, as Cobalt jumped up to referee the arm wrestling and pairs of students faced off to get the parts they wanted to read. There was competition, no doubt, but there was also so much laughter, even joy. There was agility. Importantly, there was also respect, as evidenced by students waiting until the last game was complete before packing up their things and leaving their seats. I understood this as an ethical classroom encounter.

This book argues that high school students in this course used language and literacy to move ideologically across differences in classroom encounters. By using language and literacy, I mean that students read, discussed, and wrote about LGBTQ+-themed literature as well as their lives more broadly. By moving across differences, I mean that they listened to one another—not all of the time, but sometimes, and when they did, they learned from one another, about one another as well as about themselves. They did not necessarily argue with and persuade one another. Indeed, sometimes they actively rejected one another, and sometimes with very good reason. But they moved. As they did so, the classroom became not a site of mere celebration of differences but rather a site of engaged negotiation and even struggle.

To make this argument, I engage with the work of Sara Ahmed and other queer scholars, some but not all of whom work in the realm of literacy education. Then I contextualize the study in pertinent empirical literature before contextualizing it socially and culturally in both broad terms and those specific to the particular school and classroom. I conclude this introduction by laying out the structure of the remainder of the book.

(Ethical) Encounters

Saying the opening vignette represents an ethical encounter raises the question of what an ethical encounter is. I start by exploring the notion of encounter before reflecting on what makes an encounter ethical. Ahmed (2000) defines an encounter as a face-to-face meeting that is “mediated” (p. 7)—in the case of a classroom, by a teacher and students—and in which there is an “asymmetry of power” (p. 8), which in this case exists between a teacher and students but also among students.

Encounters cannot be understood in isolation from the histories of those who constitute them. Consider classroom encounters in the United States, where there are pronounced histories of heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, racism, and the fallacy of white supremacy, among other sorts of oppression. We see this in classrooms where sex education ignores same-sex desires, where students are organized by gender, and where curricula center white men who are cisgender, heterosexual, and Christian. We also see it when teachers insist that students use English, and, more specifically, a “standard” English, demanding that students conceal or erase their home languages or dialects. Ahmed (2000) says, “The face to face of [any particular] encounter cannot . . . be detached or isolated from such broader relations of antagonism” (p. 9). Encounters, she asserts, “always hesitate between the domain of the particular—the face to face of this encounter—and the general—the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism. The particular encounter hence always carries *traces* of those broader relationships” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8). If we think about this in terms of classrooms, this means that a white woman teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* to Black students, for example, must acknowledge that she is implicated in the white-savior narrative on which the novel relies. For her to put Atticus Finch, a white lawyer, on a pedestal for trying the case in which Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of rape, is acquitted reveals at least the potential of her seeing herself as one who saves Black students. The teacher positioning herself as a white savior, whether consciously or not, is destined to provoke the righteous anger in at least some of her Black students. Here we see the particular encounter between a teacher and students influenced by “broader relationships of power and antagonism,” not only in the past, as represented by the novel, but also in the present, by contemporary dynamics in and beyond school.

Not only do encounters hover between the past and present, they also have implications for the future. In their exploration of Ahmed’s encounters, Buys and Marotta (2021) explain, “Historical relations are made up of racialised, gendered, sexualised, and classed encounters and these impact present and, more importantly, future encounters” (p. 103). Indeed, Ahmed (2000) focuses on these future encounters when she asks “not only what made this encounter possible (its historicity), but also what does it make possible, what futures might it open up?” (p. 145). What kinds of futures an encounter might “open up” depends largely on the nature of the encounter. According to Buys and Marotta (2021), “Ahmed’s notion

of generous encounters illustrates how relations are not undifferentiated; some relations of proximity are healthier than others” (p. 110). Unethical encounters “can make some of us feel ‘out of place’ or not ‘at home’ where we are brought up” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 8). They can “objectify and marginalise” (Buys & Marotta, 2021, p. 108); they can “appropriat[e]” and “negate” (p. 109); they can “categorise” and “constrain” (p. 109). You can see how a white teacher teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* to Black students may make students feel out of place in school, which they are required to attend. That said, healthier relations are possible; Ahmed calls these “ethical encounters.”

An ethical encounter is where people come together, in moments in time, recognizing the “debts that are already accrued” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 154), talking across differences, and forming collectives “through the *very work that we need to do* in order to get closer to others” (p. 180). Ahmed (2000) argues that “a politics of encountering gets closer in order to allow the differences between us . . . to make a difference to the very encounter itself. The differences between us necessitate the dialogue, rather than disallow it—a dialogue must take place, precisely *because* we don’t speak the same language” (p. 180). When Ahmed talks about dialogue, she is not, as I understand her, talking about what Bryson and de Castell (1993) call “some kind of pluralistic exhortation [to] ‘dialogue across differences’” (p. 301). Instead, she means something more like how Aukerman (2021) uses the word: an unordered exchange of ideas, a “struggle, as students thought with and against each other’s possible meanings” (p. 9), “productive struggles over meaning” (p. 10). The differences she references may be defined by sexuality, gender, race, and religion, as well as those defined by families and many other ideological, social, and cultural constructs.¹ In a classroom, this sense of dialogue might mean a teacher naming problematic power dynamics and inviting students to discuss them. Consider a teacher reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) with their students. Together, they might discuss why the N-word is used by the Black author, Mildred D. Taylor, in her representation of the Logans, an African American family living in the rural South in the

1. I will sometimes use the language of identities to refer to these constructs, and when I do, I am talking about identities as multiple and variable; I am talking about identities and the systems that constitute them as interlocking (see the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement in BlackPast, 2012), intersectional (Hill Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991), and mutually constitutive (Winnubst, 2006).

1930s. The teacher might also explain that they are going to use the term “the N-word” instead of reading it verbatim during their read-alouds and invite students to discuss this decision. Everyone might not agree on Taylor’s decision to use the word or the teacher’s decision not to, but engaging in the dialogue across differences is a conversation that matters beyond the reading of the book.

Alexander (2008) asserts that “our differences—often systematically defined and constructed along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and class—impact our ability to speak for ourselves, tell our truths, and make common cause with others” (p. 8). In other words, our differences impact our ability to communicate and connect. Therefore, I look not only at the that which hinders our ability to communicate and connect but also at the moments in which we overcome those obstacles and do it anyway. Encounters across differences, thus, are “bound up with responsibility” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 180). Those involved must “thin[k] about how we might work with, and speak to, others, or how we might inhabit the world *with* others” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 180). According to Ahmed, this requires “the ‘painstaking labour’ of getting closer, of speaking to each other, and of working *for* each other,” which results in getting “closer to ‘other others’” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 180). It is through such “acts of alignment” that “we can reshape the very bodily form of the community, as a community that is yet to come” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 180). It is not always and everywhere appropriate to do this work. Indeed, Ahmed (2000) states that “we need to pay attention to the *shifting conditions* in which encounters between others, and between other others, take place” (p. 19). It is only by paying attention to encounters that we can begin to answer Ahmed’s (2000) question: “How can we encounter an other in such a way, in a *better* way, that allows something to give?” (p. 154).

Thus, in an ethical encounter people listen to one another; they notice what moves them and what fails to move them (Ahmed, 2000). Such listening and noticing requires a degree of proximity, but Ahmed (2000) quotes Iris Marion Young in pointing out that those who have been othered, or minoritized and oppressed, “‘would prefer a stance of respectful distance, . . . and thus [others] must listen [to them] carefully across the distance’” (p. 156). In other words, in an ethical encounter, people must be close enough to listen but not so close as to threaten. How close one can be without being threatening depends on the shared histories and the trusted promises of futures. Ahmed (2000) states, “An ethical communication is about a certain way of holding proximity and

distance together: one gets close enough to others to be touched by that which cannot be simply got across. In such an encounter, ‘one’ does not stay in place, or one does not stay safely at a distance (there is no space which is not implicated in the encounter). It is through getting closer, rather than remaining at a distance, that the impossibility of pure proximity can be put to work or made to work” (p. 157). An ethical encounter is characterized by one’s “refusal to identify the other as enemy” and commitment to assume “intimate responsibility for the other” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 137). (When she uses the term “the other,” Ahmed means people who have been othered, like those who have been minoritized, not just people who are other than you in one way or another, although that might also be the case.) Aukerman (2021) argues that “ethical” defines how “we should be in the world with each other” (p. 12). A teacher striving to foster ethical encounters in a classroom listens to students and notices when something invigorates them and when something deflates them, whether it is an assignment or an interaction with a peer. When a student comes into the class looking angry, the teacher checks in with them but does not pry, offers support or alternatives but does not demand an explanation. The teacher positions themselves as an advocate for students in myriad ways. They never “stay in place” but move in response to and with respect for students. Ethical encounters, then, require movement both toward and within encounters.

MOVING TOWARD ENCOUNTERS

We only encounter one another when we move, from one place to another. When we move, there is always, out there, the idea of home, where, in Ahmed’s (2000) words, “one has already been enveloped, inhabited by” (p. 90). Home is often “*sentimentalised* as a space of belonging” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 89), but home is more complicated than that. Consider, for example, the home of a child who comes to understand themselves as something other than straight or cisgender. The child may be ostracized by other family members, in their shared home. Indeed, “if we think of ‘home’ purely as proximity and familiarity, then we fail to recognise the relationships of estrangement and distance within the home” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 139). A home does not mean the absence of strangers, if we rely on Ahmed’s understanding of the stranger: “strangers are under scrutiny by those who consider themselves at home or in place” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 19). Ahmed (2021) offers, as an example, how “people of colour in white organisations

are treated as guests, temporary residents in someone else's home" (p. 17). That is to say, they, like some queer youth, are made to feel as strangers in their own homes. Minoritized people need ideological homes where people are "like-minded and understand the danger and the price of such work to sustain themselves" (Gonçalves, 2005, p. 15), where people can "work steadily toward understanding [their] own values and the values of others" (p. 13). One can have many ideological homes (Gonçalves, 2005), and the boundaries between them and not-home are, according to Ahmed (2000), permeable.

When someone moves away from one person or community, where they move toward depends on what is in their ideological line of vision, according to Ahmed. One cannot move toward a trans community, for example, when they think they are the only one experiencing gender in ways beyond cisnormativity. They must know that other transgender people exist in the world in order to move toward them, and such movement is of immense consequence, and not just for the one moving. When one moves toward a person or community, that person or those people in the community are "touched by what comes near" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 22). People come to understand themselves and one another, and, in doing so, they influence one another (Ahmed, 2000). According to Ahmed (2000), people are thus "perpetually reconstituted" through encounters (p. 7). Relatedly, encounters that result from movement between and among people and communities broaden people's understanding of the world and the people in it. Waite (2017) reflects on such encounters as "the moment we come into contact with what challenges, affirms, resists, or does not fit in with our prior knowledge of ourselves or others" (p. 134). Waite (2017) argues that "without this movement, this revision of understanding, we would be left with [a] kind of reduction and simplification" (p. 143). Waite (2017) asserts that "to move toward multiplicity is to live in a world with more possibility," which, Waite reminds us, quoting Judith Butler, "is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread" (p. 153). That is to say, broadening understanding matters.

Gonçalves (2005) found that students who had more narrow and static understandings of themselves and others saw "differences as impossible obstacles" or "ignore[ed] differences altogether" (p. 12). Either way, according to Gonçalves (2005), "leaves in place the customs, norms, and laws that stigmatize" (p. 12). In contrast, when speakers "claim[ed] and name[d] their own multiple, in-flux identities, they [we]re more likely to see all people . . . as complicated and in process rather than as a static

enemy image. Likewise, when speakers acknowledge[d] their own multiple and in-process identities, audience members [we]re more likely to see [people] as in-process and complicated rather than as a static pariah image” (Gonçalves, 2005, pp. 12–13). By seeing themselves and others as multiple and variable, they came to understand differences “as a source of new perspectives” and thus understand others as potential allies, to whom they could speak more easily (Gonçalves, 2005, p. 13). Thus, as Ahmed (2000) asserts, encounters shape worlds (p. 8). Without movement toward encounters, movement within encounters becomes impossible.

MOVING WITHIN ENCOUNTERS

In an effort to explore the notion of movement within an encounter, Ahmed (2000) reflects on encountering a text. She writes about the many tensions in the experience but also how the “narrative moves [her] forward” (p. 159) and how, in her words, “I touch the pages. I am moved. Something gives” (p. 154). This is not physical movement, necessarily, but ideological.

Waite (2017) uses water as a metaphor for understanding ideological movement between and among people and communities. Waite (2017) talks about “becoming liquid” when discussing “ways of moving students, or helping them to move themselves, away from dualistic constructions of body, of argument, and of categorical placement” (p. 25). Waite (2017) tries to understand “what it means to *become water*, moving water, which, in the end, resists its own freezing up” (p. 25). The alternative, Waite (2017) asserts, is “to become stone, to become the reader who cannot be moved or repositioned” (p. 164). I am not just talking about readers, however; I am talking about people who read among those who engage in many other forms of communication. In doing so, people may either become rigid in their thinking and cold in their feeling or, alternatively, become fluid. Becoming fluid does not mean simply taking the ideological shape of those read or heard. Indeed, Waite reminds us that water cuts canyons. But Waite (2017) also considers turning into liquid like “dissolving” (p. 134), like sugar dissolves in coffee or tea. Waite (2017) contends that dissolving “always involves movement—the kind of movement solids are not capable of” (p. 134). So, when one’s ideas dissolve, they “never, ultimately, disappear, but when they become liquid and fluid as opposed to solid, it makes them movable; it makes them open to evaporation” (Waite, 2017, p. 135). The metaphor is not scientifically perfect, but no metaphor is perfect, by definition. Still, the idea of becoming ideologically water or

liquid so that one can read, listen, and learn—so that one can also write, speak, and teach—so that one can *move* among people and communities is one that I find useful.

Moving among people and communities, however, is not an independent endeavor. Ahmed (2000) talks about being “moved by the other” (p. 156). This raises a question of agency, a question underscored by Gonçalves (2005) and Waite (2017), who study how students learn to move their audiences, whether those are students on a speakers’ bureau talking to their audiences in an effort to move them or writing students striving to move the readers of their writing. Waite also talks about teachers moving students, although this is not Waite’s focus. Thus, in these ways and others, people move themselves and others. Ahmed (2021) further points out that one can even be *removed* by another. But no one moves in isolation from others.

To be moved by an other, though, depends on listening, listening that Aukerman (2021) describes as “rare, real listening to understand” rather than to instruct (p. 8), a “careful[ly] sustained listening, [a] willingness to consider multiple perspectives, [a] deliberate building upon what others have to say even in the presence of passionate disagreement” (p. 12). Further, movement depends on emotions. Emotions, as social and cultural practices, can provoke ideological movement. Ahmed (2014) describes emotions as “*doing things*” (p. 209). She says they “involve different movements towards and away from others” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 209). She says they are “relational: they involve (re)actions of relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to such objects” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 8). Here, “objects” may be people and communities. Whether emotions provoke movement toward or away depends on the emotion. Ahmed (2014) tells us, “Different emotions . . . involve different orientations toward objects and others” (p. 210). Fear, disgust, and shame, she argues, can conjure repulsion, or provoke movement away from. Love can conjure attraction, or provoke movement toward. But it’s not that simple: “the intensification [of emotions such as fear, hate, disgust, or pain can] involv[e] moving away from the body of the other, or moving towards that body in an act of violence, and then moving away” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 194). In other words, movement within encounters does not ensure ethical encounters, but it does allow for the possibility. Indeed, encounters are where Ahmed (2000) sees possibility, the “possibility of something giving—not me or you—but something giving in the very encounter between a ‘me’ and a ‘you’” (p. 154). This notion of “giving” is central to the idea of ethical encounters.

So, there is movement toward encounters and movement in encounters, and both depend on agility. The movement may be dramatic but is more likely to be subtle, more like giving. Ethical encounters depend on movement toward and in encounters. It is not that all encounters surrounded by and comprising movement are ethical; they are not. And a person can be ethical while taking a firm stance. But in order for an encounter to happen, there must be movement toward it, and in order for an encounter to be ethical, there must be give among those in it.

LGBTQ+-Themed Literature in Secondary Classrooms

This book portrays, explores, and examines a study of a secondary English language arts course with a particular focus on LGBTQ+-themed literature. Such courses have been the sites of the majority of studies of LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula (e.g., Athanases, 1996; Blazar, 2009; Carey-Webb, 2001; Cruz, 2013; Greenbaum, 1994; Hoffman, 1993; Reese, 1998; Schey & Uppstrom, 2010; Vetter, 2010). Reviews of these studies (Blackburn & Schey, 2017; Clark & Blackburn, 2009) and others in middle and elementary classrooms (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Epstein, 2000; Gonzales, 2010; Hamilton, 1998; Moita-Lopes, 2006; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003; Simon et al., 2018) show that they were conducted in heterosexist if not homophobic contexts (Blackburn & Schey, 2017; Clark & Blackburn, 2009). In turn, students in the classes are positioned as straight and often homophobic (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Blackburn & Schey, 2017; Clark & Blackburn, 2009). While some studies have engaged LGBTQ+ adolescents and young adults with LGBTQ+-themed literature in queer-friendly contexts (Blackburn, 2002/2003, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b; de Castell & Jenson, 2007; Halverson, 2007) and a few have studied the selection, reading, and discussion of LGBTQ+-themed literature with LGBTQ+ and ally youth in queer-friendly contexts (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Blackburn et al., 2015), none of these queer-friendly contexts were classrooms or schools. Notable exceptions, beyond this project, are Helmer's (2015, 2016a, 2016b) dissertation study of a high school gay and lesbian literature course and Kenney's (2010) chapter about being an out high school English teacher.

In most studies of classroom and school contexts, however, students were assumed to be straight and/or homophobic, and they engaged with LGBTQ+-themed literature in isolated classrooms and singular lessons or

units. Typically, adults chose texts for didactic purposes, to expose students to issues pertinent to LGBTQ+ people (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). This meant the texts worked as windows into the lives of LGBTQ+ people but not as mirrors of LGBTQ+ people (Sims, 1982). Moreover, texts selected were almost entirely what Cart and Jenkins (2006) categorize as homosexual visibility (HV) rather than gay assimilation (GA) or queer community or consciousness (QC). This means that the chosen texts made LGBTQ+ people visible, but they did not show that LGBTQ+ people are like straight people, as GA literature would, or represent LGBTQ+ people in supportive communities, as QC literature would. Even though some version of the acronym *LGBTQ+* is used in many of these studies, they mostly focus on the inclusion of lesbian- and/or gay-themed literature and not bisexual- or trans-themed literature.

This book strives to fill in gaps in the field by presenting a study conducted in a classroom and school that actively worked to be queer-friendly, where it was estimated that 30 percent of the student population identified as LGBTQ+, and where it was expected and enforced that students were not homophobic or transphobic. These expectations were evident in the policy and practices of the school, teachers, and administration. For example, many students talked about being told, when they toured the school to determine whether it was good match, that there was no tolerance for homophobia or transphobia in the school and if that was a problem for them they should consider a different option for high school. Texts that promote LGBTQ+ visibility as well as agency were read across a semester. They were used as windows, mirrors, and doors into others' worlds (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Sims Bishop, 1990). As a result, this book provides new insights on the possibilities for engaging adolescents with LGBTQ+-themed literature in classrooms and schools.

That said, the argument I make is not one about simply including LGBTQ+-themed literature. Inclusion alone is too simple of a solution to too complex of a problem. Kumashiro (2001) identifies two reasons that curricular inclusion cannot solve the problem of discrimination in classrooms and schools: "First, countless differences exist in society (such as differences based on race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, [dis]ability, language, body size, and the intersections of these differences), making it literally impossible to be fully 'inclusive.' Second, even if all differences could be named and included, the very act of naming and including difference could operate in contradictory ways" (p. 5). Even if a class only

read biographies of one another all semester or even all year long, the curriculum would still only be partial. Not only would it exclude people in the world who are not in the class, but biographies always include some details and exclude others, by necessity; they are always located in some time or place, or some times and places, but not all of them, and decidedly not the ones in the present. Inclusion is quite simply beyond reach.

My contribution, rather, is about movement. Unlike the impossibility of full inclusion, moving among one another in classroom encounters is not only possible, it is all but inevitable. I show how students move closer to and farther away from one another through discussing literature and lives and how this sometimes invites students to move in and connect rather than stand back and dismiss or decipher. Such movement does not require that people relinquish their values. Encountering other people, values, and communities may even strengthen our own. But movement prevents stagnation. It interrupts the ossification of values; it discourages rigidity and encourages imagination in relationships.

Studying classroom encounters in this way can show teachers that they can expect and even demand such movement of students, since students do it all the time; really, people do it all the time. Such examinations can show researchers another way to understand people and their communities as dramatically dynamic. Some of the encounters I examine here were miserable for some people. Some of them were quite joyful. We, as members of the classroom community, needed the latter to endure the former, but we, as members of much larger communities, need the former to make change. Those miserable encounters can reveal what needs to be changed, and they can be a catalyst for that change. More broadly speaking, we need to be able to talk across differences, to understand one another better; we need to be able to be together and apart with more compassion and respect even if not more comfort; we need to be able, in Ahmed's words, to give.

Contextualizing with Breadth and Depth

To contextualize the project, I first talk about the broader social and cultural context. I then describe the school and class as well as the students and teacher in the class. Thus, I provide both breadth and depth in my contextualization of the study. The study itself was a blend of ethnography

(Blommaert & Dong, 2020; Heath & Street, 2008) and teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009).² The book focuses on classroom encounters from the aforementioned LGBTQ+-themed literature course, which I taught three consecutive semesters between January of 2015 and June of 2016.³ In the three classes, students navigated their relationships with sexual, gender, and racial identities as well as with religion and family. While these identities are always important in the United States, their importance was emphasized at the time of these classes. Race was underscored during this time because the Black Lives Matter movement had grown in power and prominence since its inception in 2013, particularly in the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in response to the murder of Michael Brown by a police officer. Moreover, Black Lives Matter was playing an active role in campaigns for the 2016 US presidential election, which was just getting started. Donald J. Trump's campaign to be the Republican nominee for the presidential election relied heavily on racist and more broadly xenophobic values but also on deeply conservative Christian values. I am not saying that these necessarily overlap, but where they did was at the heart of his campaign. As a result, not only was race a foregrounded discussion, so too was religion. Families, primarily parents, became central to my analysis because students talked about their families so often throughout classroom encounters. Although many of the readings provoked such discussions, it was not a topic I deliberately raised. It was one the students just kept returning to. It was important to them and therefore important to me.

THE SCHOOL

The school was located just inside the perimeter of a midsize Midwestern city, in a two-story, dark-glass building that was once office space. Although the school was housed on the first floor, the large sign with the

2. I discuss the methods in more detail in the appendix of this book.

3. During the first semester, I was accompanied by Ryan Schey, who is now a friend and colleague but was, at the time, a doctoral student working as a research apprentice in the class. We both attended the class daily; I was primarily in charge of teaching the class, and he was primarily in charge of gathering and organizing data. (To read more about our work together on this project, see Blackburn & Schey, 2018; Schey & Blackburn, 2019a, 2019b.) In the second and third semesters, I assumed responsibility for data collection, but Ryan, by this time a graduate research associate on the project, continued organizing the data.

school's name in block lettering on colorful squares was on the exterior of the second floor of the building. It was surrounded by a sidewalk and a parking lot, with another, smaller version of the sign on a placard in front of the building. The entrance was discreet, with the school's name, address, and hours in small white letters alongside the two glass doors in the center of the building. When I entered through those doors, I walked past a counter where administrative assistants welcomed students into the building. Behind them were the offices of administrators. Just past the counter was the main corridor of the high school, which extended right toward the science, music, and dance classrooms and left toward English, math, and theater classrooms, among others. For the classrooms where I taught, I turned left. I describe those rooms in detail later in this section.

The school was an arts-based, grassroots, charter high school. Included in its mission, vision, and articulated beliefs were words like *safe*, *inclusive*, *progressive*, *accepting*, and *respectful*. Its nondiscrimination policy used enumerated language including “race, ethnicity, country of origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, veteran status, religion, class, [and] age.” LGBTQ+ students were actively recruited to the school at events such as local Pride parades and screenings of films pertinent to LGBTQ+ people. School personnel and policies communicated to the students an expectation that they not be homophobic or transphobic, contributing to a queer-friendly environment.

Students who attended this school mostly elected to join it. As a charter school, it was no one's neighborhood school. In my initial interviews with students, when I asked the story of how they came to this school, I learned that they were mostly seeking an arts-based experience, a queer-friendly context, or an alternative to their home schools. According to some students in a class discussion, parents understood the school as “the gay school.” But it was not only the gay school. According to its policies, “it thrive[d] on the diversity of its members.” When I asked students, in interviews, to describe the school, Desiree, a Black, cis, straight young woman, said,

It's, well, you have to be able not to judge, and like when situations come up you have to be able to know how to handle it. Like I've learned that, since the course of being here, I've learned how to handle different situations different ways, because I used to be really hotheaded, and it's a really accepting school, and it's not—you won't find any other school like

it. . . . I can be myself here, and that's taught, like, it's taught me how to, like, love myself and learn and, like, develop into the person I am today, because I don't think I could have done that four years ago.

Similarly, in another interview, Jenna, who is also a Black, cis, straight young woman, said, "If you're looking to get an education and not, like, be bullied in the process of it, and be comfortable with, like, who you are, you should definitely come here." Jenna always interviewed with Khalil, a cis, gay young man who sometimes identified as Black and other times as multiracial, which I discuss further in chapter 3. In this same interview, to the same question about how they would "describe [the school] to someone who has never been here before," he said, "I always tell them the education and the non-bullying and the arts. . . . I'm like, if you want that anchor education at the same time, [this school is], like, the perfect place to be."

Of course, not all students experienced it that way. Delilah, a cis, straight Latina, experienced the antibullying aspect of the school differently. She explained, "The majority group that come here are, like, all bullied, or something's like, you know, wrong. And there's this other crowd that's like, 'What? No, we just wanted to escape our home school.'" She counted herself among the latter group and said, "We don't really know how to, like, encounter things. . . . Because we don't want to push anybody's buttons, but we also don't want to, like, make someone cry, because people are really oversensitive. . . . [So] the people who come here to escape their home schools just stay in their own little circle." I followed up by asking if these two groups were racially identifiable. "No, it's a mixture," she responded. "The ones that are, like, bullied are more Caucasian . . . or, like, Asian-ish. The ones that are not, that just escaped [their home schools], are either Hispanic or Black or, like, white, or, like, just in general just more diverse." So, while students elected to come to the school, they had different reasons. One of my students even explained that he came to this school after being expelled from his previous school. While students being given a second chance at this school was not unheard of, it was atypical. And though some experienced it as "the perfect place to be," others experienced as a little more complicated than that.

Among the little over three hundred students enrolled at the school during the time of this study, administrators at the school estimated that 30 percent identified as LGBTQ+. In terms of race and ethnicity, 56 percent of students were white, 26 percent were African American, 10 percent

were multiracial, 6 percent were Latina/o, 1 percent were Asian, and 1 percent were Pacific Islander. (Here, I am using the school's terminology.)

THE CLASS

Over the three semesters, the class met in two different rooms of teachers who had first-period study hall. During the first semester, the class met in another English teacher's room. When I walked in the door, I walked into a large, rectangular room. The wall opposite the door had windows all the way across it. The wall immediately to the right and directly across from the windows was painted a vibrant green. These two were the shorter two of the walls. On the green wall there were two bookshelves and some cabinets, and the host teacher invited me to store our class books on one of the shelves, which I did. The wall to the left as I entered was the back wall. Opposite, the front wall held a clock, a whiteboard, a smart board, and a podium, as well as a collection of inspirational posters. The teacher's desk was along the front wall in the corner diagonally opposite the door. In between were twelve light-gray tables with two burgundy chairs at each. While they were typically in three horizontal rows of four tables each, facing the front of the room, I moved six of the tables into a rectangle in front of the whiteboard, where I wrote the agenda each morning before class. Once we started recording the class, Ryan typically placed the video camera in the corner opposite both the teacher's desk and the door. At the end of every class, students would help Ryan and me reposition the tables and chairs so that they were like the host teacher wanted them for his second-period class.

During the second and third semesters, the class met in a math teacher's room. The room was small, windowless, and mostly gray. The wall with the door was one of the two long walls in the rectangular room. As I walked in the door, to the right there was a red-fabric shoe rack for students' phones and a small whiteboard on the wall. The teacher's desk was directly in front of me, along the back wall, and there was a floor lamp, a bookshelf, and a Minecraft poster behind the teacher's desk. There were some pieces of paper taped both to the wall to the right when I walked in and along the back wall. The papers to the right were schedules and reminders. The papers on the back wall were students' drawings. The front wall was almost entirely covered by a whiteboard and a smart board. There was also a screen that could be pulled down over the whiteboard for using the projector, attached to the ceiling. There was a small cabinet

from which technological devices like a laptop or DVD player could be connected to the projector. The student desks were stand-alone and moveable, with navy-blue chairs, metal frames underneath for holding students' things, and light, wood-like desktops. Typically, they were organized in six vertical rows of four desks facing the whiteboards, but every morning before class I moved enough desks for the students in my small class into a circle. I typically sat at one of the desks closer to the whiteboard, where I always wrote the agenda for the day. Once I started recording the class, I placed a microphone in the center of the circle and a tripod with the video camera diagonally opposite from the teacher's desk. That's the corner where I stored my materials in two rolling carts under a table—one cart for books anyone could borrow and another for any other supplies, like lesson plans, tape, scissors, markers, and so on. At the end of every class, students would help me replace the desks so that they were like the host teacher wanted them for his second-period class. Both teachers were very kind about sharing their space with me, and I was and am so grateful for their hospitality.

The class itself, like most classes at the school, met four days per week, with the fourth weekly meeting being a double block of time. The curriculum each term was broken down into units (see the tables in the appendix.) In the first term, I started with a unit on nonfiction and moved to one on memoir, but at the end of that term a student asked me who James Baldwin was, and I felt absolutely deflated. The following two terms, I started with a unit I called History and Poetry. In those terms I combined the units on nonfiction and memoir. In all three terms I taught a unit on fiction, and in the first and third terms I taught one on short stories (we simply ran out of time in the second term).

I prioritized young adult literature, like the novels *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) and *Brooklyn, Burning* (Brezenhoff, 2011), both of which I describe above, and *If You Could Be Mine* (Farizan, 2013), which I describe briefly below. That said, I also included literature written for and marketed to adults, like excerpts from Alison Bechdel's (2006) *Fun Home*, Terry Galloway's (2009) *Mean Little Deaf Queer*, and Audre Lord's (1982) *Zami*. I strove to bring texts that represented a broad range of experiences, with particular attention to sexuality and gender but also to race and ethnicity, as evidenced in the selection above, which includes representations of Mexican American, Iranian, and African American queer characters and authors, as well as those who live in poverty or with disabilities. The units reveal my commitment

to exploring a wide range of genres—poetry, memoir, novels, short stories, and others—but I also worked to include a range of media, including photo essays, films, graphic narratives, songs, and videos. Students also responded to these texts in a variety of ways. In our History and Poetry unit and when we studied novels, students wrote collections of journal entries and read and responded to those of classmates. When we studied memoirs, short stories, and essays, students ultimately wrote versions of their own. In short, I wanted to invite students to explore LGBTQ+-themed literature in as many ways as I could imagine and manage.

Moreover, I was committed to creating an ethical classroom through pedagogy. This is not to say I always fulfilled this commitment. Indeed, when writing about her own ethical literacy-classroom practice, Gonçalves (2005) writes that ethical principles “are not easy to practice,” sometimes “nearly impossible,” but they are made more possible with “deep listening . . . humility and compassion” (p. 133). The principles they lay out include “self-reflection, separation of judgments from observations,” “use of dialogue,” and “a focus on making allies and common ground” (Gonçalves, 2005, p. 132). They suggest that teachers “foreground connection” (Gonçalves, 2005, p. 143), “meet students wherever they [are]” (p. 144), and “revisit situations” (p. 144). Although Gonçalves is focused on collegiate teaching rather than secondary teaching, their exploration of pedagogical ethics in literacy classrooms resonates with my own. This was evident in some the repeated phrases that I came to hear as refrains as I listened to the recordings of our class discussions, like “What do you think?” and “Let me tell you this story real quick.” There were also pedagogical complements, like anticipating, attending, and debriefing after school dances and performances and other events, which bolstered the relationships among us, allowing them to endure more difficult interactions when necessary.

THE STUDENTS

Many who took the class were drawn to the content, but there were also logistical motivations, like needing a first-period class that filled an English requirement so they could leave school early for work and still graduate on time, as an example. Notable exceptions were two white, cis, straight young men who told me they were “put” in the class by an administrator as a “joke.” Still, the expectation was that homophobia and transphobia would be worked against, as they were in the school. Indeed, when