Moving across Differences
Blackburn, Mollie V.

Published by State University of New York Press

Blackburn, Mollie V.
Moving across Differences: How Students Engage LGBTQ+ Themes in a High School Literature Class.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/102860
Chapter 1

Moving with Respect to Sexual Diversity in Classroom Encounters

Students moved away from and toward sexual diversity as they read, wrote, and discussed LGBTQ+-themed texts in our shared literature classes. They were fairly comfortable navigating this terrain. They had elected to take a course on LGBTQ+-themed literature. They had elected to attend a charter school that actively and successfully recruited queer kids, including at events like the local Pride parade. But they were also of a generation whose set of experiences prepared them for such navigation. Their hometown had a Pride parade every year of their lives and many years prior. The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was instituted before they were born. Their state’s Defense of Marriage Act passed in their lifetime, but they would not have been old enough to remember it. They could have recalled, though, the surge of queer youth suicides across the nation around 2010 and the contested response of the It Gets Better Project. And they knew that their state upheld the ban on same-sex marriage in 2014 and that this was struck down by the Supreme Court decision in the case of Obergefell v. Hodges in June of 2015, between the first and second semesters of the class. That they were capable of navigating movement among sexual identities, then, is perhaps not surprising.

As I talk about this movement, I draw on a distinction made by Lovaas, Elia, and Yep (2006) between LGBT studies and queer studies. They argue that LGBT scholars tend to characterize sexuality and gender as stable whereas queer theorists aim to “continuously destabilize and deconstruct the notion of fixed sexual and gender identities” (Lovaas et al., 2006, p. 6). Being queer, then, allows for more movement than being
LGBT. One might move from LGBT to queer, or vice versa, but within an LGBT way of being there is little to no movement, and within a queer way of being there is an infinite possibility of movement.

While the focus of this chapter is sexual identities, it is not sex, per se. I use the word sex, instead, to reference a characteristic of females, people who are intersex, and males. I do not use it to reference people's gender, like being a woman, a man, transgender, cisgender, gender-fluid, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, and such. I try very hard, in this chapter and in the book more broadly, not to use the word sex when I mean gender and vice versa. I talk more about this in the next chapter, but I mention it here, in this chapter on sexual identities, so you will understand why I use scare quotes when I use "same" before sex or gender to describe desire, as in "same"-sex desire or "same"-gender desire. I do this because when sex and gender are understood as on continua rather than as dichotomies, when they are understood as multiple and variable, or at least having that potential, as I understand them, then the chances of any one person experiencing and embodying these characteristics in exactly the same way at any given moment in time as someone else are quite slim. The idea of any two people sharing the same gender, then, is all but a fiction. The scare quotes are pointing to that fiction. So, this is how I use these words, knowing that other people use them differently.

I am not trying to instigate a debate or meander down a rabbit hole. I am just trying to tell you what you need to know to understand what I am saying in this chapter. That said, I always strive to honor the language used by the students and the literature I reference above my own preferences. Using these parameters, I explore how the students with whom I shared LGBTQ+-themed literature courses moved both farther away from and closer to sexual diversity as they conceptualized coming out, as they considered and complicated the value of sexual identity labels, and as they grappled with the notion of internalized homophobia.

Conceptualizing Coming Out

In the spring of 2015, the class had just finished reading Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe, and we were reflecting on the book. I had been reading, independently, an early draft of Darla Linville and David Lee Carlson's (2016) Beyond Borders. Thein and Kedley's (2016) chapter, “Out of the Closet and All Grown Up: Problematising Normative
Narratives of Coming-Out and Coming-of-Age in Young Adult Literature,” related to our reading of Ari and Dante, so I told the class about the chapter and said,

[Thein and Kedley] posed these questions that I thought you might be interested in. So, they are kind of wondering about how a coming-out story—so if we understand that this is either Ari or Dante’s coming-out story—is tied to the notion of growing up. The questions they ask, I will read them all, and then we can talk about them. How do coming-out stories reinscribe ideas of permanent sexuality that one must discover and accept? How do the narratives link growing up and coming out of the closet? In Ari and Dante, must Ari’s love for Dante, or his desire in general, characterize Ari’s sexuality as gay? Has Ari accepted his sexuality, or has he accepted his love for Dante, and what is the difference? Any thoughts on any of that?

This prompted a series of intertwined discussions with the students defining coming out, examining coming out in relation to Aristotle and Dante, and reflecting on their own experiences.

As they struggled to answer Thein and Kedley’s questions, students worked to define what coming out was. One student offered a quick answer: “This is how I came out.” Another pondered it, and a third, Corey, offered an example: Blue Is the Warmest Color. Although we had not read this book or watched this movie together, several people in the class had, and, together, they considered whether it was a coming-out story. One student, Parker, firmly asserted that it was not; Corey just as firmly repeated his assertion that it was. Parker asked Corey to explain, and Corey said, “Because it is about, I mean, it is a movie about a young woman discovering that she has—I do not want to say she is different, but she is discovering she is a lesbian, discovering that,” and Sherry supported his claim, saying, “Because it starts out with her like with a boy, so.” Here Corey and Sherry suggest that if a character is emotionally or sexually attracted to a person of the “opposite” gender, and then ultimately, in the story, the person is attracted to someone of the “same” gender, then this story is a coming-out story. Then Parker said, “But you keep using this word ‘discovering,’ and that word does not correlate with coming out. . . . I think coming out is an action rather than something internal. I think that you accept your queerness . . . and then coming out is telling other people
around you in order for them to know who you are and feel comfortable with you. It is like when you sit people down and you are like, ‘I am gay.’ That is coming out.” Thus, Corey and Parker discussed whether coming out described the process one goes through to discover one’s sexuality or the process one goes through to tell others about their discovery.

Certainly, the two students brought very different life experiences to the conversation. Corey consistently identified as a white, cisgender young man, although he eventually told me, in our closing interview, that he had become bicurious. In contrast, Parker consistently identified as queer, at least in terms of sexuality, and more inconsistently and perhaps surreptitiously in terms of gender. In other words, at this moment in time, I cannot know whether Corey had come out to himself, but he had not come out to anyone else, whereas as Parker had quite broadly, including to family, friends, teachers, and staff, but also publicly, as Parker had written an article for a local queer magazine. Both ways of conceptualizing “coming out” were taken up in the proceeding discussion, and Jamie seemed to bring the two together when she said the following:

**Jamie:** It is about the first crush that you realize is a crush.

**Dr. Blackburn:** So, the first crush that you understand.

**Jamie:** Where you can like, [say,] “I have a crush on this person.”

The students did not land on a singular definition of coming out; rather, they grappled with the perhaps impossibility of doing so through examples in the literature we read and discussed and in their lives, about which they wrote and shared with the class.

There were, however, examples of coming-out stories all around us. Many of us had shared our own. Consider this one that Sherry had shared weeks prior. We were reading the first and second sections of *Aristotle and Dante*, and I had posed the following journal prompt: “Write about an experience that really challenged you or something with which you deeply struggled.” Sherry offered to read her writing aloud to the class:

**Sherry:** Okay, I grew up in a very, very Christian home, going to church since I was baby, and every summer since going to a [week-long camp] called [Local] Youth Camp. Around the time when I would go to camp was when I started discovering
that I was gay. So when I went there, I would cry and pray and ask not to be this way. They taught that sin was horribly wrong and being gay was a huge sin. I could not help but feel horrible. Once there was another lesbian at the camp, and I got a crush on her, and she got a crush on me. We would pass letters back and forth, and I asked her how she was able to be gay and still feel comfortable, how she could come back to church camp and not be shut down. She told me it took her awhile, but she finally got there. I remember telling her that I could not be gay because God did not want that and I had to be straight for Him. This was right before I made out with her in the bathroom.

[high five from Cobalt]

[laughter]

Dr. B: Very nice.

Sherry thus shared a version of a coming-out story, and it was a difficult one, full of shame. However, it was also one that was affirming in the moment, in that the girl whom she liked liked her back and demonstrated that affection. Further, it was affirming in the telling, in which a cisgender young man in the class high-fived her for having made out with the girl she liked and I responded to her story with “Very nice.” In the moment of this coming out, Sherry seemed to have pushed away from gay ways of being, in keeping with her religion, and toward them, in acting on her desires. She seemed to have moved back and forth. By the time of this telling, though, she seemed solidly committed to being gay.

In talking about Ari and Dante, there was no question about whether Dante is gay. He comes out during the novel, so the questions became about Ari.

Kimberly: I guess the whole notion of, like, Ari accepting his sexuality versus accepting that he is in love with Dante—I think he is in love with Dante. I think he is not worried about his sexuality as much in this particular case because it is just like, it is Dante; of course he is in love with him. It does not matter that he is a boy. I mean, it does kind of a little bit,
but, overall, it is just Dante. It is not necessarily, “I like boys” [but] “I like Dante.”

Dr. B.: Right, right, and the end kind of supports that, I think. Like, why would you ever be ashamed to love Dante?

PARKER: Right, it does not say, “Why would you ever be ashamed to be gay?”

Dr. B.: Right, or to love boys. That is a good point. What about tying the growing up thing to the coming out thing? Or do you buy that Ari has come out? Brenda says no. Jamie is like, ‘I am not sure.’

JAMIE: I am not even sure if Ari really has, like, a coming out. He is just kind of like—I feel like he does not need to, like, make the statement of “Oh, I am gay.” It is just kind of like, “I love this guy.” He has to be told that he loves him because he does not realize it for himself. I do not necessarily think that it is, like, a story of him coming out. It is him coming into himself.

Dr. B.: So, like, the growing-up narrative trumps the coming-out narrative, if there is one?

JAMIE: Yes.

Dr. B.: That one is the more prominent narrative, is the growing up.

JAMIE: Yes. Because it is not about him realizing he is gay. It is him growing up. It is him living his life.

Later in the same conversation, one student says, “I think [Ari] is Dante-sexual.” As students talk together to figure out whether the novel is a coming-out story, they grapple with what coming out means and whether the main character does come out, and even whether he can come out if he is not gay but is instead “Dante-sexual.” In doing so, they were working to understand the characters better, but they were working to understand
themselves and one another better, too. They do not even accept the
parameters of the questions. They work really hard to understand by
pushing the boundaries out, by moving.

Throughout the conversation, students in the first class considered
Ari’s experience of (not) coming out in relation to their own experiences.
Some students used their own stories to understand Ari’s. Kimberly
explained that she was like Ari in terms of not thinking she was gay until
she had a crush on a girl. She said, “Well, I feel like that is kind of like
what happened to me because I was like ten and I was like, maybe I am
gay. I was like, no. I am not gay because that is just not me. I know other
people are gay. That is cool. Then, like, I grew up a little more, and then I
got a crush on a girl. I was like, ‘Oh, okay.’ So it is not necessarily that he
is like, ‘No, no, I am not gay.’” Kimberly drew on her experience to explain
Ari as not homophobic or struggling with internalized homophobia but
just not having experienced or noticed attractions to people of the “same”
gender before Dante. Darby used her experience to wonder whether Ari
ever identifies as gay. She said, “I think that Ari might not necessarily be,
like, gay. It might be a Dante thing, because the first time that I ever, like,
thought that I liked a girl, it was not like [an] ‘oh my god, I am a lesbian’
thing. It was a ‘hey, this girl is really cute’ thing. Maybe he is, but also we
do not really know because the only guy that he has ever been like ‘hm,
I could kiss you probably’ was Dante.” Darby knew from her experience
that being attracted to and sharing a relationship with one person of the
“same” gender did not necessarily mean that someone was or was not gay.
She applied that knowledge about herself to her understanding of Ari.

Other students used Ari’s story to help understand their own. For
example, Rhys, in talking about their own coming out, said, “I was so
confused. . . . [I was] more in the stage of Ari . . . he is apparently a late
bloomer because I was like in seventh grade, and I am a late bloomer. I
liked this girl, but I did not really think about it. I look back, and I am
like, ‘Oh, great, I liked her.’” Rhys identified with Ari in terms of being
older when they identified their attraction to someone of the “same” gender.
In this way, coming to know Ari’s story helped Rhys better understand
their own.

Students also built on one another’s stories to reflect on and develop
their own. For example, after listening to Sherry, Kimberly said, “I was
going to say something about what [Sherry] said about you do not realize
that, like, your sexuality until you actually have a crush on someone, or
something. I think that is, like, so true, because it is not really relevant in
your life until you are actually interested in somebody. Then it becomes relevant. Like, ‘Oh, these are the people I am interested in.’” In this way, Kimberly affirmed Sherry’s description of her experience of “same”-gender desire and confirmed her memory of a similar experience.

Determining whether Ari is gay was no more the point than determining whether Kimberly, Darby, and Rhys were. It was irrelevant. What was relevant is how they used their life experiences to understand the characters and the novel better, used the characters in the novel to understand their lives better, and used one another’s accounts to understand themselves and one another better.

Consider, then, the adaptation of Lovaas, Elia, and Yep’s (2006) notion of LGBT studies and queer studies. Sherry stood solidly among LGBT people, particularly gay people, and Parker stood firmly in between there and queer people, considering both but not moving toward either. I understood them as standing apart from each other, but not far apart. Since both of them, and all of us in this class, were raised in a heteronormative and heterosexist if not outright homophobic society, as people who experienced “same”-sex desire, they likely had pasts that included unethical encounters in which their desires were negated if not threatened. They also likely had pasts that included the labor of having to get to where they were, where they could claim their desires and identities. So perhaps it is understandable that they were standing firm, determined not to be pushed from where they had worked so hard to get.

Kimberly, Rhys, and Darby had been raised in the same society but had experienced it differently, and, as a result, they moved. They pushed away from straight ways of being in the world, where they had been, and pulled themselves toward LGBT and/or queer ones. (If they were headed more toward one or the other—that is, LGBT or queer—it was not evident in this encounter.) In moving, they offered movement as an option for others in the class, including Sherry and Parker. They opened up potential future encounters for themselves and others through moving.

Valuing Labels

In talking about coming out, there were different estimations of the value of labels. Some students asserted that sexual identity labels were important to them. Simon, a white, trans young man, explained to the class that “there was always a misconception of, because I am trans, I am always, like,
Moving with Respect to Sexual Diversity

into girls and stuff, and that is annoying.” He also said, “Now I identify, like, as a gay male.” When I asked him why it mattered to him to claim a stable identity, at first he said, “I do not know. I do not know.” Then, Rhys described their brother, who was trans and “identifie[d] as a gay guy.” According to Rhys, “It just makes him really happy to, like, scream [his sexual identity] out in the living room that he is, like, doing something, ‘I am gay.’ It makes him so happy.” So, Rhys did not say why claiming a stable sexual identity as a white trans man was important to Simon, but they told a story that let Simon know he was not alone. Then Parker said,

Identifying has always been something that I have really struggled with, because I do not really see the point of it, but then again I do because if you are talking to someone and you tell them your identity, then there is no, like, blurred lines. They understand your intentions. They understand how far that they can go. That is where the friendship or relationship ends. It does not get complicated in that way, which is nice, because then you do not have to be like, “Sorry, I don’t like you.” You have a reason to not like them. It is because you are not attracted [to] them in that sense.

Parker thus gave a reason why it might be important for “you,” and by implication Simon, to claim a stable sexual identity. Rhys and Parker each offered a version of an answer to my question to Simon. It was only then that Simon answered for himself. He explained that while “saying one thing shouldn’t be, like, just destiny,” when he did not claim a stable sexual identity, he would “get hate from a lot of people.”

Simon, as well as Rhys’s brother, had to move to get from who he was assigned to be, who he was thought to be, to who he was. It is unclear whether the hate was in the previous metaphorical location or in the movement from it, but it seemed clear that the current location represented by a stable and alternative gender and sexual identity was a respite from that hate and that therefore he was reluctant to move from the current location, so he stood still by claiming particular gender and sexual identities.

Some students in the fall 2016 class also talked about the value of claiming particular sexual identities as they finished reading and discussing *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. The conversation
was provoked when I asked, “Do you think that Ari is gay or just in love
with Dante?” Students immediately said it did not matter, but then started
labeling him. Vic said that while it didn’t matter, she did not think he was
gay because he is never shown “looking at some other dude.” Mac pointed
out that Ari expressed desire for two people, Dante and Alaina, a boy and
a girl. So, I asked whether Ari was bi. Mac reiterated their belief that it
does not matter. Since Ann initially asked whether Ari’s sexual identity
matters, I invited her to say more. She said, again, that it did not matter,
but then said, “I actually think a really strong case could be made for
Ari being asexual and demiromantic.” I asked her to say more about that,
and she said, “I actually marked on page 298 . . . ‘Maybe kissing was part
of the human condition. Maybe I wasn’t human. Maybe I wasn’t part of
the natural order of things.’ . . . That’s so familiar to me, when it comes
to struggling with coming to terms with my asexuality. And I think a lot
of the ways he feels about his body and about his existence in space are
something that I really identify with as someone who’s asexual.” In this
way, students talked about how labeling Ari did not matter, but they went
ahead and labeled him anyway; at least, Ann did. And not only did she
label him, she labeled him with specificity far beyond that which is named
in the book. Further, she labeled herself in relation to him.

This was not the first time that Ann self-identified as asexual. Nor
was it the first time she relied on something we were reading in class
to do so. Early in the semester, during our History and Poetry unit, we
shared this interaction:

**ANN:** I had no idea any of these poets experienced same-sex
attraction at all. And I love these poets. I’m not a huge fan of
Whitman, but I love Dickinson and I love Hughes. I’ve always
identified with Emily Dickinson; I also want to “shut myself
away in a house and write until I die.” . . . That, that sounds
very attractive. None of you people, no world to deal with,
just being in the house, writing.

**DR. B.:** Yeah, yeah. An introvert speaks.

**ANN:** And I’ve been struggling a lot with my sexuality and my
romantic orientation in the past few years, and it just blows my
mind that nobody bothered to mention this in passing to me.
Although she did not specifically self-identify here, she stated that she had been “struggling a lot with [her] sexuality and [her] romantic orientation” and aligned herself with poets who had “experienced same-sex attraction,” particularly Emily Dickinson, with whom she had “always identified.” But just over a week later, we watched the film Stonewall Uprising, which is a documentary about the 1969 Stonewall riots. In response, Ann conveyed her terror at people who had experienced “same”-sex desire being treated with electroshock therapy, as if having a mental illness that required curing. In doing so, she implicitly self-identified as gay or asexual:

ANN: One of the things that terrifies me, because I can’t tell you how many times my mom has said, “Hey, you should tell”—doctors, my, my therapist, or my psychiatrist, whichever mind doctor I’m meeting with that week—“you should tell doctor so-and-so that you’re asexual or that you think you’re gay or uncertain.” It’s like, “No I shouldn’t.”

DR. B.: Because you’re afraid of what—

ANN: —they’ll say.

DR. B.: Yeah, yeah. No, that’s really terrifying.

ANN: Especially with asexuality, because there’s a number of people who believe that that’s a mental illness.

Here, Ann’s focus was on her reaction to the film, and then she connected that to her own life experience. Then, not even two weeks later, when students were expected to share a project at the conclusion of the unit, Ann shared a sonnet she wrote:

My lips are shaped for sin and meant for two
At least that’s what they tell me every day
My mouth would shatter if I smiled, it’s true
But I am just a statue, a display
A holy whore who watches from above
My teeth are carved on an eternal frown
I say there’s nothing wrong with how I love
My heart and skin are not a battleground
I do not need your names, I have my own
I’m full of stories, I am full of song
I do not need your labels, or your robes
My porcelain is marble now—I’m strong
I know the things they say are never true
My lips are shaped for sin and meant for two

I understood the poem as about Ann’s asexuality, but she did not plainly state that, and it was not taken up in that way by anyone in the class. But the next day, she talked about identifying with Ari in a conversation we were sharing about sexual identities and labels. In doing so, she explicitly self-identified as asexual. She said, “I identify as asexual right now. . . . [And] I started identifying as homoromantic.” She then talked about the work labels did for her, much like Simon did, although the kind of work they did was quite different. Ann said, “I think, to me personally, I’m on the autistic spectrum. I’m really—I know ‘high-functioning’ isn’t generally an accepted term, but I feel like it applies to me, so I use it when I’m referring to me. I’m really, really high-functioning, but I use labels as a coping mechanism, and so not having a label for some part of myself makes me feel like I’m missing something.” In other words, Ann relied on labels to understand herself better.

Carter also described a similar need to claim a stable sexual identity. She said, “For the longest, I was like, ‘Oh yeah, I’m bisexual,’ but then, like, as time went on and, like, I, like, started learning more about the LGBT community and, like, learning all these different things, I was like, ‘Woah, yeah, bisexual’s, like, a thing, and, like, it identifies with me more than being straight, but . . . it doesn’t get all the way there of, like, to who I am. Whereas, like, pansexual does, and being pan is, like, what I am, and it resonates with me.” Carter claimed a label to represent her sexual identity because, like Ann, she thought it facilitated understanding, but, unlike Ann, she thought this was needed for others rather than herself. She said,

I think people just—we need—people are like, “Oh yeah, don’t label,” like, “we don’t need labels” or “there’s no reason for them,” or “don’t label people” or whatever, but then, in all technicality,
like, we—we as a society need labels. Like, um, just to like, in general, be able to, like, function. Because, like, it makes life a lot easier to have something to call yourself or call something that you can’t, like, fully explain, but, like, there’s already an explanation there, and you can just use the word for it. Just simply, like, having like a title or a name for something just makes it a lot easier. So, like, I think that labels are, like, a necessity for us to have, just, like, as a coping mechanism for other people, so, like, other people, when they say, “Oh, I don’t understand what you are,” you can just easily say, “I’m this. This is the label that I identify with.” Or, like, “resonate with” or whatever. And it just makes it a lot simple—like, just a lot simpler, for people to understand and stuff like that.

Simon, Ann, and Carter all found value in claiming labels to name their sexual identities to protect them from hate, to make themselves feel more whole, and to communicate more clearly with others. In this way, Simon’s, Ann’s, and Carter’s moves to stability were similar.

But in other ways their moves were quite different. It could be argued that Simon moved toward a heteronormative way of being in the world, perhaps enjoying what Serano (2016b) calls “conditional cis privilege,” or “passing privilege,” in some contexts, whereas Ann and Carter moved within nonheteronormative ways of being in the world, from asexual to homoromantic, in Ann’s case, and from bisexual to pansexual, in Carter’s case. In doing so, it might be argued that they moved from one stable identity to another, thus only fleetingly experiencing queerness in between the stability of two LGBT ways of being, which is ironic, since none of their identities are represented in the LGBT acronym. By maintaining an openness to future fluidity, however, Ann and Carter were not fully outside of queer ways of being, which means they were still open to movement.

Complicating Labels

Ann’s and Carter’s openness to movement was evident. Even in the naming and claiming of sexual identity labels, Carter understood the importance of not being confined to one particular label. She said, “You cannot, like, you may not a hundred percent, like, confine yourself in that label or whatever, but, like, I don’t know, like I’m pansexual, but I still have, like,
my preference is more toward women than it is men, but yet I have a boyfriend. That doesn't make me straight and it doesn't make me a lesbian; that's like hopping over the line or whatever. But like, it just doesn't—it doesn't like—confine me either.” Similarly, Ann left space for being able to change labels if she so desired. She said,

Yeah, there's a chance that someday I'm going to meet someone and I'm going to want to have sex with them. I don't think so, but it's a possibility. You always have possibilities. And that doesn't—that wouldn't negate my sexuality now. That wouldn't retroactively make me a liar. . . . I started identifying as homoromantic because even though, like, I like guys and I find some guys attractive, I don't actually want to be in a relationship with a guy. But if I meet a guy I want to be in a relationship with, that doesn't make me less gay now. And it's a really important distinction that there's a difference between—it's okay to try on labels, and it doesn't make them wrong or inaccurate or lies or deluding yourself if that label changes.

In other words, claiming sexual identities at one moment in time did not mean, necessarily, that they would not change those identities either in the present, as with Carter, or in the future, as with Ann. That is, they did not understand being LGBT and being queer as mutually exclusive.

As mentioned above, Parker was conflicted about claiming sexual identity labels. They wondered whether young people should even bother coming out since they are likely to have so many different feelings and experiences across the years. They said,

I think that [to claim sexual identity labels] is necessary in some ways, but in some ways, especially when you are still growing and still learning things about yourself, it is bad for you to limit yourself to those identities. Like, you should allow yourself for some swim room instead of, like, “I like girls, so I am gay.” Then you stick yourself in this one box. If some really cool guy comes along or some trans guy or something, then you are like, “Oh my god, I am not allowed to like you, but I do.” Then it is like coming out again. That was already difficult the first time. So why not wait until you figure yourself out in whole.
Darby immediately spoke up. She said, “I actually can speak to that because when I first, like, came out to my mom, it was like, ‘I like girls. Okay, I must be gay.’ Then, like, after that, I got kind of a crush on a boy, and I was like, well, I cannot just say, ‘Hey Mom, I like a boy,’ because she is going to feel like ‘oh, you are lying.’” Here, Parker assumed that sexual identities fluctuate over time but would likely settle eventually. Their question was about why people claim identities during the fluctuation since reclaiming new and even former identities is difficult. Darby confirmed Parker’s claim about this difficulty with an account of her own. Both expected to embody various sexual identities but also expected this variability to create difficulties for them, and Parker, at least, expected that their identities would stabilize over time. It is worth noting, however, that when Parker read a draft of this book, they commented specifically on this part, saying, “When I said ‘I don’t think young people should identify because they will feel stuck in it,’ [these were] totally my dad’s words. Thank goodness for independence ;-),” suggesting their evolving perspective on the issue and an opening up of a future that was different than what seemed possible when they were in high school.

Some students talked about how they wished such potential changes would be more easily accepted. Sarah, for example, offered this metaphor:

This whole identity thing kind of reminds of a conversation I had yesterday with a four-year-old. [laughter] She is like, “Guess what I want to be when I grow up?” I am like, “I do not know, an astronaut.” She was like, “No, a doctor, but then maybe I will be a chef. No, I want to be a chef, but I want to make, like, pastries but would never make it with nuts.” She was going through all these jobs. That kind of reminded me about, like, identity. People expect you to be, like, young and have everything figured out, like know yourself perfectly. I just do not know. It is ridiculous.

Here Sarah suggested that to expect a single, stable sexual identity from an adolescent is “ridiculous.” This resonated with Kimberly:

**Kimberly:** That is, like, the perfect metaphor for identity. When we are little, we are like, “I want to be an astronaut.” Then you are like, “I want to be a fashion designer.” Then you are like, “I want to work in a bar like my mom.” Then you are like, “No, I do not want to do that” when you look back on it.
Dr. B.: What if you gave yourself that same freedom in terms of your sexual identity?

Kimberly: Exactly. 'Cause when you’re like three and you are like, “I am going to be an astronaut,” everyone is like, “Okay, you are going to be an astronaut,” even though people are like, “No, you are not really going to be an astronaut.”

Kimberly, among others, wanted the flexibility that young children have when imagining future careers for themselves. She valued the support they are offered, although the last phrase suggests that she valued that support even if it were not genuine, even if it were patronizing. The suggestion is, though, a preference for a queer community.

I never asked students to identify themselves in terms of sexuality in class. I listened closely to what they said, took notes, and then asked questions in interviews. In the first semester, though, when we read “Am I Blue?,” a short story by Bruce Coville (1994), the question was posed. Sort of. The story is about a young man who is struggling to decipher his sexual identity and, in the process, gains a fairy godfather who gives him a kind of vision in which he sees anyone who has experienced any “same”-sex desire as slightly blue and anyone who experiences only “same”-sex desire as completely blue, and every hue in between. After we finished reading the story, Sherry said, “We should go around and tell everyone what shade of blue we’d be.” Then, she started, “Okay. I guess I would be a dark sky blue. There we go.” Then we went around the room, saying our shades and asking one another for more details:

Parker: Before it storms? Like darkest blue you can get without being black? Right?

Sherry: No . . .

Dr. B.: I’m picturing Colorado skies?

Sherry: Yeah. Like right before the sun goes down; like that kind of blue . . .

Rhys: I also have a picture of the sky turning, like, purple in my phone, which is in my—
Dr. B.: Is that what color you are?

Rhys: No.

Mollie: Purple?

Kimberly: Purple.

Dr. B.: Yeah? Tell me more.

Kimberly: I was like—I couldn't think of the right blue but then I thought of a purple and I was like that looks better. . . .

Parker: Periwinkle or dark purple?

Kimberly: Periwinkle. . . .

Rhys: Shimmering blue; like you see me and just shimmering down my body blue, and it's like really radiant bright blue and shimmering. It's just like shimmering down. . . .

Jamie: The [indecipherable] blue?

Dr. B.: Oh, the color of the [hall] pass!

Kimberly: Yes. That's what I was thinking of, but more purple. . . .

Darby: I feel like I would be like a mix between both shades of blue that my hair was because sometimes I'm probably gay and sometimes I'm probably not.

Kimberly: That's why I picked purple.

Dr. B.: Does the red have any indicator in it or it's just not blue?

Kimberly: Just not blue. . . . It's purple. . . .

Dr. B.: I like the idea of playing with depth of light, so I'm thinking of that water bottle blue. See how it's both dark and
light because it allows light through it, but it’s a darker color, so it’s not like a turquoise water bottle but it’s—

**Parker:** It’s really beautiful.

**Dr. B.:** You are such a smart-ass. [laughter]

In this conversation, Sherry, Kimberly, Jamie, Darby, Rhys, and I self-identify in terms of blue as a metaphor for sexual identities. The story invites readers not to limit themselves to blue or not blue, as in gay or straight, but instead offers a continuum of shades of blue. Students accepted that invitation and then extended it, moving beyond blue, as Kimberly did, and complicating blue with light, as Rhys did. Here, movement seems playful, experimental, almost without consequence. Students tried on a future without necessarily leaving a past behind. They moved together, in some ways but not all ways. Students moved themselves toward a queer way of being without necessarily leaving an LGBT one behind.

(Externalizing) Internalized Homophobia

But not all movement was so joyful. Students also explored the concept of internalized homophobia, which describes when gay or lesbian people learn that not being straight is a bad thing and apply this belief to themselves. People who have internalized homophobia have moved fervently away from LGBT and queer ways of being in the world and forced themselves toward straight ones. Students explored this concept in our discussions of literature we read, particularly *If You Could Be Mine* (Farizan, 2013), *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012), and “Am I Blue?” (Coville, 1994).

*If You Could Be Mine* provided us an opportunity to explore the idea of internalized homophobia. The novel, which is set in contemporary Tehran, begins as a love story between Sahar and Nasrin. On this day, we had just read chapters seven through nine. In the seventh chapter, Sahar takes Nasrin to a café that caters to LGBTQ+ people, where her cousin Ali is a “special customer” (Farizan, 2013, p. 88). Nasrin does not seem to notice the other customers until Ali “motions to a neighboring table. Two older women sit with each other, and even though they are
not touching, the love in their eyes for each other is evident” (Farizan, 2013, p. 94). When Nasrin “looks at the women” (Farizan, 2013, p. 94), she gasps, looks “mortified” (p. 95), and “starts hyperventilating” (p. 95). As Sahar tries to calm her, she says, “‘No one cares who we are in here’” (Farizan, 2013, p. 95). Nasrin gets angry and says, “‘What do you mean who we are?’” (Farizan, 2013, p. 95), as if she has not been engaged in a romantic and sexual relationship with Sahar for a long time. At this point in our read-aloud of the chapter, Katherine blurted out her thoughts:

Katherine: Nasrin is being super homophobic. I feel like it’s the internalized homophobia, too. I don’t know; it just blows my mind.

Dr. B.: I can’t believe she got so, her reaction was so strong to the two elderly women.

Katherine: I think it’s because she knows, on the inside, that’s her and Sahar, but she’s not really—I don’t know if she’s ready to accept it. Like, I know she loves Sahar, I think she feels that way, but she’s not ready to take that step and making it, I don’t know, public, or just being, “Okay, I’m never going to be married to a man; it’s just going to be Sahar and I, but we’ll never have kids.” You know? “We’ll never be able to, like, inherit our family’s money,” you know, “we might have to be living in the streets.”

Katherine recognized Nasrin’s actions as homophobic immediately and quickly applied that recognition to internalized homophobia. Nasrin’s panic at being surrounded by LGBTQ+ people and horror at seeing Sahar and herself in the elderly lesbian couple in the café reveal her internalized homophobia. Nasrin’s internalized homophobia provokes her to push herself out of an LGBTQ+ way of being in the world, which is clear when Sahar suggests they are a part of the surrounding LGBTQ+ community and Nasrin vehemently rejects this suggestion and asserts that they are apart from that community, not a part of it.

The next person to speak was Carter, who recognized not only Nasrin’s internalized homophobia but also Sahar’s. There is evidence of this in the eighth chapter, where Sahar says, “I know how I feel when Nasrin
walks in a room. I feel weak and strong. I feel proud and ashamed. I feel love for her and hate for myself. I want to be clean of my feelings for her because they are wrong. Everyone knows that” (Farizan, 2013, p. 105). Carter recognized Sahar’s shame and self-hatred as internalized homophobia and named it as such. In this excerpt of the book, Sahar pushes herself away from at least a lesbian way of being by saying, “I want to be clean of my feelings for her because they are wrong,” thus judging this way of being and wanting to rid herself of it.

Both Nasrin’s and Sahar’s movement away from LGBTQ+ ways of being are propelled by internalized homophobia. They have been raised to believe that loving someone of the “same” gender is wrong, and they feel great shame and self-hatred because of their love for each other. Devastatingly, and oxymoronically, they are both experiencing the same thing together in total isolation. They are moving, but in ways that damage them, at least at this point in the story.

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* also provided us with opportunities to explore internalized homophobia, particularly in a scene that students called “the bath scene,” which is in the eighth chapter of the third section. In it, Ari is in two full leg casts, and, since the novel is set in the eighties, the casts are plaster. As a result, Ari cannot shower or take baths, and his parents give him sponge baths, but in this chapter Dante offers to give him a bath, and Ari reluctantly agrees. It is an intimate scene, one that brings Dante to tears, which infuriates Ari. Ari says, “I wanted to yell at him. . . . all I wanted to do was put my fist through his jaw” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 144). In the first semester, students were to read the scene for homework before this conversation, but then Parker raised the topic:

**PARKER:** Wait, can we talk about the bath scene?

**DR. B.:** Let’s talk about the bath scene.

**PARKER:** What the hell?

**DR. B.:** Chapter 8. What was going on?

**PARKER:** “Can I bathe you today?” Let’s read it. Chapter 8.
Dr. B.: All right, let’s go, chapter 8, which is page 143. This is, he has come back from the hospital. He has got two casts from ankle to thigh. He is moody and angry. He is kind of hating everybody right now.

In both of the semesters that we read this book, students were taken aback by this scene. They wanted to think through it together and even read it together, as they did here. So, we read the scene aloud together. Then, I initiated the conversation:

Dr. B.: So, what is going on there?

Parker: Sexual tension.

Dr. B.: There is a sexual tension. How is Ari feeling about the sexual tension?

Parker: Pissed off.

Dr. B.: Right, right. Why do you think he is pissed off?

Parker: Because he says he wants to hit him.

Dr. B.: Well, no, that is why you know he is pissed off. Yeah, you know he is pissed off, absolutely. But where is the, like, can you figure out where the anger is coming from? Why does it piss him off?

Sherry: It is because he doesn’t know what’s going on inside his brain.

Parker: Oh my god.

Dr. B.: Right, he is confused by it.

Parker: Okay, so that, but he is also kind of realizing that maybe he does have feelings for Dante and he does not like that. I think maybe the reason he did not want to talk about
the accident and seem like a hero [was] because he does not want anyone to think, “I did it because I love Dante.”

Here, Parker and Sherry, both of whom identify themselves as queer, albeit differently, not only from each other but also at different times and places, scrutinized the scene and tried to understand Ari’s anger. Both of them seem to interpret Ari as coming to recognize his desire for Dante, but it was Parker who plainly stated, “[Ari] does have feelings for Dante and he does not like that.” In that, we see Parker’s recognition of Ari’s internalized homophobia. We also see, in the “bath scene,” Ari violently pushing himself away from experiencing “same”-sex desire, specifically desire for Dante, even if only in his imagination.

This violent pushing away from what is understood as gayness is material in Bruce Coville’s “Am I Blue?” Recall that this short story is about Vince questioning his sexual identity with the support of his fairy godfather. One of the people in Vince’s life is Butch, who routinely beats up Vince because he perceives Vince as gay. Ultimately, we learn that Butch is gay. At this point in our reading of the story, Delilah said, “I had a feeling that was going to happen . . . The—his bully was also gay . . . because like, you know, like sometimes, like, when people make other people, like, down or whatnot, it’s because the other person that they’re bullying has something that they want or something that they are; they just don’t know how to get their feelings out. So it makes them hurt other people.” Here, Delilah suggested that Butch abuses Vince either because he desires him or because he sees his own “same”-gender desire in him. This was almost four weeks after we talked about internalized homophobia in If You Could Be Mine, so I reminded her, “Remember when talked about internalized homophobia? So we see that Butch has this internalized homophobia that he’s taking out on Vince, right?” Thus, I underscored what they had learned about the concept of internalized homophobia.

When Sahar sees “same”-gender desire in herself, she is ashamed and hateful, but toward herself. When Nasrin, Ari, and Butch see this desire in themselves, they take it out on others. In other words, they externalize their internalized homophobia, although they do so differently. Nasrin does so verbally, Ari does so in his imagination, and Butch does so violently. All of them, to different degrees, though, push themselves away from lesbian or gay ways of being in the world and pull themselves toward straight ones, even homophobic ones, at least for these focal moments
in time. Students reflected on their own experiences with such pushing and pulling in mind.

Mac told a story about their brother. Before he came out, according to Mac, “everyone would pick on him for being gay.” Thus, he learned that being gay was something that prompted abuse. Then, after he came out, he started calling Mac a lesbian and a dyke, even though they did not identify as such at the time. According to Mac, “it always had, like, a negative connotation to it, so that made me like, ‘Oh no, is this,’ like, I never thought that being gay for anyone else but myself was bad. I felt like if I was gay, that would be bad. . . . Yeah, that’s, um, that’s why for awhile I was like, ‘No, I’m straight.’ . . . And that’s why I was trying to prove him wrong by having a lot of boyfriends. . . . And I felt like I had internalized homophobia.” In other words, Mac’s brother internalized homophobia and then taught Mac to do the same by externalizing his homophobia onto Mac. In this way, both Mac and their brother pushed themselves away from gay and lesbian ways of being and pulled themselves toward straight and homophobic ones, at least for moments in time. When movement is provoked by hatred, whether the movement is away from that which is hated or toward that which is not, the movement is not ethical, and it has harmful consequences, whether for the person moving, for those around them, or both.

Isolation and Internalized Homophobia

In the next chapter, I discuss at some length a young man I call John and his deep investment in being not just a cisgender but also a masculine man. Of course, being a cisgender and masculine man does not mean being a straight man, but it was how I understood him. In fact, that’s how he explicitly identified in our concluding interview. But in his journal, when he wrote about the turmoil of his life before coming to this school, his struggle getting into any high school, and then the orientation for this school, he went on to write, “That’s when you spot him. He’s tall, slim, with blonde/brown hair, blue eyes. You sit next to him, his eyes light up. . . . 2 months and we’re inseparable.” Then he described the two of them coming back from a game of “airsoft,” stripping down to their boxers, and embracing each other: “You cling to him and [he] clings back, locked in a loving embrace.” He prefaced the account by saying, “There
is no shame between you two,” and concluded it by saying, “But neither of you are ashamed.” In other words, the account is framed in shame, but a rejection of shame. Then he offers a sort of epilogue for the story, beginning with “2 years later.” The epilogue references the “one awkward time where you went camping and the showers were just one big line and you get it.” Then, about a month later, when we were discussing the bath scene in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, John said, “But I mean, I’ve taken a—I’ve taken a bath with one of my friends before. You know, we got back from four days out of airsoft and we were all dead tired. And I’m just, ‘I’m going to get in the shower.’ And I looked at the water heater, because it had a little meter on it that says how much is left, and I’m like, ‘Oh crap.’ And I’m like, ‘Want to hop in the shower with me?’” This account could be understood to fill in some of the blanks of that early journal entry. The embrace happened after “airsoft” and the shower much later, in the journal entry, and there are other variations, but still the experience of intimacy with a friend who also identifies as a young man was consistent across both of John’s stories. A significant difference between the two, though, is that the journal entry was, as far as I know, private, and the comment public. I did not understand this public telling to be a coming out for John, though. Instead, I heard him saying, “Dante can bathe Ari, and it doesn’t mean either one of them is gay. I mean, I took a shower with a guy, and clearly I’m not gay.” At this point in the book, readers do not know whether Ari is gay. I cannot know what John believed at this point. I know that John was very engaged in this book. He was reading ahead of the class and talking about literary devices used by the author, including foreshadowing. I also know that in the prewriting for his final essay in the class, he noted that “the LGBTQ+ part of [Ari and Dante] didn’t get big until the last sections,” that he preferred “where the narrators sexuality is shown early on,” and stated, “I hate surprises.” From this, I take it that John did not expect Ari to fall in love with Dante and felt a bit surprised by this turn of events at the end of the novel. This is quite different than how I understood that early journal entry, in which I did not understand him to come out, but I did understand him to be embracing intimacy between two men. Thus, in the private context, John stood near men who love men, but in the public one, in a classroom encounter, he stood farther away from such men. In neither context did I see him move from one position to another. Like with Simon earlier in this chapter, I understand John’s standing still as about safety, wanting to be safe, but rather than having worked really hard
through the hate to get to safe, as Simon had, I understand John as just not willing to take the risk at all.

**Ethical Movement with Respect to Sexual Diversity in Classroom Encounters**

Sometimes students moved with respect to sexual diversity in classroom encounters, and sometimes they did not. Students stood still among communities that they had worked hard to get to and were not eager to leave. Students moved deliberately and carefully, crafting lives for themselves. Students also moved playfully from one community to another, exploring possibilities for themselves in the present and future. I saw these stances and moves as empowering and ethical.

But not all stances and moves were. Students talked about characters who moved in ways that were provoked by and perpetuated hate, which led to a conversation about a family member doing something similar. So, it was not that the students moved with animosity, or unethically, at least not in the context of the class, but they recognized when others did. In the class, though, one student took a troubling stance. Rather than move toward men who love men, as he did in the privacy of his journal, he stood with heteronormativity, even in this LGBTQ+-themed class in this queer-friendly school, even with all of his white, cis, male privilege. A stance can be ethical when it is preceded by movement and when it holds the possibility of being followed by movement. A stance can be ethical when it remains agile. But a stance without movement before or after lacks the opportunity to encounter others. Such a stance is one of isolation, reification, ossification. It is not ethical. Movement is needed to encounter others; it is not all that is needed, but it is always needed. Sometimes those encounters are harmful, and sometimes they are empowering, even joyful. The difference is in whether they are agile, whether they are ethical.