

Pedagogies of Queer and Trans Repair: Letters from Queer Geographic Classrooms

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Abstract

In this article, four scholars in feminist, queer and transgender (trans) geographies, and critical race geographies bring forth experiences of teaching about race, gender, sexualities, ability, and citizenship status in contemporary United States and Canada. We utilize “queer epistolary,” a form of letter writing as speaking out loud, co-reflecting, caring, and supporting each other. In doing so, the article suggests that a queer, trans, feminist, and critical race geographic pedagogy requires ongoing community building (both virtual and material) in order to nurture and sustain the work of racialized, queer, and trans, non-



binary, and gender non-conforming geographers. This article presents our exchange as a way of illuminating how geography classrooms are laden with power asymmetries, and how our embodied experiences as queer and trans people are tangled in the messy power exchanges of the classroom. We argue that queering the geography classroom necessitates critical explorations of (settler) colonialism, racial capitalism, regionalisms, and geopolitics alongside our own bodies and subjectivities. Queer and trans geographic pedagogies challenge us to locate ourselves, alongside our students, within the personal and geographical specificity of power geometries in the classroom setting. This task is weighted with political urgency while simultaneously attaching vulnerability to the queer and trans geographers who embody the vexing differences that we teach.

Keywords

Queer, trans, pedagogy, repair, classroom, LGBTQ

Introduction

This article is a queer epistolary, a letter of repair, disappointment, concern, and solidarity shared between four queer, trans, and/or non-binary junior scholars. In this article, we address our unique identities and experiences in the classroom, and share how we respond to the challenges and possibilities that emerge from moments when our positionalities come into personal contact with our teaching – its content, spatial associations, varying pedagogical approaches, and the multiple subjectivities. The exchange presented in this article was inspired after meeting at the Controversial Pedagogy workshop in Toronto in May 2018, after which we exchanged letters (via email attachments) about some of our concerns, questions, and observations of teaching as junior queer, trans, and/or non-binary geographers. Our writing exchange created a sense of solidarity, support, and hope in our strategies for teaching anti-racist, intersectional, queer, trans, and feminist geographies in the classroom, a process that is always an act of becoming more vulnerable, more present, and therefore more anchored in the radical possibilities we desire.

We anchor this project in queer geographic pedagogy, a project David Seitz (2020, 313) argues is rooted in teaching disappointment in order to “radically [rethink] what ‘success’ in the always-collective, almost-always-failing scene of transformative community work might look or feel like.” Our coming together through exchanging letters demonstrates how collaborative writing can develop queer geographical pedagogical practices that manifest from shared affects of the classroom, office corridors, and other educational spaces that meet our bodies, intellectual curiosities, and social/political orientations in unique moments and geopolitical contexts. Alongside our aims to disrupt hierarchies of power and shape our teaching through social justice frameworks, the emergent pedagogical practices from these conversations help to sustain ourselves and each other as we digest and disturb the constraints of racism (capitalist and otherwise), transphobia, queer/bi/homophobia, ableism, and (settler) colonialism in the university setting. Such a project builds on Eve Sedgwick’s reparative reading: “learning how to build small worlds of sustenance that cultivate a different present and future for the losses that one has suffered” (Wiegman, 2014, 11; citing Sedgwick, 1996). Our reparative queer epistolary aims to build solidarity with each other as LGBTQ+ people, standing with one another in our classrooms and research, across nation-state borders and time zones, in order to enact social change.

We share with each other intimate moments from our sites of education with the goal that they offer some insights about the political work of queering the classroom, and how the classroom can in turn queer the world. In reading each other’s letters, and creating a scholarly frame for our experiences and insights, opens us up to being vulnerable to the readership of *ACME* as well as to a broader audience.

Our letters employ friendship as a form of social activism to collectively confront the hetero/homo and cis/trans binaries, as well as the interlocking structures of racism, sexism, (settler) colonialism, and ableism that define all spaces, including academic spaces (Browne, 2003; Banerjea, DasGupta, DasGupta & Grant, 2018).

Queer epistolary provides a method for reading desire, sexuality, and non-heteronormative bonds, offering us visions of queer desires in a different time and place. For example, Pamela VanHaitsma (2017) offers a close reading of romantic letters between Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, two African American women reformists from the end of the nineteenth century, which provide a glimpse into the ways in which the two women inspired each other toward the radical acts of self-education. Cindi Katz, Angelika Bammer, Minrose Gwin, and Elizabeth Meese wrote letters to one another to “perform a process of exchange and, in some instances, drift” (Katz, et al., 1997, 161) as they contended with the process of producing feminist knowledge. We follow a similar methodology of writing letters to drift between each other’s narratives of the personal and political experiences of engaging queer geographical pedagogy and, consequently, knowledge production.

The co-authors are in differing junior positions and occupy a range of racial, gender, and sexual identities that position us very differently within the field of geography and our respective institutions.¹ We and many Others (i.e. Othered to the global North/“western”, white, cis, patriarchal, heteronormative and middle class university setting) are often expected to discuss the “hard to teach” topics of race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, and abilities in geography (Oswin, 2019). We face different socio-political climates, gender normative expectations, and the patriarchal whiteness of the academy in our embodied and emotional navigations of these topics in our classrooms. The following letters were written by us, to each other, as a way of reading these pedagogical encounters aloud, claiming our bodies and feelings as inherent to the classroom, and embodying the shifting, blurry quality of queerness in teaching.

In each of our letters, we catalogue reflections we added in 2020 into letters we wrote in 2018 (noting the dates of our original letters and final edits), to make further sense of the past and reflect on the solidarities that bind us. It is poignant how little has changed in these years and how much we have left to do. We recognize the limitations of only being able to offer examples from our own bodies, lives, and classrooms, specifically as queer and trans people of color, and notably trans women, are often disproportionately visibilized and experience intensified bodily scrutiny, social and political discipline, and emotional and/or physical abuse in and outside of educational settings. Even in the recognition of Seitz’s possible disappointment of queer pedagogy, the following reparative reading of our experiences clings to the hope of creating a diverse, disjunctured discursive horizon from which readers can find resources for teaching intersectional geography within and beyond the classroom.

September 6th, 2018 / February 24, 2020

Dear Debanuj, JP, and Rae

Why is it rare for us to communicate beyond the pages of journals and behind the tables of conference rooms? It seems odd or invasive to reach out and share with other queer geographers about pedagogy, especially when social media bestows a sense of intimacy for many academics that we crave

¹ At the time of writing this article, Debanuj DasGupta and John Paul Catungal employed as Assistant Professor, and they are both currently employed as Assistant Professor. Rae Rosenberg was completing his dissertation at York University at the time of writing this letter exchange, and has since earned his Ph.D. Jack Giesecking was not yet tenured at the University of Kentucky.

but never fully experience or, at least, are able to sustain. Our colleagues' status updates, blog posts, images, and tweets of instructional jubilations, classroom agonies, grading frustrations, and pedagogical realizations are nowhere near the honest space and time we had to share our stories in Toronto, or the time and space to share directly on the page.

It's taken me months to figure out what to write about feminist controversy and pedagogy—the nebulous yet important project of the conference that brought us together in person and now on the page—although I just keep writing the same notes over and over in my marginalia: just write about the body. As a queer trans butch dyke communicating to other queers, I know that you understand that this geography is a difficult one to discuss. The body in the classroom is always questioned in the space that exudes the life of the mind. Honestly, I don't have the words for all of this yet. Instead, I'm sending you stories, discursive vignettes and physical moments that queerness and transness comes into the classroom for me, and what comes of it. [Deb and JP would later comment here on how stories are easier to share than words alone. Thank you for seeing me, friends.]

I begin every semester in the gendered discourse of our course introductions. I request students fill out index cards with key details about themselves, including their pronouns. (I used “preferred pronoun” for years until one junior wrote “it.” It took us both weeks to figure out she went by “she”—both of us awkward, clueless, earnest—and she thought “it” was just the prettiest of pronouns. And, notably, she felt degraded and disregarded by my mis-gendering and became a champion of careful pronoun use thereafter.) When I ask them to share these details with one another around the room, I conclude by sharing about myself and my own pronoun—and then I dive into the lecture. Of course, it's what an academic does: you intellectualize these moments too, yes? I truly do want to know.

Yet whether I discuss the fall of Berlin Wall, how Google and Apple steal our data, or convince them that space is socially produced, I can see in some of them a sort of stunned silence, mouth open and steady blinks since my higher register voice said, “I use he/him/his pronouns”—and, since I first wrote this article, I use they/them/theirs as well now—before they remember to get their water bottles or forget them altogether as they rush out the door. Throughout the semester there is the utter paralysis of some students, always the most generous and courteous, afraid to say the wrong pronoun. They navigate like many faculty colleagues do in meetings between and after classes: they do not ask, and keep calling me Professor Giesecking (or Jack, among friends or peers). These are those moments where I expect to hear a pronoun but instead what echoes back is a sensation of void and absence of recognition. Or sometime around when the leaves fall or start to bloom again (I'm in the northern hemisphere), I mention my girlfriend in some story and two students look at one another with ohhhh faces and nodding, likely in the sexual label of queerness. Now I am understood, sorted, and categorized. Am I? Are you? Is anyone?

My physical body affords a range of other interactions. The privilege afforded by my whiteness, my height (I'm tall), my weight (insulation that neuters sexualization but enforces further management for “women,” and assigns power to “men”), my wit (some say I'm funny), and even my masculinity—although not assigned male at birth—is clear. Until recently, most of my postdoctoral and tenure-track teaching has been at elite white liberal arts colleges where, like most co-ed campuses, white heteropatriarchy blankets the campus. Near the end of every course I have taught, I notice a student staring at the most private parts of my body. In a bit of daze. Head tilting to the left or right. Squinting perhaps. Always left wondering, as so many people wonder, at what trans genitalia lie within our denim, cotton, tweed, or wool. [I thank and stand with dozens of my cisgender female colleagues who have since shared with me, after my own inquiry, about how their bodies are also stared at and sexualized in classrooms. Your stories are both painful and tragic to listen to, and I will always be here for you to listen to and to fight with you for another classroom.]

And back in that moment in the classroom, I stare back, until they catch my eye, my face expressionless because what can I say when I am angry and wounded, unsurprised and understanding of something awful I once did in my youth too. There is no response I know yet beyond the mutual gaze. While many services (supposedly) exist for women in the academy, there is yet no mass of trans faculty guidebooks, *Chronicle* editorials, or dean's workshops for this experience or most trans and even queer academic experiences. In each case, the student reddens and gulps, and I nod and we move on. None of the other students seems to notice; how very like trans experience: how many people don't notice, how fewer words there are yet to express us.

There is another version of my body in the classroom too. Soon, I will have knee surgery. I spent the preceding six months in varied levels of constant pain, the three months before that in two hand surgeries in other sorts of pain, and the month before that with a herniated disc—more pain. Pain and/or the management of pain consumed me for weeks at a time. When I wasn't prepping, teaching, or trying to write, I spent the year sitting with the work of disability studies, ashamed that my permanently aching body had only brought me to this body of literature in a time of need. Mostly though, I was afraid of what the students would think of me, if I could be clear enough, dynamic enough, quick enough, physically and mentally; it feels so achingly white, middle class to even write that I thought could or must "keep it together"—keep *what* and *who* together *for what reasons*?

In fact, my students were my greatest compatriots. At the intersection of the whiteness of my injuries and the authority of my position, my gender became their afterthought. In a school where most students were or are athletes, they registered my injuries as temporary, offered support. How would they act if my disability wouldn't be "cured" by a surgery, some physical therapy, or just time (Clare, 2017)? How would they act if they had to grapple out loud with my gender the way I do? Perhaps they do, in dorm rooms and at dinner tables, and we never know. And when the register of recognition shifts, I know too that, in part by pain and part by privilege, my transness shifts for them that becomes a common but still unusual part of their lives, and one they tell in thank you notes when the classes are over that they will carry with them.

I know that, in pain and casts, on canes and ice, my body offered them a point for compassionate connection. They told me as much before and after class, in notes, in nods. And students began to open up in class about their pain, their parent's cancer, and their roommate's and their own disabilities in ways I sensed they could not find room before.

One class on the production of space and memory returned again and again to the issue of gun control and campuses around the time of the Parkland shooting. We drew up the talk of bodies, in pain and/or disabled, to rethink the oppression and freedom of education itself. This room, this access reminded me of Kristina Knoll's (2009) call for a "feminist disability studies pedagogy," a pedagogy that Angela Carter writes "approaches questions of access not merely as means of inclusion, but rather as analyses of systems of power and oppression" (Carter, 2015, 122). "Did I have a plan for an active shooter?" one student asked. They compared their grade school and high school trainings. They all had nightmares, but one student said she had nightmares about who would be left behind—namely the disabled who could not flee or hide as such plans required.

I am a woman who uses he/him pronouns. I look male to some, female to others, or both to many. My course evaluations speak to the conclusion of our time together. Students do not regard me like feminine-presenting colleagues, especially women colleagues of color and trans feminine colleagues: I do not have the critiques about my dress, clothing, pace, voice, or doubts about my knowledge in my course evaluations. I am congratulated for my messy hair rather than mocked for its disorderliness. I am not belittled for my slide design or quiz structures. I am never second guessed for the goals of the course. I am however often noted to be "disorganized" by a small minority each year of each class—the

discomfort and anger about my gender must be projected somewhere. But beyond this small batch of orderly-minded critics, these evals reek of whiteness that ignores my assigned-female-at-birth body to prize masculinity. This is authority no one should be granted unless we are all granted it.

I am in between in these terms, this body, those evaluations like I am in my gender, my body, my words. But I do have a term I do like, one born especially in the spatial critiques of feminist geography: betweenness. When I read the term in grad school, I had no idea how it would permeate my work, my life. Lise Nelson, writing on the concept of performativity in geography, draws on Cindi Katz's (1992) idea of "space of betweenness," an "unstable space...[that] represents a commitment to a relational and situated ontology of 'the subject' and knowledge" (Nelson, 1999, 349). Nelson adds that many feminist geographers in the 1990s were writing of betweenness, a concept that "captures the instability, partiality and situatedness of intersubjective relationships, self-reflexivity and knowledge production" (349). In the classroom and beyond, I remain in my betweenness. I am both waiting and not waiting for the words, surgeries, hormones, friends, recognition, and stories that help make sense of me in this binary-dominant world. The bright-faced, embarrassed students, the students who think they understand gender, the students who do not fathom queerness or have no one to fathom it deeply with, and the gender non-conforming and non-binary students who show up every day glowing to be in a room with someone like them—there is my body, teaching geography.

Audre Lorde wrote, "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (2007, 108-109). I realize, thanks to Lorde, that I left out the joy. But it is in there. When they refuse the white cis-heteropatriarchal norms of their campus and speak anti-racism, anti-colonialism, and feminism, I feel free. The students look free. This affective moment sits in my chest even though I am so used to the queer pedagogy of disappointment, that Seitz points us to, that I forget about the repair yet possible, a pedagogy that takes "a vigilant stand against repetition, [and] responds to the future with affirmative richness" (Wiegman, 2014, 11).

I look forward to reading your stories, dear ones.

As usual and always,

Jack

Pocumtuc, Nipmuc / South Hadley, Massachusetts, & Osage, ᎠᎯᎩᎯᎠᎩ Tsalaguwetiyi (Cherokee, East), Shawnee, Haudenosaunee Confederacy / Lexington, Kentucky, USA

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September 15, 2018 / March 6, 2020

My dear friends: Jack, Debanuj, Rae ...

Jack, *maraming salamat* (many thanks) for your letter. A few time zones away, and yet I felt your presence and warmth in your words. There was a sense of kinning that I felt invited to as I read your letter.

I sit here, in the Firehall Public Library, about two blocks from where I live in Coast Salish territories, a place known to many as Vancouver. On my walk over here, I had listened to Rihanna's song *Work*, not for any reason other than it came on as I was listening in on my phone. And, though I am not necessarily a firm believer in the concept of fate, I now feel it apt, perhaps destined, that this song came on as I was prepping to write this letter to you. This letter, after all, will be about work: the things we have to do as part of our jobs, including and especially the difficult tasks (in the vein of "this takes *work*") and also the very socio-spatial environments – institutional, socio-political, economic – that condition our capacities to work.

This letter has been on my 'to do' list for a few days. It is work I know I have to do, but haven't had a chance to do. Our teaching term started in early September, and I have since been engulfed with those 'beginning of term' responsibilities: ensuring that readings, syllabi and other course documents are uploaded properly to our online classroom system; attending orientation and welcome back events; preparing the introductory lectures for my courses. I also had to attend Orientation as a 'new' faculty member at the University of British Columbia, despite the fact that I have been at this university in various capacities since 2014. I am new in the sense that I just started as a research faculty member, at the tenure-track rank of Assistant Professor, in July 2018. In starting anew, I discovered – or actually, more accurately, *confirmed* – the hierarchical positionings of differently constituted faculty members in my institution.

Prior to becoming an Assistant Professor, I was in another tenure stream: what, at UBC, is called "Educational Leadership". UBC is unusual in being one of very few universities that has a *tenure-track* career path focused on all manners of educational leadership, which includes not only classroom teaching, but also campus leadership in pedagogy, curriculum, student support, institutional policymaking, educational research. For two and a half years in this position, I had the happy and challenging task of focusing on what brought me to academia in the first place: teaching students and engaging in institutional efforts to improve environments of teaching and learning on campus. I worked closely with colleagues to improve course offerings in my department and in others on issues related to critical racial and sexuality studies. I also worked with staff and students to create specific conversations on rape culture, on LGBTQ+ exclusions, on racism and other issues of importance to marginalized teachers and learners on campus. This is work I hope to continue doing in my current position.

I asked my Director for a switch to the other tenure-track stream – the research stream – in part because I wanted to devote more time and effort to research and because I discovered, through anecdotal conversations and after asking for data from the Faculty Association, that faculty members in the Educational Leadership stream were paid less than those in the Research stream. When I first discovered the latter, I felt conflicted, knowing that the current academic job market was shitty, and thus part of me felt that I should be grateful to have a permanent, tenure-track job in a city that I want to live in. Many others, including many friends and colleagues, are in much more precarious positions than I am. And yet, another part of me insisted that to be grateful as such is to acquiesce to the social organization of such hierarchies, which manifested not only in pay differentials, but also in how some people, including students, viewed and interacted with me. For some, I was "merely" a teacher and not a researcher, betraying in their affect the treatment of university teachers as less than university researchers.

I looked for opportunities elsewhere, though given how much work academic applications entail, including for my reference letters, I didn't cast my net widely. I targeted job searches that fit my research well, in places and institutions where I could see myself thriving as someone who researches, embodies, and teaches at the intersections of racial, sexual and gender difference. I secured a campus visit at a US-based university, where, for the first time in a long time, I felt recognized as a researcher of the

geographies of race, gender and sexuality. The hospitality and excitement I felt from my possible colleagues were palpable. I was excited at the possibility of being appreciated as a researcher-teacher and coming back to Geography from an interdisciplinary institutional home at UBC, and even more so when they eventually offered me the position. I ended up having a major decision to make, including whether to move to the USA given its current political climate, the difference between US and Canadian health care systems and politics, and Vancouver being where my family lives.

Ultimately, UBC sent me a counter-offer that included a move to the research stream. In the end, after a long and difficult period of reflection, I accepted UBC's counter-offer. I thus managed to negotiate a better position for myself, aided in part by a very supportive set of colleagues, including the Director of my home unit on campus, without whose amazing support the highers-up might not have offered to retain me at UBC. I fixed the situation for myself, but the structure remains in place: the pay differences between the two streams no doubt remain the same, and while I've managed to "climb" the ladder, the ladder itself still exists. In all honesty, even sharing this critique worries me, and even more so as a concerned reviewer asked me to consider the risks of telling this story and offering this critique. I decided that this is a risk I'd like to take, not for myself, but for the greater need to name these kinds of institutional dynamics.

What does all this have to do with feminist pedagogy and controversy? First, it became very clear to me, as a relatively junior faculty member, that the work of teaching, central as it is to the mission of institutions of higher education, continues to be devalued, and is exacerbated by the neoliberalization of the university (Servage, 2009). The existence of separate and unequal streams at UBC is one manifestation of a broader system of devaluation, from the proliferation of contingent faculty who are paid on a per-course basis to the recent invention of the atrocious category of "zero-time" (i.e., volunteer and uncompensated) faculty (Warner, 2018).

Second, the body remains one important site through which we encounter, feel and negotiate the very intimate workings of our markedly differentiated places in the university. Jack, you make this so crystal clear in your letter. Here, I want to highlight another way that this takes place: we come to know ourselves as academic subjects in part through the ways that our bodies rub up against institutional arrangements that define our place and position and thus construct parameters around our value and contributions. We feel this viscerally in our bodies: sometimes in our tense muscles, sometimes in our in/capacity to sleep, sometimes in the unnameable awkwardness of being there, but not feeling or being seen or heard (Catungal, 2017). For an increasing number of our colleagues, this has other nefarious corporeal manifestations – the need to sleep in cars, to go hungry, to work oneself to ill health (Gee, 2017; Flannery, 2017; Kilgannon, 2014; Hauen, 2018).

I feel lucky to be in a position where teaching is central to what I do. I love being in the classroom. I love the 'eureka' moments that I see viscerally on my students' faces when they get a concept or when they make very clear connections between their lives and the material that we study. The courses I get to teach at UBC – this term in the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice and in the Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies program – allow me to center a different kind of curriculum than is usually on offer in disciplinary programs, including in Geography. The work I get to do in the classroom involves bringing marginalized academic bodies of knowledge – both scholars and scholarship – front and center in the way that I approach my course curricula. This, for me, is a necessary intersectional feminist intervention in the spaces of teaching and learning where I get to do an important part of my work as an academic. This term, with much pride, I've managed to ensure that all the required readings in my courses are written or co-written by Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx scholars, and a majority of them by women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, trans, and/or non-binary people. This took a lot of work, in part because my academic training and the broader academic environment in which we do our work have primed me towards a certain view of what scholars, and which ideas, should be required

reading. Curriculum, like pedagogy, is very political work. In my courses, I ensure that students know this. In the introductory lectures, after I go through course expectations and deliverables, I do a week-by-week breakdown of the weekly themes and readings. When I do this, I include photographs of scholars whose work constitute the required readings in my presentation slides – a small way of making them visible, as bodies of knowledge, to my students. I do so in part in the hopes that some of my students could see themselves, or someone who might look like them, in what we are learning and who we are learning from.

As I write this, I am in the midst of preparing for Week 3 of a thirteen-week semester. We are reading Christopher Lee and Christine Kim (2015) and Himani Bannerji (1996) for my Asian Canadian popular culture class, and Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck and Angie Morrill (2013) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) in my class on theories of representation and difference. I have learned a lot from these amazing scholars, and I hope that my students do too. These scholars, in their own ways, teach us to examine our investments in being seen, heard and represented, and to pay close attention to the parameters that structure how such forms of recognition, visibility and inclusion take place. I am excited about the conversations that we will have with and through these thinkers. I hope they learn as much from them as I have so far.

Thank you to all of you for giving me the opportunity to share these reflections with you. Jack, I appreciate that you begin your letter with a statement about craving deliberate opportunities and spaces for coming together in community. I am thankful that social media facilitates some of this, albeit incompletely. You folks' status updates, Facebook messages, texts and emails might not be communication in person, but they make me feel connected to you. As a diasporic subject with family living all over the Pacific Rim, I've come to learn that these moments of connection bridge the distance and enable us to perform geographies of intimacy despite a lack of propinquity (see also Francisco-Menchavez, 2018; Tungohan, 2013). It is in this spirit that I hope that you keep the status updates, etc. coming!

Take good care.

With much love,

JP

Coast Salish territories / Vancouver BC

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September 24, 2018 / March 3, 2020

Dear friends: JP, Jack, and Debanuj.

Thank you, Jack and JP, for beginning this conversation and moving it forward with such personal reflections. I apologize for having taken more time than I thought I needed to cultivate a response. I have struggled with what I could contribute to this conversation, given that I have less teaching experience than the three of you. Writing this letter reflecting on pedagogies has been a bit of a challenge for me, in that sense.

In sitting with your words, I have been wondering about the *becoming* of controversial for us as queer, trans, and gender expansive scholars who wrestle with the political and personal weight of teaching in higher education. Your commentary elicits a series of questions for me of what we do with our bodies, our histories, and our complexly situated subjectivities in the simultaneously elastic and restrictive temporalities and spaces of teaching. What do our own bodies do to the pedagogical practices of teaching ‘controversial’ topics when we ourselves are markers of, and at times subsumed in, controversy? Are there moments when controversy is not merely a circumstance to navigate within the classroom, but instead an intentional political act of, say, queer and trans solidarity or disruption? And what of those whose employment is not secured by tenure, who are on the job market, and are subsequently more vulnerable to critique when not only our course topics, but the social positions we occupy (and not yet(?) occupy), place us almost inseparably from the notion of controversy in the classroom?

As I have already noted, I reflect on your letters and our broader conversation as someone in the very early stages of my academic career. In considering the questions I raised above, I wish to reflect on two different teaching experiences, the first as a tutorial leader while completing my Ph.D., and the second shortly after earning my doctorate, both in Toronto, Canada. In 2018 I received an opportunity to work as a tutorial leader for an introductory-level social science course with 25 students from a wide disciplinary background. I was keen to explore my first teaching role and to experience the feeling of independence while working with students, despite not having the freedom to design the syllabus. Luckily for me, I was given a significant amount of control over how I could design my tutorials, and as such was able to incorporate my own flare to spice up the course content. As the fall semester progressed and we moved beyond the material covering course foundations, I grew frustrated with the limitations of the course material in initiating meaningful dialogue about relevant events that were occurring outside of the classroom – particularly around race and Indigeneity. I noticed a powerful disconnect between the course content and my students, the majority of whom were people of color, and many from first-generation Canadian families who hailed from countries in the Caribbean, South East Asia, and the Middle East. While social scientific topics, fields of research, and areas of scholarship are very relatable to the lived experiences of students of color and their families, this was not what they were learning from the readings in their syllabus.

To counter this, I began to incorporate current, and often contentious, topics into my short tutorials; doing so sparked generative dialogue that connected, for example, our readings about settler colonialism and the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade to current events of police violence in Toronto and Canada’s clandestine affair with slavery (McKittrick, 2014). There was no shortage of current events to incorporate into my tutorial, which occurred alongside the campaign for Ontario’s provincial election, which included the prospective winner, Doug Ford, who interrupted the Liberal Party’s 14-year reign over the provincial government. Ford’s campaign was bent on radically disrupting and undermining the current state of Ontario politics and culture, including proposals, for example, to reverse Ontario’s sex-education curriculum (specifically taking away content on gender identity), remove Ontario’s Indigenous curriculum, and other contentious changes.

In addition to these political shifts, other events occurred that powerfully resonated with topics I brought into tutorial. For example, in the same week of February of 2018, two separate white men were exonerated for the murders of two Indigenous people – Tina Fontaine, a 15 year-old girl from the Sagkeeng First Nation, and Coulten Boushie, a 22 year-old Cree man from the Red Pheasant First Nation – while an Indigenous man from Nunavut was sentenced to two years in jail, 12 months of probation, and 50 hours of community service, for firing a gun at a house. Together, my students and I bore witness to the ways in which Canadian politics, as well as judicial and legal systems, systemically erase Indigenous peoples, histories and contemporary mechanisms of colonialism, and excuse ongoing forms

of violence experienced by Indigenous peoples across Canada. In the two weeks covering Indigeneity in this professor's syllabus, my students observed and responded to the disproportionate punishment of Indigenous people alongside their assigned readings of non-Indigenous scholars debating Canada's Indigenous policies. While intense political changes in Ontario's provincial government, and current examples reflecting dated scholarship by white academics, swirled around our 8:00 a.m. tutorial, I would argue that it was equally, if not more, controversial that my students were not being probed to engage with our political reality in relation to the course content, in either their lectures or their assigned readings.

In this classroom experience, the privileges of my whiteness afforded me much more comfort in navigating delicate conversations about settler colonialism and violent, systemic forms of racism. My whiteness removed my vulnerability from these conversations, which I am sure comes as no surprise to any of you. We are all acutely aware of the comfort that accompanies privilege; as Jack and JP have already illustrated, our teaching of difficult, politically charged content is inseparable from our bodies, histories, experiences, and embodiments. How, then, does our course content place ourselves, and our communities and families, as sources of controversy in the classroom? And what are the pedagogical potentialities and risks of placing our queer selves as part of the course content, in order to reflect to our students that our lives, and the conditions around them, matter just as much as, and perhaps more than, their readings? If we wish to employ an engaged pedagogy (hooks 1994) that centers students' lived experiences as sources of knowledge, is there any reason why we should not be exemplifying this ourselves?

It has been two years since writing my original letter in this exchange, and these same questions lead me to reflect on another teaching experience for an urban political science course that I taught in the beginning of 2020. My syllabus was peppered with queer and critical race content that directly spoke to concepts of urban politics, and our first direct engagement with this work was in our third week with Ellison's (2019) piece on queer police-reform activism in Los Angeles. Presenting urban queer and anti-racist politics and histories to a group of students who did not choose to take a queer-related course was intimidating. I acutely remember paying attention to small details amongst the cis men in my class, whose bodily movements and behavior was noticeably distinct than cis women – one squirming in his seat, another bouncing his legs with great intensity, and another whose face resembled the moment after water goes up one's nose. I still feel the weight of their silence and hesitance to talk about the reading and the corresponding lecture I delivered in class. Was this queer content the reason why more cis men sat toward the back of the classroom, or why some of them very boldly challenged the parameters I set for their assignments as the semester progressed? Or was it *me*? Both? Surely, I am projecting my anxieties. Am I? Were these young men working through years of messages that queerness is only relevant as a source of pop-culture and not scholarly knowledge? Were they processing internalized queerphobia? Does their discomfort rest in my visible queerness, and/or the ways in which this classroom experience was queered through the course content and dialogue? And these questions bring forth the thought that looms most largely in my mind – what would happen if I told my students that I am trans?

After the third week of this class, I received an email from a student asking if she could write her term paper on current trans politics that were taking place in Toronto. This email brought me so much relief and gratitude, because it was the first moment in which the results of my queer pedagogical strategies were made visible. This student felt seen and, in response, she saw me; but even more importantly, she could see how her lived experiences as a queer cis ally were valued sources of knowledge. I share this not only because it is uplifting in a moment when we are all exhausted and stretched thin, but also because of its illustration of the pedagogical possibilities that can emerge when we place our vulnerabilities at the center of our courses – something that I was, and still am, intimidated by. It is a political act to immerse ourselves as part of what could make a classroom controversial – as you, Jack, stare back at those trying to find some gendered 'truth in what lies underneath your clothes (I

do this, too!), and you, JP, cultivate course content that challenges how the Other is encountered in the classroom (and, of course, how your own body becomes situated when working against such Othering). Your letters illustrate that as queer, trans, and/or gender expansive people we cannot place ourselves outside of controversy. Rather, we cannot do anything *but* situate ourselves as the sources, targets, producers, or instigators of chaos and disruption in the current state of our worlds. What I am trying to say is that part of the process of teaching about and around controversy is not only what we incorporate into our courses, but also the ways in which we ourselves become (and already exist as) agents of controversy for merely existing, creating knowledge, and educating.

I am deeply grateful for being included in this discussion with the three of you. It is no exaggeration when I say that your brilliance and inspiring work is what maintains my forward movement into, hopefully, a successful career (whatever that means). It is so easy for us to remain isolated while simultaneously existing among each other as we embark on related work that is rooted in our communities, confronting the challenge of cultivating care and knowledge from our various locations in this world. You all give me hope when my sources run low.

Warmly,

Rae

Tkaranto (*ᐱᐸᐸᐱᐸᐸ* [Anishinabek], Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, and Mississauga Territories)/Toronto, ON

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October 4, 2018 / February, 26th 2020

Dear Colleagues,

I write this letter while still needing to pack for my research trip across South Asia. I will be returning to the region after having conducted initial fieldwork within transgender activist communities about the changing nature of legal recognition (of gender diversity) in the region. My travel across territorial, race, class, gender, and caste borders in the South Asian sub-continent has far reaching implications for my pedagogy and *becoming* something else...

Queerness is a form of becoming, always in formation rather than a static frozen identity (Gopinath, 2005; Knopp, 2007; Roach, 2012). My travels across multiple countries in South Asia presents a complex, rather queer time and space configuration. I remain awake when everyone else is sleeping in Kolkata, India. In this way, I am able to find quiet time to work in an otherwise bustling household and a loud mega-city. My colleagues in the US and UK are awake, since it is daytime for them. I am able to respond to emails in a timely way. However, the time noted on the emails are adjusted to reflect the latitude and longitudinal differences between us. Secondly, as an upper-caste, middle class, Indian academic living in the US, I carry extreme amounts of privilege while moving through South Asia. Yet being femme-identified and gender queer reduces me as lesser than in the masculinist gay male cosmopolitan cultures of Kolkata, New Delhi, Mumbai, Colombo, and Kathmandu. My gaze is that of an elite Indian academic. Queering such a gaze requires forming friendships, sexually intimate relations within, and learning to be allies in the struggles of the communities I "study." This shared vulnerability

feels tenuous. Sharing my feelings, emotions with fellow transgender activists renders the research process as an affective journey, allowing me to be a sensate being in the research field.

I render myself vulnerable

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I render myself vulnerable in the classroom. I teach at a major research university in the New England area. I hold a joint appointment between the Department of Geography & Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Connecticut. I discuss sex, gender, race, sexuality, nationality, disability, citizenship status in a globalizing context with students who are pre-dominantly white, and international Asian students from privileged classes. In this context, as all of you have highlighted how our bodies move through the classroom, and the campus bears upon the classroom dynamics. How does one teach students to think about space and place as it is formed through income, race, and gender inequalities? Conversely, how does one teach students about queer movements in a way that does not recreate a "from the west to the rest" analysis. How does one create a syllabus that accounts for the cultural divides between American students of diverse race, class backgrounds and international students who might be perceived as racially homogenous yet bring with them regional [and ethnic, religious, cultural, geopolitical] differences within contemporary Asia? I approach the syllabus by thinking about the metacognition concepts. The concepts are then broken down through concrete teaching tools such as activist produced videos, Ted talks, YouTube videos, and visiting websites of activist organizations.

I pepper my syllabus and classroom activities with class interactions emphasizing these two concepts:

- 1) Space is a contested terrain of power relations framed through social differences.
- 2) Gender and sexual identity is regionally produced through shifting political economies and geopolitics.

Teaching these two concepts after the election of Donald Trump in the USA, the consolidation of conservative politics globally and the public emboldening of unabashed masculinist white-supremacy, has rocked my world. The 2016 election and the subsequent Donald Trump presidency has consistently attacked immigrants, issued travel bans from countries with predominantly Muslim populations, and is presently virtually withholding all new visa processing. Further, the administration has been actively rolling back on protections provided to transgender communities in healthcare and homeless shelters. Such excitable speech and policies create a transphobic and xenophobic public culture (DasGupta, 2019). My classrooms represent the political divergences of our times. Upper class elite students (mostly white) challenge the notion of income inequalities and racial disparities, while working-poor white students bring with them heightened skepticism about globalization and migration. Topics such as transgender detention activism, anti-globalization organizing, and police brutality have polarized my classrooms.

Recently, I felt—in the middle of a race war while discussing the spatialization of Blackness (Shabazz, 2016)—how police brutality is an extension of slavery and plantation economy (Cowen and Lewis, 2016). A white, male, upper class student raised his hand. As a professor, I felt the need to give space to every student in the classroom. He offered an angry reaction, by discussing how police are being killed at a higher proportion than “black people.” In this context, I have felt challenged not to take a stand, as I could be easily read as a queer person of color who is being defensive about racism and immigration regulations.

Approximately, over half of the students in this class were students of color. I could see their anger, shock, and pain. I felt stumped in attempting to challenge the white student's comments. I posted on social media, found colleagues such as all of you, and met with my Chair as well as colleagues at the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning on my campus in order to build my inner-strength as an instructor. I returned to this classroom (and, the subsequent times while offering this course) with statistics, case studies, and readings that elaborate on racial segregation, issues of predatory banking, redlining, and the erasure of LGBT people in the upcoming US Census and its implication for urban planning and research. Color, as Audrey Kobayashi points out, divides the class in to two: "those who have experienced racism in some form, and those who have not" (1999, 180). Inhabiting a queer body of color leaves me 'somewhere' else in this division. I am neither on the side of students of color (in the above-mentioned situation, most students of color felt abandoned by me as evidenced in their comments), nor do the white students feel comfortable with my presence. Discomfort marks my classes that address intersectional geography. Paradoxically, I received a very high student ranking (5 out of 5) in this specific seminar. I remain bewildered as to how an incredibly exhausting semester produced high student evaluations for me. Such an incident reveals how exhaustion is the price that some of us have to pay to teach intersectional geographies, and geographies of inequality.

My authority as a professor is trumped by my students' whiteness. My colleagues in geography react by saying, "Oh well, that must be hard! Your classes tackle these issues upfront." Their well-intentioned anti-racism cloaks their inability to disrupt whiteness while teaching physical geographies, or climate geographies, or geomorphology. To be the token queer geographer in a department that focuses on GI science and applications, climate change science, and geo-sciences is the cost I pay for holding a job in a prestigious research institution. I have cried, slept, and held my fellow queer friends of color tightly to my chest during the past four years.

I must return to packing. I am leaving for 3.5 months. Different latitudes and longitudes. Different map orientations. I will teach three classes on Michel Foucault, and the geopolitics of transgender recognition at Jadavpur University in Kolkata. I will be organizing workshops about decolonizing the body with colleagues in Colombo, Sri-Lanka as well as conducting a workshop about feminist geography with PhD students at Delhi University. One wonders how my American accent, femme body, and genderqueer clothing will fare in these settings.

I am becoming...something else...somewhere else.

Yours in love,

Debanuj

Mohegan, Pequot-Mohegan, Sequin and Nipmunk territories (Storrs, CT)

Kolkata, (West) Bengal-the first capital of Colonial British rule in India

Coda Without Conclusion: Toward Queer Geographic Pedagogy

In attempting to write a conclusion, each of us read our letters while thinking about how we are speaking through scholarship that articulates the role of the 'personal' in geographic pedagogy (Binnie, 2017; Browne, 2005; Eaves, 2019; Kobayashi, 1999). In the 1999 symposium about teaching sexuality in the geography classroom, queer geographers write about how personal identities matter in the classroom (Elder, 1999; Knopp, 1999), and Gibson-Graham (1999) argue that teaching geography requires us to explore the differences in class, regional imbalances, and the attempts to create non-capitalist modes of living. Twenty years after this symposium, our exchanges return to the questions about when or how our

sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity, and relationships to ‘nation’ create a tensed student-teacher exchange. They offer ways to queer geographic pedagogy even when the topics are not about sex, gender, desire, intimacy, sexuality, or kinship.

Our queer epistolary offers ways to open up dialogues about race/ethnicity/income and their intersections with broader systems of inequality. JP and Rae foreground questions of settler economies in Canada, while Jack and Debanuj highlight questions of regional disparities, the production of space and place through class, caste, gender, race, ability, and ethnicity. Queering the geography classroom requires offering how feelings, emotions, and affect, and friendship remain entangled with fights for the right to housing (Di Feliciano, 2018), or how queer commons (Brown, 2007) or experiments with queer farming offer a non-masculinist vision of racial and economic justice. Some of us regularly teach graduate seminars and supervise doctoral candidates working about race, gender, sexuality, health, urban, digital, and migration geographies. Queering geographic pedagogies at the graduate level extends beyond the classroom and necessitates us to guide students as they navigate the incoherence of discrete categories in the research process, and encourage fieldwork that appreciates affective bonds between the researcher and ‘subjects of research’ (Browne and Nash, 2010; Di Feliciano, Gadelha & DasGupta, 2017).

In resisting the act of concluding our ongoing project of solidarity in queering geographic pedagogies, we end with a coda that awaits the next group of queer geographers to find each other sitting together at a conference, break after break, meal after meal, yearning for our solidarity to exceed these few moments together—that we eventually found ourselves writing in these letters. In these letters lie our fears and exasperations, hopes and desires, needs and demands, and stitched across them in some sort of countertopography that also feels like being seen, it feels like breathing (Katz, 2004). Our letters show that queer pedagogy is a process: we are always at work on becoming who we are, rather than repeating the norms and categories that structures of oppression anoint for us.

We are grateful for each other’s words and stories. We never expected us to churn out something so beautiful and personal to each of us. We are also not surprised: queers love things that glitter, queers adore worlds that are magical as well as honest, and queers recuperate what is considered ugly, messy and unseemly (Manalansan, 2014). Queers offer an unruly method of doing philosophy and praxis. We read us as full of embodied honesty in our mutual state of becoming vulnerable to one another and becoming, dare we say, friends with thousands of miles between us at any given time. Our letters here mimic our sporadic exchanges on social media platforms, either through messenger chats or texts during a difficult work day, or celebrating milestones by pressing “like” or “love” on our pictures or posts. It takes ongoing intimate labor to build between each other, just as JP (and Rihanna) said “it takes work” to build our worlds with students in the face of such violence and oppression. These worlds, as Jack so powerfully describes, may feel sticky with awkwardness or discomfort, yet our in-betweenness also elicits delicate encounters that push beyond the space of the university. Debanuj’s critique of racism in the workplace and classroom while packing for months of fieldwork in India reminded us of Rae’s statement that, also, sweetly summarizes all of our lives: “Rather, we cannot do anything *but* situate ourselves as the sources, targets, producers, or instigators of chaos and disruption in the current state of our worlds.” We are all educating students as we educate ourselves, one another, our colleagues, and sometimes the broader public.

This short (non)conclusion is only to bring us together once more on these pages. Soon we will be vulnerable and disruptive to a reading public, as this article gets published and circulated online. We wish to understand how racialization, ability, immigration status, queerness and gender non-conformity draws lines of connection and solidarity, or perhaps just recognition in the face of colonialism, racism, neoliberal capitalism, and cis-heteropatriarchy, particularly as we face the multiple iterations of turmoil enveloping our worlds. If we are *becoming*, in the classroom and beyond, with affective charges of terror, rage, and grief, we have one another to do it with.

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