

Disrupting the Present: An Autobiographical Narrative of Educational Angst

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Abstract

This paper offers a narrative account of my ‘journey’ in graduate studies and was first presented at the University of British Columbia’s Faculty of Education’s Annual Graduate Student Retreat in February 2008. Examining the gap that exists between the time of one’s experience in education and the time of narrating that experience, this paper questions whether those of us who inhabit a place called higher education can claim to know what education is. It offers a means for thinking through the complexities and the ‘queerness’ of the time of education through personal journal reflections that highlight the shifting relations between past and present, and that hold tight the tensions which exist between the processes of reconstruction, interpretation, and narration.

Introduction

The Question of Education

What difference might it make to the stories we tell as graduate students about the lives we live now in education if we were to begin to think of education not as a place (an institution or a faculty), an instrument (of socialization, social justice, or self and cultural transformation), or as a quality (of certainty, mastery, or control), but rather – and this is bound to seem contradictory and illogical to some – as a question? My interest in thinking about education as something that exceeds consciousness and intentionality, and that therefore can neither be “measured as success or failure, nor reduced to an authoritative order of compliance and non-compliance” (Britzman, 2003a, p.1) develops not only from my history of a sustained and impassioned intellectual engagement with psychoanalytic theory, but also from my own defensiveness at feeling subjected to questions while I have worked diligently, though, for the most part, ignorantly, to become a subject in education.

The recent and developing concern (Pitt, Robertson, & Todd, 1998) for thinking psychoanalytically about the difficulties of education has historical roots in the work of Sigmund Freud and his conceptualization of education as something that carries psychical consequences.¹ Writing *Civilization and its Discontents* in the late 1920s, between the devastating and traumatic time of the World Wars, Freud worried about the harshness of life for children and considered that the essential duty of education was to prepare students for experiences of hostility and violence. Having made his important discovery of the unconscious years earlier, however, Freud knew that education, despite its wishes, could never in reality be so deliberate, for just as students were subjected to wars waged from the outside, so were they affected by their own inner wars and the antagonisms at the root of psychic life.

Psychoanalysis, Education, and Trauma

In examining the implications of psychoanalysis for education, Freud noted a certain unpredictability and resistance that characterized the human, and he viewed these qualities as working against education's aim of mastery as well as its presumptions about the certainty and fixity of knowledge and time. How could knowledge be conceived simply as a straightforward trajectory from ignorance to enlightenment, he wondered, when ignorance itself indicated not so much absence of knowledge but its negation, a kind of wilful forgetting or turning away? How could the paradox and the precocity of unconscious knowledge, of refusing to know what one already knows, unsettle conventional framings of time in education, which presupposed that knowledge was necessary to preparation? How, marvelled Freud, could anyone prepare for what was already there?² These questions, rooted as they were in psychoanalytic reflections on the traumatic nature of knowledge and the ways in which encounters with knowledge often provoke a crisis in meaning that leaves a person feeling at variance with their perceptions of self, others, and society, would then open up new questions for education about the difficulties of learning posed by the unruliness of psychical life. In understanding education not just in terms of the social, as a problem of self/other relations, but also as a quality of psychical reality, and so as shaped by the conflicts within both the learner and the teacher, conventional definitions would be placed at stake.

When Freud wondered about the capacity for psychoanalysis to interfere with education's "ordinary modes of thought" (Britzman, 1998a, p. 54), and thus to conceive of knowledge not as a solution but a problem, plagued by uncertainty and inapplicability, he proposed an intriguing and novel idea for further investigation. Indeed, more than a century later, it is apparent that his questions, however unlikely, have inspired intellectuals both in education and psychoanalysis. As educational scholars Pitt, Robertson, and Todd (1998) suggest, one obvious indication of the extent of psychoanalysis's influence on contemporary education concerns not so much its preoccupation with questions of how one learns to engage critically with educational concepts, theories, and practices, but the new persistent focus on how "one learns to think beyond one's means, to continually push against the horizons of [self] understanding" (Pitt et al., p. 3). If one of the predominant ways of thinking about education today is, as they suggest, "a field of perpetual inquiry into the conditions of teaching and learning and what it is we mean by those terms" (Pitt et al., p. 3), then we may feel reasonably assured that education has begun the slow work of acknowledging its debt to psychoanalysis.

“In psychoanalysis, at least,” Adam Phillips observes, “answers are not a cure for questions” (1996, p. 3). Indeed, if in this paper, which itself is an attempt to think psychoanalytically about the conflictive and uncertain experiences of education, I ask whether we might also imagine education as a place of questions rather than answers, I am, not surprisingly, reminded of the determination with which many of us in education hold onto our claims to knowledge as a means to defend against ignorance and the anxiety of not knowing. In thinking about my own history of being educated as a graduate student generally and as a doctoral student at the Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry specifically – through my experience of the comprehensive exam process last spring, and the writing of my dissertation and research which promises to bring me closer to the status of an ‘expert’ – I have the curious sense of being persecuted by questions. The first of these transports me back in time to the days of my undergraduate studies and then of my Master’s, and thus animates the anxiety that no amount of explaining can either assuage the sense of desperation that underlies the desire to know, or settle the distress made when understanding breaks down: “But what *is* women’s studies?” The second: “Why AIDS?” asked repeatedly, and not uncommonly, with incredulity, by my fellow graduate students when they learn of my dissertation research topic in education, disables my wish that one’s research bear no relation to one’s subjectivity, and so impossibly, that the problem of implication be the problem of others.³

While I intend to stay close to these questions and invoke the importance of thinking about my journey in education as that which has occurred partly in excess of deliberate planning, I also mean to unsettle the sense of familiarity that attaches to and secures commonplace notions of education – to ask, in other words: “But what *is* education?” Delineating my journey as a set of journal entries that offer reflections on the development of some of my more persistent theoretical preoccupations, my paper seeks to investigate a particular problematic which, in the words of Ross Chambers (2004), serves to “strangify the familiar” (p. 331) of education. If despite having literally grown up in education, first as a student of the Montessori school and then as subject to the public school system and to many years of the university, I feel now, as a student whose academic location at the Centre of Cross-Faculty Inquiry is expressly interdisciplinary, that I am an ‘outsider’ in education, should I not at this point be curious, confused, and doubtful enough to ask: “But what, finally, is education?”

Deborah Britzman’s (2003b) incisive, compelling, and frequently startling inquiry into the intersections of psychoanalysis and education opens the definition of education to incorporate “events that resist but nonetheless shape education, such as not learning, ignorance, aggression, and even phantasies” (p. 8). Finding pleasure in thinking about the ambiguities of education “as a dynamic, as a sort of borderline concept, something in-between, and made from that strange combination of movements in knowledge, in the teacher, in the students, and in institutional settings,” Britzman (1998a, p. 53) focuses her attention on the unusual concept of an “after-education.” She then pursues its significance by reflecting on the question: “What is education that it may need an afterward?” (Britzman, 2003b, p. 5) “Long after events have occurred,” she suggests, “nagging thoughts remain to repeat what the event left unresolved” (p. 21). Something happened – a mistake, a crisis, a failure, an attraction, a disappointment, a missed opportunity, a close encounter (with knowledge, with desire, with another) – in

education, and it is “after-education” (2003b) – that “new work of constructing one’s history of education after the experience of education” (p. 4) – that opens up a space for confronting the aftermath, for making significance, for engaging in what Freud (1915) might describe as the interminable act of “working through” and what most of us might call, simply, learning.

Psychoanalysis advances the unconventional view that education occurs at a time when it is too early for anyone to rely on understanding. As such, “our curiosity is precocious, tied not to understanding but to desire” (Britzman, 1998a, p. 54). In the crisis that is education, in which “events, both actual and imagined are forcibly felt before they can be known” (Britzman, 2003b, p. 7), the learner, prompted by her susceptibilities to her own instincts perhaps (the demand for love for example) and to ideas and to people, and anticipating an event which, in retrospect, she will come to recognize as learning, attempts something before she understands. The story that results – we might call it an autobiographical narrative of a life in education – will then carry the deferred effects of that later knowledge and so also “the idea that events might have turned out differently, and if interpreted differently, might still be capable of changing the subject’s understanding of her life and herself (La Capra, 1983, King, 2000, p. 23).

If from all of this, then, it should seem that our personal narratives of education bear the burden of too heavy a responsibility, it is not that they should have to submit to the impossible demand to ‘get it all right.’ Rather, if we consider the essential project of autobiography as existing at the interchange of two narrative dynamics: one that is a form of retrospection and thus subject to gaps and distortions in memory and the other an exploration of the present time of narration and thus an inquiry into one’s identity at the moment of writing,⁴ then our best hope for the narrative may be that it offer simply an imperfect and unceasing translation.

We are never done learning and hence neither are we finished with the story that organizes our perception of what that experience entails or articulates our wish for what it might still become. After the experience of education, there remains the problem of constructing significance and interpretation. But whether we have the words, we have lost the words, we have too few words, or we have no capacity for words at all, it will be the work of narration that creates the space for thinking and for signification and that enables the question, “in what sense have we been educated at all?”

Autobiographical Narratives of Education

August 24, 2006

I had a lovely meeting over lunch with Q. today. Much of our time was spent going over the logistics of scheduling the comps, discussing the details as well as my thoughts and feelings about particular readings. I told him I am feeling relieved to have finally moved away from the theoretical readings and on to a section on fiction and memoir. Even now I’m not sure in what sense, precisely, I am relieved (maybe what I meant was released? Sometimes language only takes us further a-field). In any case I’m anxious and uncertain about the relative ease with which I feel I am handling these stories. These are not just stories, I remind myself. They are people’s lives and also their deaths.

In the midst of this, there is something else. He asks a question that, although well known to me by now, still manages to throw me for a loop. “I forget,” he says, “how is it that you became interested in AIDS again?” Immediately, I am suspicious without quite knowing why, of his claim to forgetfulness. It comes too quickly, almost instinctively, I think, and for this reason feels defensive. Also, I am confused by the sudden realization that our conversation has inexplicably taken on a new focus, that the shift from a prior moment in which we discussed our lives and interests equally and with candour has been effected by his skilful manipulation. As one of the most eloquent and committed proponents of psychoanalysis in education today, he knows as well as anyone that in psychoanalytic views there is nothing innocent about forgetting. Thus I wonder, why is he claiming to forget what we both know he already knows? His denial, having been expressed to me on at least two other occasions, now carries a sting which feels like aggression.

I think of the closing chapter of Edmund White’s autobiography, *My Lives*. It begins: “I think of all the ways I could have written this book.” I am aware that my account of my developing interest in AIDS, the way in which I piece the details together, the parts I remember, the occurrences I leave out – today – will constitute an entirely different (but no less true or real) story from the ones I told before. Still, these multiple stories must not be interpreted as the cause of his forgetting. Educators, in my view, are only too aware of the ways in which, for students, issues of suffering can be both depressing and debilitating. Certainly, there is nothing easy about studying AIDS, yet these problems are made even more complex when educators disavow their own difficulties of engagement.⁵

For an instant, I long to be one of those graduate students, well trained and rehearsed in the formalities of student/faculty functions, who serves up what seems an instantly prepared, easily digestible, and prettily packaged description of research interests. Alas, I am not so well trained and neither are my interests so easily condensed, facts that make me happy if confused at times, and others uncomfortable. It is not inconsequential either that in my most inspired work I consider myself a student of psychoanalytic theory. In analytic views, thinking and learning proceed not in linear fashion but rather through a series of deferrals, breakthroughs, leaps, returns – accidents and collisions of thought, really. I am always trying to listen for the other, the stranger within, what Freud (1915) called ‘the unconscious,’ paying attention to the slips, the fragments, the dreams, the jokes, the strange address. These are the clues that take me closer to where I need to be, to what I imagine as the space inside my research.

I pause, reaching for an answer. “I think I came to AIDS first through the literature and the films,” I say, not at all convinced or satisfied that this is the story I want to tell. I remember seeing Marlon Riggs’s work, his films *No Regrets* and *Tongues Untied* in a course on feminist theory during the second year of my undergrad. And then after that, the brilliant and complex writings by Lee Edelman, Bill Haver, Leo Bersani, Andre Garcia Duttman, Douglas Crimp, Simon Watney. Yes, and Eve Sedgwick. Especially Eve Sedgwick. I wonder why I’ve chosen to list my influences in this order. It’s absurd, really, but today I feel like I’ve somehow gotten it wrong. Wasn’t it Sedgwick who wrote *White Glasses*, the beautiful essay, a memorial really, about her friendship with the writer Michael Lynch who died of AIDS? Wasn’t this the first real piece of writing that gave me a language that allowed me to think coherently about the passionate work of identifications, about the importance of “releasing identification from the agonies of ontology” (Britzman, 2003b, p. 147), about creating a relation between gays and lesbians, men and women, the healthy and the ill, that can take its residence “in the ontological crack between the living and the dead” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 257). Yes, it was this, and also the friends I have known and loved, and my previous life doing a Master’s at York University in Toronto, and the sometimes unendurable homesickness for that city I have experienced since moving to Vancouver, a longing that could not be satisfied at first even by revisiting the place. I want to tell Q. that his question makes me tired, that there is something so intensely personal about this work – my work – and my reasons for choosing it, that I still need time for thinking.⁶

The Queer Time of Education: Learning as Belated

March 27, 2007

Still too close to having finished my comprehensives perhaps to be able to close the gap between the experience and recounting its meaning, the one persistent thought I have, ten days after the fact, is what *was* that? And yet, as this is the first time since the exam that actually feel I am able to open my mouth to speak without unintentionally eliciting some sort of terrifying primal scream, I may as well use it to my advantage and try to figure something out about what happened. What did happen? To say that the experience was an exercise in humiliation provokes secret, and to be sure, sardonic, inner laughter because, well, what an extraordinary understatement. During the roughly ten years I have spent immersed in the strange and not uncommonly cruel world of academia,

I have had, just every so often, the profound and startling experience of a terrific discovery, a reckoning of sorts – what some might call, though perhaps a bit boldly and assuredly for my tastes, an enlightenment. The comprehensive exam represents one such experience, for the new, revelatory piece of information it supplied, the unexpected gift of knowledge it bestowed, so immense and stunning as to be in almost every respect beyond my capacity for belief, confirmed the very thing that I have long, only half-consciously suspected to be true: I am a most exquisite masochist.

An unusual choice of adjective, I know, to describe what, for Freud, represented possibly the most pronounced and intriguing type of perversion – *exquisite*, the semantics of which are ‘delicate’, ‘beautiful’, and ‘refined’ – seems a bit contradictory or in any

case does little to open up commonplace understandings of a thing that is equated almost invariably, in the homophobic logic of Western culture, with uncontrolled acting out, as well as pathological and even criminal gay sexual promiscuity. But this is precisely it – it is in the disconnect between the adjective and the noun that I make my discovery and so unlock a crucial component of my dissertation and my work on identity and implication.

How might the concept of female perversion, formulated psychoanalytically, as the “normal neurosis” of femininity under patriarchy, and examined in detail by Louise Kaplan (1991, 2000, 2006) in terms of the ways in which women fetishize their own bodies, taking them as objects over which they can exert control and abuse, open up a complex understanding of what some scholars describe as “the lethal character of male homosexuality” (Nunokowa, 1991, p. 311) in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, the so-called ‘age of AIDS’? How might the concept of ‘normal femininity,’ or the female embodiment and expression of such ‘natural’ virtues as passivity, purity, kindness, gentleness, and submission, be interpreted as communicating a sense of self in disrepair, one which, in its compulsive, aggressive urges toward the self-damaging extremes of, for example, dieting, anorexia, and cutting, uncannily parallel the ‘sick’ nature of the stereotyped ‘AIDS infected gay man’ who believes that “sex is worth dying for” (Dean, 2000, p. 168) and hence behaves accordingly?

I have suffered through the two-hour oral examination, the unrelenting interrogation that, clearly, in the view of at least one committee member, was never so focused on my research project, the nature of my theoretical interests, or the development of my arguments, as it was on questions about my own identity, the unspoken but still deafening subtext of which was always: “In what sense is AIDS and the problematic concerning gay male sexuality and illness relevant to a straight, normatively feminine and, dare I say it, *high femme woman*?” (Here, she pauses for dramatic effect and gives a subtle, knowing nod to the ‘insiders’ in the room – but clearly I am not one – who self-identify as queer). “Explain yourself, or be punished.”

I respond with silence. “Oh, really, you have no idea,” I say inside my head, but with anger so seething and palpable that for a second even *she* appears to realize that a line – I don’t know of what; let’s call it decorum – has been crossed. For the truth of it is, my punishment began some time ago in our long, dysfunctional afternoon conversations that consisted mostly of missed meanings, with her holding court in her office, speaking mostly non-stop, and again for the most part incoherently, about her intense commitment to post-structural theories of subjectivity while insisting in the same breath and in her everyday life, however impossibly imagined, on the essentialist construction of her own identity (that is, on the ‘being’ rather than the ‘doing’ of queer); while I listened, just every so often giving the required and to be sure placating nod that signalled, for her, my complicity in the pain she was inflicting. “What is important, don’t you think,” I would finally, at one point, interrupt, sounding a great deal more self-assured than I felt, “is not that anyone might be queer, but that something queer might happen to anyone?” (Britzman, 1998b, p. 91).

“And so, this is what this is?” she retorts, taking in my entire body from head to toe with one long, sweeping, and seductive but still doubtful glance. “Queer happening to you?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I respond, a bit defiantly. “Or maybe you’ve missed the queer happening because you’ve looked too searchingly for your own reflection in me and so been unable to recognize there your own foreignness.”

“Oh, *now* I see the lines along which you must be thinking,” she says, breathing an audible sigh of relief. “Derrida. You do very interesting work with him. You should keep going with that.”

Just like that, our conversation is over. I am offended. She has too quickly recovered, returned to familiar ground, caught up with her fleeting sense of superiority. She has missed the point, or perhaps, more exactly, avoided it. Though never quite allowed to materialize in form, what we had in that moment, I think, was the very beginnings of something like a queer exchange and so the possibility of disrupting what we both imagined as the stable division between teacher and student.

Perhaps looking back at it, it was easier or in a sense more convenient in that moment to think about ‘queer’ as “a sheer positivity” (Britzman, 1998c, p. 216), as being oriented around queer objects – gays and lesbians, for example, than as a social relation where encounters between people can and do often consist in the apprehension, surprise, and uncertainty of what is felt but not yet known or understood. If one of the most radical qualities of sexuality is its mobility, or the way in which it is not contained within or confined to any one body, experience, or place, but travels and moves between and among bodies, spaces, identities, and even disciplines with frequency, and in unanticipated ways, does this not then disable the idea that we might be able to decide, finally, in education, who or what is queer? As “the uninvited guest,” queerness appears “both predictably and unexpectedly – in the student’s body, the teacher’s body, and the curriculum” (Gilbert, 2006, p. 33). But how we choose to receive it, or indeed, whether we even notice it, depends, I think, on how willing we are to confront and endure our own strangeness and to accept difference in others in ways that necessarily and continuously risk the delicate coherence of the self.

Education’s Aftermath

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, for those of us who inhabit the place called education, a place that has intimately and profoundly and yet seldom admittedly been shaped by Freud and his theorizing, there is perhaps nothing quite as curious as the questions psychoanalysis has posed in conceptualizing the work of learning and teaching in education. In challenging education to expand its view of itself as a purely conscious endeavour in which good knowledge and effective practice mitigates the possibility of conflict, and to acknowledge as well the play of the psyche, and the conflicted, aggressive, and out of synch human, psychoanalysis has opened education to uncertainty and to the potential for breakdown.

Following the work of Freud, contemporary scholars such as Shoshana Felman (1992), Deborah Britzman (1996, 1998, 2003, 2004), and Alice Pitt (2003, 2004) propose a new and extraordinary notion of education as crisis. Learning and crisis involve a breakdown of defenses, and, as they appropriately describe it, “knowledge is felt as a force without being secured by meaning and understanding” (Britzman & Pitt, 2004, p. 354). If learning bears a strong resemblance to crisis, then it is precisely because it unsettles and makes strange much of what we think we already know. In those moments of not knowing, or perhaps even, of knowing too much, we are at a loss for words. Yet because the crisis destroys cognitive frameworks for understanding the experience of education, and at the same time can only be worked through after the fact via language, through narratives that connect events to emotional life, then writing has the potential to serve as a powerful means for repairing the effects of that crisis (Salvio, 2007, p. 85). In the reflective space of writing, in which we reacquire our facility of language, we begin to reconstruct the difficult events of education knowing that while suffering may not have been part of the plan, it will always be an intrinsic part of what it means to be human, and so for that reason, necessary to education.

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Endnotes

¹ In their Guest Editors' Notes to a special (Summer 1998) volume of the *Journal for Curriculum Theorizing*, Alice Pitt, Judith Robertson, and Sharon Todd address what they consider to be the important questions of "return and renewal in psychoanalysis and education" (p. 6). Beginning with the observation that despite occupying a presence in *JCT* since the journal's first publication in 1979, psychoanalysis has existed primarily as a backdrop, the editors set out to trace a history of the significance and usefulness of psychoanalysis of and for education. They note the impact of Freud's theorizing on such influential scholars as William Pinar, Madeleine Grumet, Shohana Felman, Deborah Britzman, Jane Gallop, and Peter Taubman, and offer reflections on how their contributions have altered the landscape of contemporary education.

² Britzman, in *After-Education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and Psychoanalytic Histories of Learning* (2003) reflects on this question as she offers an analysis of how Freud's concept of the unconscious shapes and alters what she calls "the time of learning." The unconscious, Britzman argues, here and elsewhere (see 1998a), knows "no time," and as such, is always out of synch with the demands set by both the classroom clock and the lesson plan. For more on this discussion, see as an example, "Some Observations on the Work of Learning: A Discussion Paper for the Centre for Teaching and Learning, York University," *JCT*, Summer 1998.

³ One problematic of my PhD research on HIV/AIDS concerns the important distinction made in psychoanalytic inquiry between questions of application versus implication in knowledge. Precisely because, as Deborah Britzman and Alice Pitt (2003) point out, "there exists a kernel of trauma in the very capacity to know" (p. 756), we must neither presume there is anything easy about knowledge nor conceive of it as a discrete entity to simply be applied. Developing a concept which they call "difficult knowledge," the authors present an understanding of ignorance as the other side of knowledge, and argue that it is merely a defense – a strategic means for refusing to implicate oneself in the pain of what one already knows. In my own work on the difficulties encountered by students in learning about AIDS I have been especially intrigued by Pitt's (2003) observation that "we resist learning precisely where we are most implicated" (p. 6). As such, I have worked, particularly throughout the writing of my comprehensive exams, to envision a pedagogy and to develop a curriculum that would take these difficulties into account. Specifically, I have pursued the questions: How might students' refusals to learn about AIDS help teachers, paradoxically, to enhance the process and improve the conditions for learning about AIDS? What is the relationship and the difference between learning and not learning?

⁴ This intricate conceptualization and articulation of the autobiographical project I owe to my friend and colleague, Bianca Rus, at The University of British Columbia, and her impressive forthcoming PhD dissertation on the entanglements of theory and fiction in the work of Julia Kristeva.

⁵ For an insightful analysis of the psychical challenges HIV/AIDS presents to thinking and the ways in which unacknowledged difficulties and feelings of helplessness and loss get transferred into displays of ambivalence and aggression in the classroom, see Britzman (1998d's) "On Some Psychical Consequences of AIDS Education" in *Queer Theory in Education*. On the topic of difficult knowledge and teacher aggression towards students, see Britzman (2006's) "Notes on the Teacher's Illness," in *Novel Education: Psychoanalytic Studies of Learning and Not Learning*.

⁶ In my PhD dissertation research proposal, prepared in the months following my comprehensive exams, I would begin to explore in detail the personal and at times painful implications of doing this work

on AIDS. Part of what propelled my work in this area, and on the possibilities for psychological identification between gay men who are infected with HIV/AIDS and straight, normatively feminine, 'healthy' women, was an

experience I had while doing research for my literature review where I unexpectedly and inexplicably recognized something of myself in a photograph I came across of the writer Eric Michaels suffering from AIDS. Thus I would write: "How could it be that the man in the photograph, whose work I had not read, and whom personally I knew nothing about, other than the fact that he was clearly dying from AIDS and wanted to demonstrate to his readers, in no uncertain terms, what a body with AIDS looks like and how fearless resistance to such a death might be embodied and performed, seemed so familiar, but in ways that I could not manage to articulate?" (Price, 2007, p. 13). What was I to make of this identification given the persistent confusion of gay and feminine sexualities in North American cultural imaginings of AIDS? But also, who were Eric Michaels and I beyond the identities 'gay man' and 'straight woman'?