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
I was struck most by students’ shifting relationships with families, and with parents in particular. When I talk about families and parents, I am using the words as they were used by my students and the literature we read and discussed together. I am not particularly interested in who was born to or adopted by whom, unless my students were. I am only interested in whom my students understood as parents and family in the literature and their lives. With this notion of parents and family, I look at how students moved farther away from them by critiquing them through literature we read and discussed together as well as through their stories about their lives beyond the classroom. I also look at how they moved closer to parents and families by striving to understand parents’ grief and fear in relation to their children’s sexual and gender identities and appreciated them for loving, affirming, and standing up for them.

Critiquing Parents

Students critiqued parents and families in the literature we read and discussed together, such as *Fun Home*, *Rethinking Normal*, and *Some Assembly Required*. They also critiqued parents and families they encountered in their jobs, their friends’ homes, and their own homes.
In Course Literature

In the third of the three semesters, we read several excerpts from the graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Bechdel, 2006) and listened to the related songs from the eponymous musical (Kron & Tesori, 2015) as well as part of an interview with Alison Bechdel, Lisa Kron, and Jeanine Tesori conducted by NPR's Terry Gross (2015). (For more about this lesson, read Blackburn, 2019.) *Fun Home* is a graphic memoir of Bechdel's growing up and coming out in a funeral home with her family that pays particular attention to Bechdel's father, who experienced and embodied same-sex desire throughout his life and ultimately died by what might have been interpreted as an accident but Bechdel certainly interprets as suicide. The memoir was made into a musical, which was awarded a Tony.

One of the memoir excerpts comprised two pages (pp. 220–221), each with twelve square panels (three across, four down). In each panel Alison, the college-aged daughter, and Bruce, her middle-aged father, sit together in a car. He is driving. Alison is eager to connect with her father since just coming out as lesbian, but her father is unavailable to connect with her because he is so isolated in his own internalized homophobia. The conversation is awkward and halting. The correlated song is “Telephone Wire,” in which Alison struggles to talk about what it is like for both of them, daughter and father, being gay. Her father talks about his experiences as a closeted gay man, but he makes no effort to connect with her, despite her efforts. In the interview, both Bechdel and Tesori reference how painful this bit was for them to watch in the musical. Although the students did not see the musical, we discussed the related excerpt of the memoir, the song, and part of the interview, and students talked about the disconnect between daughter and father. Kristy, who identified as straight, cis, and white, said,

> The part that caught my attention the most was when [the father] was saying how when he was little he really wanted to be a girl and dressed in girls’ clothes. . . . And [Alison] was like, “I wanted to be a boy, dress in boys’ clothes. Remember?” And it reminded me back to the scene on this side [a scene that we had read, heard, and discussed previously where the father looks at a butch woman disdainfully], where he’s like, “Is that what you want to look like?” And it’s like he was kind
of, like, judging her for it. But, like, he did the same thing when he was little.

I heard Kristy as angry with the father for belittling his daughter for feelings he shared with her. Similarly, Desiree, who identified as straight, cis, and Black, said, “The ending of the song really stuck out because it was like ‘that we’re both—,’ then she didn’t get to say ‘gay’; he, like, cut her off. So, I don’t remember what he said, but he said something that had nothing to do with what she was singing about.” Desiree, too, seemed angry with the father, in this case for preventing Alison from naming their both being gay. In other words, both Kristy and Desiree blamed Alison’s father for putting obstacles in between his daughter and himself and therefore preventing their connection—indeed, ensuring their disconnect. So while Bruce pushed Alison away from him, Kristy and Desiree moved themselves farther from Alison’s father and closer to college-aged Alison. This movement occurred across lines of difference defined by sexuality but also gender expression and, in Desiree’s case, race. They moved farther away from at least one person if not people more generally who struggled with internalized homophobia and toward those who more confidently claimed their gay identities. In doing so, they closed down possibilities of connecting with people struggling with internalized homophobia while opening up possibilities of connecting with LGBTQ+ people without that struggle.

When we read and discussed *Rethinking Normal* (Hill, 2014) and *Some Assembly Required* (Andrews, 2014), students pushed away from parents by critiquing the parents represented in those books. Recall that these two autobiographies were written by trans teens who for a period of time shared a romantic and sexual relationship. *Rethinking Normal* was written by Katie Rain Hill, who transitioned to being a girl as a teenager in Oklahoma. It begins with her birth in 1994 and concludes with her attending college at the University of Tulsa. A significant thread throughout the book is Katie’s relationship with Arin Andrews, the author of *Some Assembly Required*, which I describe in chapter 2.

In this class, students chose one of the two books to read, and we discussed them together. Mac, who was gender-fluid and white, had selected and read *Some Assembly Required*. They were sharing their frustration with Arin Andrews’s mother’s response to Arin’s coming out to her as trans. According to Mac’s reading of *Some Assembly Required*,
Arin’s mother “was basically like, when he told her he was trans, she kind of didn’t say anything; he gave her, like, a newspaper, that, you know, [indecipherable] gave about Katie Rain Hill. And he’s like, you know, ‘Mom, I’m not the only one. This is not just me. There are other people.’ And she didn’t read it. She tucked it away. She didn’t read it. And she kind of just ignored it.” Mac seemed appalled if not offended that Arin’s mom essentially dismissed Arin’s efforts to talk with her about his gender identity.

In this discussion, I asked students to focus on the parts in *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* where Katie and Arin were depressed and suicidal, at which points their mothers begin to take their gender identities more seriously. I asked students to find the scenes where this happens, and when a student conveyed she did not understand, I modeled with *Some Assembly Required*:

So, in this book, what happens is, um, as, so, the, what’s going on is Katie is, Katie and her family have moved to Oklahoma where her grandparents are, and she feels really isolated and depressed, and it’s just a terrible move for her. And then her parents get divorced, and that, like, sends her—so she—her father had been distancing himself from her the more feminine she got. So, she missed him already, but things happened in the house just even made it like a greater loss, so she was getting more and more isolated. She did have a social group, a group of girls at her middle school who she, you know, to hang out with. . . . Okay, so she’s getting really depressed, and I’m just going to read the same part we read. So—oh, and she’s a big reader and writer, so she just reads and writes to escape from her reality, so she, it’s great because it gives her an alternative world, but it also makes her even more isolated, right. . . . Okay, so, she tells—she finds an article online; she tells her mom, “Hey this is me, I’m trans.” And her mom’s like, “Oh, come on, can’t you just be gay.” And she’s like, “No.” And um, it’s an Oprah interview that she gets her to, um, watch, and then these articles on trans kids.

At this point, I started to read from the book, a part where Katie’s mom is talking:
Dr. Blackburn: “‘Will this make you happy, baby?’”

[Mac hits their desk with their palm]

Dr. B.: “And I felt a rush of overwhelming relief, ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I think it will. I just want to be a girl.’”

[Mac rubs their head]

Dr. B.: “‘Okay,’ my mom said softly and she put her arms around me. We sat there and hugged each other tight, both bawling.”

[Mac adjusts in their seat]

Dr. B.: “My mom wiped her eyes, straightened, and held onto my shoulders. ‘Then we’re going to do this. Make me list of everything you want done, and I will make sure I do every single thing on it.’” [sounding choked up] Did the same thing to me all over again. You’d think I could handle it on the third reading.

At this point, there was an audible sigh by multiple students. Carter, who identified as pan, cis, and Black, said, “That is so sweet.” I continued reading:

Dr. B.: “‘Really?’ I said. ‘You just have to promise me one thing.’”

[Mac puts their hand over their heart]

Dr. B.: “‘What?’ I said, wiping my nose. ‘You cannot kill yourself.’”

[Mac slams their palm on the desk]

Dr. B.: “‘I can’t help you, I can’t fix this if you kill yourself. You’ve got to promise me that no matter how hard it gets, you will not take your life.’”
Mac makes a sort of namaste pose

Dr. B.: “I looked at my mom, her green eyes wet and bloodshot from crying. ‘I promise.’ I said.”

Mac rubs their face, puts their head down, and shakes their head

Dr. B.: “‘Okay. You hold your promise. I swear I’ll hold mine.’”

Carter said, “Aw, that was so cute. I know, right? That was the cutest, oh my god.” Here, I contextualized and read the scene where Katie’s mother begins to support her in her transition. In doing so, I conveyed emotion, getting a bit choked up as I read. I think it is fair to say I was connecting with and moving toward the mother, as a mother myself. But Carter also described the scene as “sweet” and “cute,” and other students felt similarly, as indicated by their collective sigh. I understood Mac’s gestures as engagement and appreciation; I understood them as being moved by Katie’s story and toward Katie’s mother.

At least the three of us, and likely others in the class, moved across lines of difference toward Katie’s mother. Mac crossed lines of difference defined by gender identity, and Carter crossed lines of difference defined by race. But most pertinent here is that both of them crossed lines of difference defined by their roles in families, that is, as children moving toward Katie’s mother. In doing so, they opened up the possibility of moving closer to parents of trans kids; in the case of Mac, this included their own.

Then, Vic volunteered to share the parallel scene from Some Assembly Required. She explained first that Arin had been cutting himself with a knife and considering suicide. She said, reading,

“The next night was more of the same, and on the third day I was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling and mom came in and sat down next, beside me. She saw the knife still on the floor, and picked it up. ‘This trans stuff is real, isn’t it?’ She asked. ‘It’s not going away, you’re not going to grow out of it.’ ‘No, I’m not.’ ‘But how are you going to live like this?’ ‘Would you ignore the fact that this is who I am makes me think that life isn’t worth living at all?’ She looked at me and then glanced back down at the knife. ‘You really would have
‘Did you do this?’ She asked. ‘I tried.’ She nodded and tears started streaming down her cheeks, down her neck. ‘I will support you. I won’t lose you.’ ‘You won’t.’ I said, ‘I’m still me, I’ll always still be me. But I need my body to be my own.’ She nodded again. And I knew that she finally got it.”

Throughout Vic’s reading, Mac was still, with face resting on fist and elbow resting on desk. They appeared to be listening, but they were still. They were the first to raise their hand to speak afterward. Their contribution was stumbling, a bit hard to follow. I could hear their frustration with Arin’s mother when they said she “doesn’t accept him for who he is... If she can’t accept him for who he is... He might have actually gone through with it. She would have lost a son.” Yanika, who identified as straight, cis, and biracial, agreed, saying, “I feel like if the knife wasn’t there in the situation at all, then she wouldn’t, if—like she wouldn’t have come to that—not, like, realization... I feel like that if the knife wasn’t there and Arin didn’t feel at that point, then [his suicide] would have happened.” Here, Mac and Yanika suggested that if the mother had not seen the knife, then Arin might very well have died from suicide. I, likely identifying with the mother, said, “But it’s a game changer, right?” But Katherine, who identified as bi, cis, and white, rejected my excusing the mother. She said, “I feel like it should not have gotten to that point; I’m like, as a parent you really should realize that your child is going to commit suicide... I just don’t understand why it has to be so extreme.”

This time I understood. I said, “Right, why can’t you just listen to me before I get to that point,” and Katherine continued, “Right, it’s almost like, you don’t believe them, you don’t believe your own child saying these things to you; it’s kind of hard to deal with, you know, not getting the audience you need from your parents.” And, again, I understood, “Right. Right. I think that’s a good point.” Interestingly, both Katherine and I started talking to Arin’s mother using second person, “you.” I then started using first person, as if I were Arin. In doing so, I shifted closer to Arin and farther from his mother. Katherine first referred to Arin in third person, using “them,” but then second person, “you,” when she said “not getting the audience you need from your parents”; this also suggests a shift closer to Arin. Mac mentioned something they saw on social media “that was about trans equality, and it was like, when you’re pregnant, you don’t know what gender your child’s going to be. And, but you still love them, so why should it matter now? [indecipherable]. It wasn’t exactly
like that, but that was the gist of it.” By referring to the parents of trans youth in second person here, Mac moved closer to Arin’s mother while moving no farther away from Arin. Thus, Mac, Yanika, and Katherine pushed themselves away from Arin’s mother, and I let go, a bit, of my tightly held grip on the mothers. But then Mac made a sort of turn back toward mothers of trans youth, a movement, even if just for a moment. Here we see an ambivalence, a desire to connect with parents of trans youth but an unwillingness to tolerate transphobia from them, a possibility of connecting but not without some constraints that protect trans youth.

**As Teachers beyond Class**

Students also critiqued the parents they encountered beyond what we read and discussed in class, in contexts where they could position themselves as teachers. For example, one day there had been a snowstorm and students were trickling in, so we were just chatting. A student from the previous semester’s class had come in and talked about her cousin’s assumptions of gender in relationship to earrings, and Kristy built on that discussion. She said,

> I work at Claire’s, so I, like, pierce people’s ears. . . . This one lady got her son’s ears pierced, and she was like, “I don’t even know if I should do this, or if I do I should only get one done because I’m afraid he’s going to look gay.” . . . It’s like that thing with the whole gender thing is either girls have their ears pierced or, and boys don’t. Or boys have one—it’s so stupid. . . . The world is changing, like—you have to constantly evolve and, like, adapt to new changes.

Here, Kristy critiqued a parent who worried about ear piercings making her son look gay because, as she said, “there’s nothing wrong with being gay . . . it’s a natural thing, like, it’s something you see every day and it’s—even if you didn’t see it every day there’s no reason to hate on it.” Kristy, here, moved herself away from, and more specifically above, parents by making it clear they had something to learn from her, she had something to teach them.

Sometimes students talked about their friends’ parents in similar ways. Mac, for example, talked about their friend’s parents doing things that might be understood as minor but are also major to their friend:
Mac: They accept them and they just don't use the right pronouns. They don't accept them. They say that they do accept them, but they don't.

Dr. B.: And they’re, like, these little things that they do over and over again that kind of call into question their acceptance?

Mac: Yeah.

Dr. B.: Some people call those microaggressions.

Mac: They'll use the wrong pronouns, use the wrong name. Their actions contradict what they say about him and it bothers me, but they keep saying, like, the name, and, like, I just—I try to influence them. And especially his younger siblings. I’ll be like, “That’s [Francis],” or “he,” you know?

Dr. B.: Yeah, you model the good behavior and show them how to do it.

Here, Mac revealed how the parents were failing their child, Mac's friend, and Mac was not only bothered but actively tried to educate them, distinguishing themself from these parents but also attempting to educate them. Mac tried to move them.

As Kristy and Mac positioned themselves as educators of parents, in some ways this positioning moved them away from these parents, but not so far away that they could not communicate across their differences. Indeed, they stayed far enough away to distinguish themselves but close enough together to interact, to educate. In doing so, they opened up possibilities of ongoing communication and education.

IN THEIR FAMILIES

This dynamic was evident when students talked about parents in the books we read as well as other parents in their lives, but it became most pronounced when they talked about their own families. When students critiqued their families, they effectively pushed them away from them. Students did so by critiquing their family members' policing of gender; their lack of knowledge regarding sexuality and gender, like perceiving it
as a phase; their dismissal of their feelings; and their loving them *despite* their sexual and gender identities.

Just as Kristy reported parents in Claire’s policing their sons’ gender expression through ear piercings, students reported their own family members policing gender expression as well. I had explained, early in the second-semester class, that gender policing is “where people act like, ‘I need to make sure that you know how to act like a boy right’ or ‘act like a girl right.’” In students’ accounts, as at Claire’s, boys were the main focus of such policing, but it was not just parents who did it. Carter, for example, told a story about her older brothers refusing to play with her because boys don’t play with girls and her younger brothers playing dolls with her but then being teased by her older brothers and corrected by her parents. She wanted playmates so would question her family members. She said,

I’m the only girl out of—I have five brothers. So I have never had like—so I have never had a girl companion at home that I can, like, play with, like play with others. And of course like I have, like, toys and, like, Barbies and Bratz dolls, but like I can only play with them by myself. So I asked my brothers if they’d play with me—my older brothers were like, “No.” But I have two younger brothers, and I could, like, talk them into playing with me, but like as, like, my brothers would like just make fun of them. Like, “What are you doing? Why are you playing with dolls?” And they’re like—and like my parents would be like, “You shouldn’t be doing that,” but wouldn’t say anything knowing that I’m the only girl, and I didn’t have anyone else to play with, and I’m like, “I don’t, I don’t see a problem with this.” So, like, all my brothers would be like, “Dude, I’m not playing with you simply because I’m not a girl, I’m a guy and I don’t do that.” It’s like, “Well, why not?”

This prompted Yanika to tell a similar story in which her younger brothers policed her older brother for playing with her:

*YANIKA:* I also have five brothers. . . . And I have two sisters. And so my older bro—my eldest brother—would be the one that played with me, and then my younger brothers would tease my older brother, saying that, like, “Oh, but you have a girlfriend and you can’t do that,” or something along those lines.
Dr. B.: So they were the gender police?

YANIK: Yeah. . . . So like everybody’s, like, policing.

Students told stories of parents getting boys, particularly feminine boys, “in so much trouble,” in Vic’s words, for playing with girls, playing with dolls, and painting their nails.

Girls, too, were policed by their parents, not when they were young, but when they became older. Terry, who identified as straight, cis, and white, shared this story:

When I was little my mom was all for, like, “everything is pretty much gender neutral.” But then I got older, and then right after sophomore year, when I cut my hair, she was—like, I started doing the same things I did when I was little, but then she was like, “Why do you want to be a boy?” And I’m like, “This isn’t new. What do you mean? Because I cut my hair I want to be boy?” . . . Sometimes my mom will still be like, “Can you try to look like a girl.” And I’m like, “What do you mean?”

As students shared these accounts, they critiqued their family members for policing gender by saying things like “I don’t see the problem” and asking things like “What do you mean?” In doing so, they moved away from family members who policed gender, whether it was their own, as in Terry’s account, or that of their siblings, as in Carter’s and Yanika’s stories. They moved away from parental gender policing even when they themselves were not being policed or when they were even though they identified as cisgender. In doing so, they protected themselves from the potential damage such policing can cause.

Students also critiqued their families for their lack of knowledge of sexual and gender identities. Often parents thought their children’s sexual identities were phases. According to Darby, who identified as cisgender, when she came out as gay to her mother, her mother assumed it was a phase. Darby said, “She was like, ‘Oh, well, now that you go to that school, this is just, like, a fad. This is just, like, a popularity thing. You just want to be a part of it.’” She rejected her mom’s understanding. Then, later, when found herself attracted to a boy, she told her mother, “‘Oh, I think I like this boy.’ She was like, ‘Oh, I told you it was just a phase.’” Darby reported trying to explain to her mother, “‘It is not just
that I like one or the other. There is room in between to like both, or there are so many different spectrums than just black and white on this. She was like, ‘Oh, so what? You want to become a boy now, too?’ I was like, ‘Mom, you are being rude about it.’ She does not—she is trying, but she does not really get that there is more than a black and white spectrum of it.” Darby acknowledged that this was a “hard concept to grasp” for her mother, who asked, “Well, what is that called?” to which Darby replied, “Read a book, Mom.” Darby critiqued her mother for her lack of knowledge about sexual identities, particularly her sexual identity, which, by the way, was not bisexual or pansexual but rather “unidentified” because she “just like[s] who [she] like[s].” Her critique was evident when she said, about her mother, “She does not really get” it and when she told her to “read a book.” With such comments, Darby moved away from her mother and what she experienced as her mother’s ignorance, thus protecting herself from it.

Katherine, who identified as bisexual and white, also critiqued her parents for their ignorance with respect to sexual identities. She said,

Sometimes [my parents] say things that kind of are insulting to me or like weird, like almost homophobic without realizing it, you know? . . . So it’s not like they’re doing it on purpose. But I remember really clearly, I came home and I was chilling on the couch, watching TV, [and talking about Mac and Joan], and my parents were in the room. They were like, “You know what? You need some straight friends.” I got mad too because I was like, “I don’t need straight friends. Like, that’s not what I’m looking for in a friend; it doesn’t matter to me if you’re an LGBT or straight.” Like, it shouldn’t matter, but they got so mad; they’re like, “You need to do things like go to straight bars.”

At this point, everyone in the class started laughing. I said, sarcastically, “You’ll never find a man if you don’t have any straight friends,” and I asked, “Are they at all concerned that you’d be going to bars?” And Yanika suggested that was not what “normal parents” would tell their kids to do. Here, Katherine certainly provided an effective example of how her parents were sometimes ignorantly and passionately homophobic. Her example was so effective that others in the class joined Katherine in her critique.

Katherine, months later, described her parents as not only ignorant but actively dismissive, particularly of her bisexual identity. She told the
class about coming out to them, about explaining that it was not a phase and that she wanted to be respected as bisexual. She then explained their reaction:

**Katherine:** And they do this thing where parents are like, “Oh, okay,” you know? And they kind of just sweep it aside like, “Oh, okay. Sure.”

**Ann:** Pat you on the head a little?

**Katherine:** Yeah, and say, “Oh, you silly teenager, you.” And they kind of, you know, like, let it go, but, you know, I’ll say things like, “Oh, I think she’s really attractive,” and my mom will be like, “Oh, yeah. Well, she’s a woman to look up to and, you know, to respect.”

**Dr. B.:** She just reframes in a way that works for her, yeah.

**Katherine:** Right, you know, I’m just admiring her because I think she is a strong woman, not because I think she’s, you know—I don’t want to be shallow, but I think she’s beautiful and I think she has a nice personality and I think I would, you know, like, date her. And my parents will kind of get kind of quiet when I say, “Oh, I think she’s really pretty. You know, I would love to date her,” and my parents get really quiet. Whenever I say it about a guy, my mom’s like, “Oh, yeah, he’s cute!” and I’m like, you know, it doesn’t really match, so I think they’re trying to kind of make sense of it in a way, that I’m not really bisexual and I’m just confusing my feelings with admiring women.

**Dr. B.:** Yeah, that’s what it sounds like.

**Katherine:** It’s kind of distancing—this refusal to kind of accept it and try to put it on something else. It really gets on my nerves.

Here, Katherine explicitly named the movement away from her parents as they refused to accept her sexual identity. Katherine’s movement away is
not solely of her own doing; by refusing to accept her, her parents push her away from them.

Ann, who identified as homoromantic, cis, and white, immediately connected to Katherine’s story, saying, “I think there’s a big, big difference between accepting despite and accepting because.” I thought I heard the connection, but I wasn’t sure, so I asked her to say more. She referred to herself “as the official gay delegation in [her] family,” and said,

The thing is, there are people who can accept you, but they’re not going to actually care about that part of you. It’s the whole “Love the sinner, hate the sin” thing, which I totally supported at a point in my life, when I had no idea. I had some idea, but I was terrified of it—to acknowledge my own homoromantic-ness. And there’s this feeling that if you accept them despite of it, it’s going to change someday. Like, if you can just love them hard enough, you’ll love the gay away. And then “accepting because” is where you look at this person and you look at all of them and you go, “Okay, I love you because of who you are, not despite who you are.” I think before I acknowledged myself—exactly how queer I am—I didn’t realize what a huge part of someone’s identity it is. . . . So, it sort of made sense to me that you could love someone despite—you really can’t.

Ann had clearly moved on the issue; she had moved away from homophobic ideas. Similarly, in September, students laughed with Katherine about her parents, but later, in December, Ann responded personally and somberly. Again, she moved. In both September and December, Katherine moved farther away from her parents, not alone but with her classmates. Across these accounts, students’ awareness that their understandings of gender and sexuality were less finite than those of their family members distanced them from those family members, at least during these moments in time. This distancing limited future opportunities for connecting with family.

Understanding Parents

After Katherine expressed her frustration with Arin’s mom for not listening to her child before he became suicidal, discussed above, Vic, who
identified as lesbian, cis, and Black, explained, drawing on a lesson her mother taught her. She said,

My mom explained this to me, a couple of years ago or something like that, how like, when most people have kids, they judge how their kids are going to be. Like if you hear you're going to have a girl, you're like, “I'm going to do this; I get to dress her up like [indecipherable]” and stuff like that, and that's probably what his mom had envisioned for him when like he was born as a girl. So like, it's kind of like really traumatic on the parent part, because [indecipherable], “I really love having a young girl, but, like, I need to like get used to this,” because you know, it's like, now you [indecipherable]; it's like, “If you don't listen to me, I'm going to die.” And that's probably how she felt, so it's just like really—it was really emotional.

Here, Vic moved toward parents of trans kids with the help of her mother. I affirmed Vic's account, saying, “You do hear parents talk about going through a period of mourning or loss. I have to give up my son in order to raise my daughter. Instead of just being, I love my child.” Katherine had no patience for this, saying, “Your child is your child. It shouldn't matter. Male or female, she's still your child. I mean, you love them, but it's like, mourning? . . . I feel like it's too much. Too much.” Others, however, seemed to respect Arin’s patience with his mother's grief as he transitioned. I had expressed appreciation that Arin “showed that he wasn't just resentful. But that he could see her love for him in those struggles” with his transition, and Mac pointed to a particular place in the book to illustrate that:

It was also kind of like that when he was going in to get his top surgery, chilling in [indecipherable] where—she was saying, or, like, thinking, and he didn't want to, like, talk about how stoked he was to finally have top surgery . . . he's like, you know, “I'm going to let her think about it because this is kind of like the final step. Almost. And, like, this real for her, so I don't want to gloat in her face about how excited I am while she's kind of, like, grieving.”

Then Vic said, “Like, he was like really, really, like, understanding of his mom.” Similarly, Mac noted that Arin was patient with his mother when
he said “I got to give her time,” and Mac respected that “a lot.” Although I would not argue that Mac and Vic understood the mother’s grief, they did respect and maybe even admire Arin’s ability to understand his mother’s grief. Even so, by reflecting on the potential grief of parents of trans children, Vic moved closer to those parents, whereas Katherine moved farther away from them. Vic was opening the possibilities of connection, while Katherine was conveying an intolerance for transphobia.

Students did seem to understand, however, parents’ fear, and in doing so they moved closer to them. When the third-semester class was reading and discussing *Beyond Magenta*, which I describe in chapter 2, the students talked about Christina, who is a trans Latina featured in the book. Khalil, who was gay, embodied gender expansiveness, and identified as multiracial, expressed frustration that Christina’s mom “wants Christina to keep her chin down.” He says, “If she keeps her chin up, it makes her feel more comfortable and confident. . . But if she had to keep her chin down it makes her look like she’s not comfortable with being who she is.” He acknowledged that “she wanted her to hide her Adam’s apple” but was still worried about the impact on Christina. Kristy, however, worked to consider Christina’s mother’s point of view, not only with respect to Christina as a trans woman but also with respect to Christina’s brother, who is gay. She said,

She’s so afraid, like—I don’t even think it’s that they’re gay or transsexual. It’s that they can be hurt and that someone else who’s going to find out is going to hurt them. And I think that’s like what a lot of the moms’ motives are. She may have had a problem with it at the beginning, but like I think another part of it really was that a lot of people didn’t agree with it at the time, so she was afraid that her kids were going to walk out the door and get, like, beat up or something, like how Christina was punched in the face. And I think, like, that honestly was what caused a lot of her, like, reactions most of the time.

Kristy understood the mother’s fear when reading about it in *Beyond Magenta* and was able to articulate it to the class. In understanding Christina’s mother’s fear, she moved closer to her. By reflecting on the potential grief of parents of trans children, Kristy moved closer to those parents, whereas Khalil moved farther away from them, again show a tension between the desire to connect and the refusal to tolerate transphobia.
There were also times when students worked to understand their own parents’ fear, but in the case of their own parents this reflection helped them move closer to them. In an interview just weeks before Khalil critiqued Christina’s mother, he defended his mother for similar actions.

Khalil: I finally became comfortable. I’m like, “Look, I’m gonna wear skinny jeans, I’m gonna have mascara on.” . . . I decided just do my full face and go downstairs to my mom and be like, “Look.” . . . She’s like, “You’re almost eighteen”; I was like, “I know, I have less than a month now.” So she was like, “You do whatever you want,” and then she told me, “Don’t wear it on the [local public] bus.”

Dr. B.: What do you think that’s about?

Khalil: She don’t want nobody hurting me, and I was like, “Okay,” and so I now—

Dr. B.: She wants you to be safe. . . .

Khalil: —Yeah. So she gave me pepper spray, so I have that on me at all times.

Here, Khalil’s mother moved closer to him by recognizing and accommodating his independence, but Khalil also moved closer to her by recognizing and accommodating her concern. Thus, when it came to his own parent, Khalil prioritized moving closer and opening up possibilities of connection.

As the only parent in the room, I sometimes provoked such movement toward parents, including of me toward my own. In one of our conversations about Arin Andrews and Katie Rain Hill, I said, “There’s an issue around safety, too. So like, I know, and this was a long time ago, I came out—or the year after was the year Matthew Shepard was murdered, and so for my mom, well she was very conservative, and so she had all sorts of issues, but, but, to also be like, ‘I am afraid you’re going to get hurt. I want you to have an easy life; this is going be a harder life.’” After I shared this, several students told stories about their parents’ concern for their safety as queer youth. Katherine, for example, acknowledged that when she was “hanging out with [Mac],” her parents were “so worried that since . . . I was around them, and we were dating, and we’re not a
straight couple, that, you know, I’m going to be targeted for a hate crime. They were just, they were so [indecipherable], so cautious.” Katherine was annoyed, as indicated by her next statement: “and like, to me, my parents were just so hyperfocused on that one thing.” Still, she moved closer to her parents as she noted their worry. Thus, like Khalil, Katherine prioritized moving closer and opening up possibilities of connection when in relation to her own parents.

Similarly, Vic, who identified as gay, said, “Whenever I go out on dates . . . before I walk out the door, [my mom is] always like, ‘No holding hands. No, like, [indecipherable], no kissing,’ and stuff like that.” Vic, like Katherine, also expressed her annoyance, saying, “She thinks I’m like going to like make out in public. I’m not that kind of kid.” She went on to say, however, “I can understand where they come from, I guess. But my mom thinks—my mom sees the world very negatively; she’s like kind of negative. So I think that’s why she’s so scared about everything.” According to Yanika, her father seemed to share the same kind of concern for Yanika’s sister when she started dating a woman, but instead of telling her not to display affection publicly he said, “All right, time to teach you how to box.” In this way, Yanika’s father encouraged his daughter not to hide herself from homophobes but to be able to defend herself against them. Through sharing these stories, students worked to understand their own parents and, in doing so, moved themselves and one another closer to them.

As students worked to understand parents represented in the books we read and discussed together, they would sometimes pull closer to them and other times push farther away from them, but when it came to working to understand their own parents students were much more likely to pull closer to them, and sometimes, particularly in the case of Khalil, this pulling closer also provoked parents to pull closer to their children as well. As a parent myself, this pulling closer was something I tended to encourage. Such movement opened up a future of possible encounters in which students could maintain their dignity in their identities and share intimate relationships with their parents, simultaneously.

Appreciating Parents

Students also moved closer to parents—both in literature and in their lives—by appreciating when they were kind, loving, affirming, open to
learning about their children, and standing up for them. In the second-semester class, for example, we had read the first section of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) and were discussing the following journal prompt: “Select a character. Describe his/her personality. Point to the places in the novel that let you know this is his/her personality.” Several students wrote about parents. Carter, for example, wrote about Dante’s father, who is an academic. She described him as “kind understanding honest thoughtful.” She gave examples from the book of each of these traits and then said, “He seems really chill. Really nice.” Ann and Yanika wrote about Ari’s mother, who is a teacher. Ann said, “She’s primarily driven by love for her son.” Yanika said, “Lily seems like just [a] very loving mother.” Being kind and loving were qualities that, of course, drew students to parents, at least to those in the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*.

Students also valued when parents explicitly affirmed their children. For example, when we were talking about Arin’s mother learning to affirm him in *Some Assembly Required* (Andrews, 2014), Hilary said, “I just want to, like, point something out. It was, like, my favorite part . . . when his mom, like, finally, like—was like 100 percent, I feel like, on it, because she was like taking him to, like, counseling and, like, was finally letting him get his hair cut, and like right after he got his hair cut, like he, she let him, like, change his name. I thought that was really, like, sweet of him—I mean, of her—to do that.” That this was Hilary’s “favorite part” of the book strikes me as important. This was clear movement toward Arin’s mother, particularly since there was so much ire toward her earlier. Yanika, too, said her “favorite part” of *If You Could Be Mine* (Farizan, 2013) was when the Sahar’s father starts getting treatment for his depression and “starts coming back.” Neither of these “favorite parts” were momentous ones in their respective books, but seeing parents affirm and support their children mattered to some students, resulting in them moving closer to those parents.

Also of significance were the times when parents stuck up for their children. We talked about this in the third semester in relation to Christina’s story in *Beyond Magenta*. Christina has been “punched . . . in the face” (Kuklin, 2014, p. 68), and her mother approached a group of men

---

1. If I were writing this prompt now, I would use “their” instead of “his/her,” as supported by the National Council of Teachers of English’s *Statement on Gender and Language* (DesPrez et al., 2018).
who she believed included the one who assaulted her daughter, and she walked right up to him and “told him off” (p. 68). Ultimately the man confesses, and his friends tell her, “Don’t worry ma’am. From now on, we’re going to have respect for her. We’re going to watch out for her’” (Kuklin, 2014, p. 68). Khalil said, “I feel like everybody could relate to the story, whether you’re trans, gay, or not, because this part, her mom went to go defend her not knowing what could happen, she still did it anyway.” Students valued loving and affirming parents in the books we read and discussed, and they also valued parents who stood up for their children. This valuing resulted in their moving closer to these parents.

Students appreciated the same efforts in their own parents. One way that they reported their parents showed they cared was by learning from them. Mac, for example, said that their parents had “never been exposed to anyone who’s transgender,” so they try to model appropriate behavior for their parents, and when their parents ask about why Mac does what they do, Mac answers their questions. They reported,

> When I talk about my gender-fluid friends and I say “they,” they’re like, “Wait, they?” And I’m like, “Yeah, they. That’s, like, a pronoun that they use.” And especially my mom, she’s like, “That doesn’t make sense because *they* is not a pronoun.” And I’m like, “Mom, it is. You don’t have to understand. You just have to, like, accept it and use the right pronoun, even if you [don’t] understand. Just have enough respect to use the right pronoun.” And she tries. She does. Like, when my friends come over, she tries to use the pronouns that, you know, they want. She’ll ask.

Here, Mac indicated that they valued their mother trying to be respectful to their gender-fluid friends, whether or not she understood. Hilary also talked about teaching her parent to be respectful were she to have “a transgender friend come over.” She explained that she would “tell him what the right pronouns are,” but she worried that he would “slip up a lot.” She said she would “give him a death look” until he modified his behavior. Although Mac told their story as if based on actual events from the past and Hilary told hers based on hypothetical events in the future, both represented their parents as people with whom they can talk and whom they can even educate. As such, they pulled their parents closer to
them as they taught or imagined teaching them to be respectful of trans people, particularly their friends.

Students further valued when their parents’ learning was followed by affirmation. Khalil told stories about his mother and father not “really understanding everything” but eventually his mother “help[ing him] through it” and his “biggest supporters” being his sister; stepfather, whom he calls Dad; and best friends. His dad supported him by talking explicitly about his experience of Khalil’s gender expressions. Khalil said, “Just the other day, my dad was like, ‘What do you go by? Because me and your mom was talking about this the other night and . . . I don’t know what to call you, and I don’t want to make a mistake.’” By explicitly asking Khalil about his gender pronouns and stating that he did not want to “make a mistake,” Khalil’s dad showed his support of him. Also, Khalil’s parents affirmed him through their support of a drag performance. Khalil reported that his mom attended his performance and was really proud of him. Jenna said, “She was in the crowd, she was going wild.” Khalil agreed, “Yeah she was a mess.” His dad could not attend, but, after the event, Khalil said, “He was like, ‘I heard about the drag show, da-da-da-da-da’; he was all happy.” That his parents’ support was of consequence to him was evident when he said, in the same interview, “Well, I’m taking my stepdad’s last name.” This was a clear indication of Khalil moving closer to his parents.

Just as students appreciated when parents in the books we read and discussed stood up for their kids, they valued when their own parents stood up for them. In fact, when Khalil praised Christina’s mother for standing up for Christina in Beyond Magenta, Delilah said this scene reminded her of her mom, and she proudly told a story about her mom confronting the mother of a girl who started a fight with Delilah. Similarly, as you will recall from the previous chapter, Khalil talked about when his family started going to a church that they really liked. He said, “When I first went there, I was gay but I wasn’t fully out to everybody.” His family knew, but the church leaders did not. Because he “loved it” and because he was a “little church boy,” he decided “to keep [his] secret in.” He described the pastor as like a “grandfather to me,” and he said he “loved” the pastor’s wife, but then the pastor’s wife started “trying to take the demons out of [him].” According to Khalil, she said, “If you’re going to still contribute to this lifestyle, you can’t be here.” So he said to himself, “I can’t do this.” Then he told his mother about it, and “she was just like, ‘we’re going to stop going there because I’m not going to have somebody belittle my son all the time!’” In these parents’ acts of standing
Moving across Differences

up for their children, as reported in our class discussions, parents moved closer to their children and their children moved closer to their parents, achieving a sort of familial intimacy, at least for particular moments in time. These moments opened up the possibility of future moments in time in which LGBTQ+ and ally youth could have their identities and values not only recognized but honored and protected by their parents, bringing them closer together through love and respect.

Ethical Movement with Respect to Families in Classroom Encounters

There were parents who would not allow their children to be in the class; or, even if they let them take the class, they would not allow them to participate in this study; or, even if they let them participate, they worried that I was essentially trying to recruit them into being gay. But the sexual and gender identities of the students did not hinge on our reading and discussion of LGBTQ+-themed literature. However, their ability to talk with their families about these identities and to understand their parents' concerns about these identities often did increase, and often with my encouragement. Thus, our reading and discussion of LGBTQ+-inclusive literature moved students closer to their parents and families, at least in some moments in time.

Sometimes parents pushed their children away from them, like Bruce in Fun Home. Other times young people moved themselves away from parents and family members who were ignorant about their sexual and gender identities, dismissed them, or failed to respect them or take them seriously. They also moved away from parents and family members who policed their gender or loved them despite who they were rather than because of who they were. Even so, students also talked about really trying to understand parents in literature and in their lives who mourned for the idea of who they thought their children would be and who deeply feared their children would be hurt for who they actually were. This moved students closer to parents, as did when they experienced parents—again in literature and in their lives—loving their children, learning about their children, affirming them, and standing up for them.

Whether students moved toward parents or away from them is not an indication of whether the encounters were ethical. I understand both the movement away from parents and the movement toward parents as
ethical because the young people were listening, paying attention, taking responsibility, and asserting themselves while they moved. They moved away from parents to protect themselves; they moved toward parents to connect with them. Sometimes they moved back and forth. Such movement might seem counterproductive, but it’s not; it’s complicated, to be sure, but movement in both directions was needed, and is needed, to make the familial relationships both respectful of the young people’s identities and values and loving between parents and children. Such respect and love are imperative for the familial relationships to be ethical. And the movement required to make the familial relationships ethical demanded great agility, particularly from the young people.