

This article was downloaded by: [Masarykova Univerzita v Brne]
On: 12 March 2014, At: 08:13
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tqse20>

Queer outings: uncomfortable stories about the subjects of post-structural school ethnography

Deborah Youdell ^a

^a Institute of Education , University of London , London, UK
Published online: 21 Jan 2010.

To cite this article: Deborah Youdell (2010) Queer outings: uncomfortable stories about the subjects of post-structural school ethnography, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 23:1, 87-100, DOI: [10.1080/09518390903447168](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390903447168)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518390903447168>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Queer outings: uncomfortable stories about the subjects of post-structural school ethnography

Deborah Youdell*

Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK

(Received 16 September 2009; final version received 28 October 2009)

In this paper, I consider the abiding value as well as the limits of queer; navigating the contradictions of a politics and ethnographic practice based on a refutation of an abiding subject; resisting subjectivation and needing recognition; and ‘coming out’ in school ethnography framed by queer theory. The paper moves from the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, borrowing Pillow’s notion of uncomfortable reflexivity and grafting the notion of the uncanny onto post-structurally informed ethnography via the work of Britzman and Delany. In bringing these ideas together, the paper is an exercise in the discomfort provoked by both telling uncertain stories of the sort that are usually left untold about school ethnography and looking for glimpses of the uncanny in and through these. The paper suggests that attempts to engage what ‘escapes’ from or ‘falls away’ in the telling of uncomfortable stories help us to engage what is unspeakable in the normative framing of the school and adult–student relations within them and are a useful reminder of the impossibility of knowing completely or with certainty. This, I suggest, offers useful insights into ethnography and ethnographic writing and reading that we might characterise as ‘after-queer’.

Keywords: subjectivation; ethnography; uncanny

Introduction

In this paper, I consider the practice of ethnographic school research concerned with sexualised subjectivities and underpinned by post-structural theorisations of a subject who is continually in the making. I engage the tensions provoked by taking up a conceptual framework that refutes an abiding subject while at the same time being subject to and by the profound pull of recognisability. In this sense, the paper is an exploration of the abiding value as well as the limits of queer, navigating the contradictions of subjectivation and identification and a politics premised on the refutation of the sexualised subject. To do this I draw on Wanda Pillow’s (2003) work on uncomfortable reflexivity to explore the discomfort provoked by the telling of uncertain stories of the sort that are usually left untold about school ethnography, its subjects and their encounters. In order to explore the possibilities that this tension and discomfort opens up, I make use of the idea of the uncanny – the discomfiting return of the silenced familiar – for writing and reading ethnographic representations. I suggest that just as we cannot escape subjectivations that constitute abiding and authentic sexualised subjects, we cannot fully ‘know’ these

*Email: d.youdell@ioe.ac.uk

subjects/ourselves or the effects of their/our own practices, affectivities or psychic processes. Taking up queer in ethnographic work, whether as a practice, subjectivity or positioning, brings tensions that are productive in their irresolvability and can be usefully augmented by further analytics, such as the uncanny, in the pursuit of an uncomfortable reflexivity.

Doing 'queer'

Michel Foucault's *History of sexuality Volume 1: An introduction* (1990), which I first read in the early 1990s, marks my point of entry into 'queer' and makes queer inseparable, for me, from the work of Foucault and the more recent thinking that has come out of it. In this sense, queer is about interrogating how discourses of sex and sexuality are implicated in processes of subjectivation that constitute subjects who are sexed and sexualised in particular ways. Judith Butler's *Imitation and gender insubordination* (1991) and Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the closet* (1993) are early pieces that demonstrated powerfully for me the illusion of the preceding, unitary, self-knowing and *sexed and sexualised* subject and the way that gay and lesbian identities and identity politics are implicated in the constitution of these subjects. A central project of queer in this framework is resisting these processes through practices that unsettle the meanings of these discourses and deploy other discourses that have been subjugated or disallowed (Butler 1997). The take-up of the name 'Queer' with its history of injury, and its redeployment to make it mean something different in places where it has been injurious or disallowed, is a key aspect of the politics of this thinking. In this way, queer has sometimes been deployed tactically as 'who we are' and has, in some quarters, acted as an interpellation of 'queer subjects' and a call to 'queer lives' (Ahmed 2004). But, in the spirit of the theory that it draws upon, it has not been who we *really* are, because 'who we really are' is rejected by the queer theory that insists instead on practices – the bodies and pleasures of Foucault's imagination (1990). While my work engages questions of subjectivation that reach beyond matters of sexualities, I take up the name 'Queer' here in order to join a citational chain that constitutes the intellectual and political community and hopes to unsettle the wider field that the work is located in (see Youdell 2004a, 2004b, 2006).

The trouble with queer

In *Revisiting bodies and pleasure* (1999), Judith Butler argues that the performative force of sex and desire is not as easily undercut as Foucault's (1990) resistant call to bodies and pleasures might be seen to infer. We might assert bodies and pleasures and refuse the binaries of penis/vagina, man/woman, hetero/homo, and yet prevailing discourse presses these upon us, like it or not. We might struggle to refuse these subjectivities, but subject-hood is dependent on our intelligibility and so we might have to take them up; we might find them put on us; and we might be attached to them, politically, socially, relationally, psychically, orgasmically. Without these subjectivations, the unintelligibility that we face might be the black hole of annihilation or micro-fascism that Deleuze and Guattari (1983) warn of. Furthermore, Ahmed (2004) has argued that the emphasis on movement, fluidity and transgression in queer inscribes another hierarchy – transgression/assimilation – where 'queer lives' are valourised over 'gay and lesbian lives' which are positioned as heteronormative. This

argument is illustrative of the fact that we have no grip on queer. Over time, the conceptual and tactical distinction between *who we are* and *what we do* has to some degrees been lost, and the impossibility of maintaining this distinction in the face of the subjectivating force of prevailing discourse has become evident. As queer has mutated into *something* or *someone* that we *are*, some of us who are keen on the Foucault-informed queer have wanted to stop queer from being added to the LGBTQI chain of identities. At the same time we have insisted that Q be added when LGB politics has refused it. This is a contradiction that underscores our need for recognition and our attachment to particular identifications as well as the mobile ground on which tactics of resistance are played out and lives are lived.

During the early 2000s, a series of publications appeared that considered the possibilities of queer for education and demonstrated these queer analytics in readings of education institutions and encounters (see Rasmussen and Crowley 2004; Rasmussen, Rofes, and Talburt 2004; Talburt and Steinberg 2000). These education scholars were no doubt well aware of the problematics of queer theory – a tactical politics is in play when we hold onto and assert queer even as we know that queer may have already been recuperated by the binary thinking and unitary subjects of identity politics and been redeployed to demarcate and define yet more insider and outsider locations. It seems to me that we are now in a moment, theoretically and methodologically, when setting out again what we mean by queer, what we hope queer can do and what its pitfalls and limits are, is possible, necessary and useful. This is a particular moment in LGBTQI politics in which queer has, to some extent, been reassimilated into mainstream discourses; sedimented as a subjectivity (perhaps no longer injurious); and taken up as a new ‘catch-all’ name for LGBTQI subjects. Queer as practices of unsettling and scattering continues to be deployed, but as queer increasingly stands as an interpellation, its meaning as tactical practice risks being lost. Furthermore, we are confronted by the limit of queer practices in the persistent refusal of subject-hood to bodies that exceed normative sex–gender–sexuality and, therefore, the continued need for particular forms of identity politics (Rasmussen, 2009). This shift from what might be seen as a prior reification of queer enables reflection on the (im)possibilities of doing queer in particular spaces as well as the ‘confession’ of queer ‘failures’ that are located not in flawed subjects who are ‘not-quite-queer’ enough, but in theoretical developments and practice. In this context, my own attachment to queer – stated as a politics of practice, but also as an insistent site of identification and subjectivity – is less certain and I find myself ‘after-queer’ at the same time as I find myself, once again, *before* queer.

In this paper, I return to ethnographic encounters that are now 10 years old to explore how queer theory and practice guided my empirical research and was deployed in ‘the field’ and interpretation. I try to engage the recurrent feeling of aspects of events in ‘the field’ escaping queer readings but insisting on being told. To do this I borrow the idea of the uncanny from psychoanalysis. The usefulness of psychoanalytic tools in education, either alone or alongside post-structural theory, has been demonstrated by writers, such as Britzman (1998), Henriques et al. (2004), Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody (2006), Ringrose (2006) and Walkerdine (1990), who engage the place of the unconscious and the significance of psychic processes such as recognition, identification, desire and abjection in the making of education’s subjects. Here I take up the uncanny and graft it onto post-structurally informed ethnography; it is a borrowing that seems at once risky and generative.

Molly

In questioning the continued usefulness of queer and exploring what a turn to uncomfortable reflexivity and the uncanny might offer, I engage a set of stories about my encounters with a particular girl – Molly. I first met Molly in 1996 when, aged 13–14, she was a participant in a school ethnography concerned with the making of educational inequalities (Gillborn and Youdell 2000). I returned to the same school two years later to conduct a separate ethnography on subjectivities (Youdell 2006). The research was framed by a rejection of a unitary, abiding subject but sought to study the processes through which the illusion of such a subject is created, looking for discourses and their subjectivating effects as these are played out in school. I was caught, therefore, in the unresolvable bind of acting/being constituted in the field as a unitary subject; being embroiled in the constitution of the young people I was researching; and attempting to demonstrate and trouble such constitutions in the data I generated and analysed (Youdell 2005, 2006). Molly, by this time aged 15–16, was a participant in this second study and acted as a guide, key informant and generous friend from early on in the fieldwork.

Molly: well-behaved, yet widely popular with students and teachers. Inside the circles of high-status anti-school girls and high-status desirable girls, yet named ‘Geeza Girl’ by friends and other peers (Youdell 2003, 2005, 2006). An accomplished footballer and well-respected for these skills, yet criticised for her ‘lack’ of femininity by the boys who occupied the school football pitches. Molly did not ‘do’ hetero-femininity; her practices exceeded the terms of the heterosexual matrix and by age 16 the space for ‘tomboy’ had closed. Yet Molly continued to be recognisable; she confronted me with impossible intelligibility. In my previous analyses I suggested, without satisfaction, that Molly’s practices constituted the ‘(un-)feminine subjecthood of a Geeza Girl’ (Youdell 2006). While this absence of satisfaction is welcome (Butler 2005), I continue to be drawn back to encounters with Molly and my own place in them.

Coming to the uncanny

I returned to reconsider my encounters with Molly during 2007/2008 while involved in the *No Outsiders* project – a three-year action research project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council that explored approaches to sexualities’ equalities in schools. The project was characterised by a series of tensions created by the apparent irrefutability of equalities-based approaches alongside the take-up of queer theory, the rejection of queer subjectivities and the assimilation of queer as identity politics. These dilemmas, and my desire to think these through, led me back to my encounters with Molly. Looking for new ways of thinking I read Deborah Britzman’s *Lost subjects, contested objects* (1998) and found her engagement with Samuel Delany’s work through the uncanny. I turned to this for clues of how to unearth whatever it was that was falling away in my analyses of my encounters with Molly.

In *The motion of light on water* (1988/2004), Samuel Delany offers multiple accounts of his first day as a scholarship boy at a selective school in downtown Manhattan. Included in this are two accounts of him meeting another boy, Chuck. The first telling is a straight story of meeting in the yard, striking up conversation, going into class, being assigned desks. The second telling follows rapidly and is a story of Delany’s emotional responses to Chuck; being drawn to Chuck’s hands and bitten fingernails, experiencing a surge of anxiety when he loses sight of Chuck in a

crowd, wondering if the strength of his feeling for Chuck will endure to the following day. Delany suggests that these two stories should not be told or read consecutively, but should appear in parallel columns. As Delany goes on to consider the two stories, his psychic and affective responses, he suggests that the first represents the 'proper' tale while the second is that which is required to remain unspoken within the terms of dominant social meaning and practice. And he offers a third tale – a brief account of Chuck's recollection of that day – Chuck's attention elsewhere, the moment insignificant to him. As Delany interrogates his need to tell the tale, which Britzman (1998) suggests is the story of falling in (prohibited) love, he considers the unspeakability that exists in the space between the two tales and the rupturing of this prohibition asking '[w]hy speak of what's uncomfortable to speak of?' (Delany 1988/2004, 73). Analysing these stories Britzman says they might be understood as: the 'ethnographic', which she describes as 'the place of detail'; the 'reflective', which she calls 'the consideration of the significance of anxiety'; and the 'uncanny', which she identifies as 'the force of secrets' (1998, 13). Delany's text shows us, according to Britzman, 'the need to excavate the lost subjects of education until what is uncanny can be engaged' (1998, 15).

The notion of the uncanny that Britzman takes up can be traced to Freud's (1990) work on the uncanny in literature where he explores the *unheimlich* – the uncanny – and the *heimlich* – the homely and familiar. Rather than being simple opposites, these are implicated in each other – the uncanny is at once what is homely and familiar *and* what is hidden. The uncanny is experienced in what 'ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light' (Freud 1990, 345). The experience of the uncanny is unsettling, then, because it 'leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud 1990, 340). One of Freud's key observations concerns ambivalence and ambiguity – not only does the uncanny speak of an ambivalence of feeling and meaning, but the relationship between the *unheimlich* and *heimlich* is itself ambiguous, with what is *heimlich* also coming to mean the familiar re-emerging in a place it should not be – the *unheimlich*. As he moves on to consider the uncanny in psychoanalytic terms, Freud locates it in relation to the unconscious and, specifically, that which is known yet repressed within the unconscious but which recurs making itself known again (Freud 1990). As such, it evidences and is the experience of the ambivalence and incoherence of the split subject and is encountered in glimmers and fragments when the unspeakable presses upon consciousness while remaining on the edge of intelligibility (Chisholm 1992). Freud's connection of these processes to the maternal body and castration anxiety has been vigorously critiqued by feminist engagements with psychoanalysis. This feminist work has reworked the notion of the uncanny, identifying it as the subversion of borders (Cixous 1976, in Chisholm 1992). In the context of man's exclusive proprietorship of the gaze, the female gaze is uncanny (Todd 1986, in Chisholm 1992). And with masculinity the 'proper' locus of desire, the desiring woman is subversive and feminine desire becomes uncanny (Feldman 1981, in Chisholm 1992). Here, then, glimpses of what is known but unknown, in particular the desiring female gaze and ambivalence, are taken up in thinking with the uncanny.

Ethnography, uncomfortable reflexivity and glimpsing the uncanny

Ethnographic 'detail', as described by Britzman, is familiar terrain in education studies but is by no means unproblematic. Paul Atkinson (1990) has drawn attention to

ethnographic writing as a genre, and feminist ethnography has been concerned with the nature and status of its representations, what is included and what is left out, and the inclusions and silences as the author speaks (Stanley 1989; Stanley and Wise 1993). Post-structural ethnography has also troubled ethnography, moving from concerns with authenticity and reciprocity to processes of subjectivation in research and representation (Harwood 2006; Lather 1991; Maclure 2003; St. Pierre and Pillow 2000; Youdell 2006). Nevertheless, ethnography continues to offer detailed present-tense representations of ‘real life’, albeit ‘life’ that is no longer claimed as ‘real’. Education has also engaged extensively with reflection and reflexivity in research and pedagogic practices (Delamont and Atkinson 1995; Moore 2004; Schon 1991). Reflections limited to the individual have been critiqued, and reflexivity that locates this individual in historical contexts and social relations has been emphasised (Moore 2004; Pillow 2003). Contextualised reflexivity advances individualised reflection (Moore 2004), yet the turn to reflexivity may be a limited response to the ‘problem’ of the researcher (Silverman 1997). Pillow (2003) offers a particularly helpful intervention, arguing that the turn to reflexivity helps us to see into processes of knowledge production and exposes the positionality of the researcher. Yet she also demonstrates how reflexivity concerned with the recognition of self and Other simultaneously imagines a transcendence of this self and so a ‘better’ reading of data. With a post-structural inflection, Pillow suggests that reflexivity usefully sets out how/where a researcher is located in the discursive field of the research and demonstrates the constitutive effects of this, but warns that this transparency can slip into ‘gestures of neutralization’ (Pillow 2003, 180). In order to avoid this, Pillow advocates vigilance over practices and their effects – an ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’ (188). This vigilance involves seeking out uncomfortable and unfamiliar tellings and data that ‘escapes’ language (St. Pierre 1997, in Pillow 2003). This invitation to turn to data that escapes language or even representation, that is uncomfortable, and which provokes unfamiliar tellings might be taken up in a queer turn to stories that might glimpse the uncanny.

Uncomfortable stories after-queer

The stories that I tell here offer the detail of previously untold encounters that I had with Molly as well as accounts of my discomforts about these. These accounts are separated into two pairs of stories. The first pair of stories revolves around a conversation between me and Molly walking in a school-corridor on the way to a lesson, and the second pair of stories revolves around a conversation we had, again walking in a corridor, during a break-time. The first story of each pair is in the ethnographic genre, offering the content of our encounters and taken from fieldnotes that I wrote shortly after the encounter took place – in Britzman’s terms this might be taken as an ethnographic detail. The second story of each pair offers an account of my thoughts and feelings at the time of the conversation, but reconstructed recently for this paper from fragments of reflections written at the time of the study – in Britzman’s terms this is perhaps the reflective and the place of anxiety. Aspects of both of these stories seem to escape telling while familiar narrative modes seep onto the page despite me. Each pair of stories is followed by an account that attempts (almost impossibly) to take some distance from the encounters and draws on the conceptual tools I have discussed to raise questions about what it means to re-engage and rewrite the encounter; what the encounter tells us about queer or ‘after-queer’; what can be glimpsed of that which

remains inaccessible or untellable in the prior stories. Together, this might amount to Pillow's uncomfortable reflexivity.

A series of re-encounters is evident in my struggle to find ways to engage with telling these stories. I re-encounter Molly and myself in my encounters with her; I re-encounter the school and its discursive regulation; I re-encounter myself early in my academic career, convinced by queer theory and concerned to 'get it right'; I encounter myself in the present, now an established academic, still committed to but more questioning of queer theory and struggling *against* the abiding struggle to 'get it right'; and I encounter a spectre of myself at secondary school, among a cluster of girls in corners and corridors where some secrets were told keenly and others were as keenly silenced and where we struggled to get our punk/new-wave cool 'right' without ever really giving up on the hetero-femininity that we claimed to despise. I have written elsewhere (Youdell 2006) about my uncomfortable identification with the alternative almost-queer middle-class 'dir'y ippie' girls in this school. In re-encountering Molly, I catch a glimpse of another girl that I was, might have been, could not be and am. These re-encounters suggest the projections that are an inevitable part of our engagements in the field and with data; our glimpses of the silenced familiar. This is not to undermine these engagements but to recognise that we are always 'in' our data and interpretation discursively, psychically and affectively.

The stories that follow might bring me closer to the encounters they represent and explore. They certainly bring me closer to the anxieties of the encounters and the anxieties of revisiting them. In this sense, between the lines and in the space between the stories, there are perhaps glimmers of what continues to fall away in my telling of these stories. At the same time, my impulse to tell stories of Molly and so 'know' her (and/or me) exposes the lure of subject-hood and my attachment to it. My discomfort over telling stories about my encounters with Molly is a discomfort over the way these stories draw me (and Molly) back into unitary subject-hood, shoring up the bounds of normative sex–gender–sexuality even as I hope to offer these encounters as expressions of the limits and fragility of these.

On the way to lesson: Story 1

Humanities Corridor, after the pip indicating the end of morning break, Taylor Comp, London

DY (researcher, woman, White, late 20s) is on her way to observe a history lesson. She is moving with the tide of students so while the corridor is bustling it is easy to pass through. Molly (girl, White, age 15/16) falls into step next to DY.

- Molly: Hi.
 DY: Oh hi, you on your way to history?
 Molly: Yes, you?
 DY: Yes.
 Molly: Whose class you going to?
 DY: Marcella and Jasmine's. [two of Molly's good friends]
 Molly: Ah yeah, with Miss Sharpe?
 DY: Yes, I think so.
 Molly: I was in her class since Year 7. She's my best friend.
 DY: Yeah?
 Molly: I bought her a 25-pound watch for Christmas last year.
 DY: Wow!

- Molly: Marcella and them laugh about it, but ...
 DY: So you coming to her class now then?
 Molly: No, I'm not in her class anymore.
 DY: Oh?
 Molly: I was moved to Miss Brown's class this year.
 DY: Oh. What for?
 Molly: Dunno, they said it would be better for me.
 DY: Do you mind?
 Molly: Not really, Miss Brown's alright.
 [We reach Miss Sharpe's classroom. Molly turns and walks back up the way we came].
 Molly: See ya.

(DY fieldnotes, Spring 1998)

If this first story is the ethnographic detail, the not-so-straightforward account of the event, then Story 2 is the reflection that opens up the consideration of the place of anxiety and the possible glimmer of the uncanny.

On the way to lesson: Story 2

Me and Molly chatted and walked down the busy corridor and I tried to 'act natural' while my heart raced. Molly was telling me, apparently just 'in passing', that she considered Miss Sharpe, her woman history teacher (who was young, fashionable, feminine and pretty) to be her 'best friend', that she'd bought her an expensive gift and that post-gift, and with no explanation, she was moved out of Miss Sharpe's class. As Molly told me this, pretty matter-of-fact, I was already certain of the school's motive and angry with them for it. It seemed self-evident to me that Molly's story was an account of her attachment to Miss Sharpe, and the school's judgement that this attachment was inappropriate, or at least that the expression of it must be foreclosed. As evident as this seemed to me, it seemed not to have occurred to Molly, unless she was telling me to try out my reaction? I was conscious of trying not to make too much of the story, to avoid pouncing. At the same time I hoped that my efforts not to overreact were not leaving my responses seeming contrived or untrustworthy. Questions pressed on me: did she want me to ask more questions? Did she think they moved her because she bought the gift? Did she think they moved her to separate her from Miss Sharpe? Did Miss Sharpe ask the school to move Molly? Did the school think Molly had a crush on Miss Sharpe? Did she have a crush on Miss Sharpe? Was she telling me without telling me that she was into girls/women/a lesbian? Was she asking me if I was into girls/women/a lesbian? Was she telling me that she thought she knew I was into girls/women/a lesbian? Did her walking me to my classroom have an undercurrent? Had she got a (romantic?) attachment to me? I buzzed with feeling as I considered this possibility even as I casually accepted her 'see ya' and went into the classroom.

This second story is reconstructed from fragments of reflections that I wrote at the time, and my recollection of the encounter and the way I felt in it and the way I feel now reflecting on it.

I had been wanting to 'know' Molly, wanting to 'know' what she thought/felt about gender, sexuality and herself. I had been gathering morsels of evidence that might confirm Molly as a lesbian-in-the-making. At the same time, I had been resisting these curious urges and the abiding subjects, complete with authentic sexual identities, that are inscribed through them. I had rejected notions of latent sexual orientation whose recognition and embrace precede 'coming out' and instead taken up accounts of sexualised identifications and positionings constituted through practices

made meaningful in discourse. In my research practice I also wanted to resist the constitution of me as hetero in/by the heterosexual matrix in this school, an almost uninterrupted constitution that may well have located me in a closet that my conceptual framing refused. I have continued to consider my 'wanting to know' Molly; my rejection of my/her location in any closet; and my resistance to sexual identity that precedes its inscription in citational chains. Can there be a closet without a prior constitution of sexual orientation, even if this prior constitution constitutes a sexual orientation that is then taken to be pre-existing? Does the heterosexual matrix mean that there is always a prior constitution of sexual orientation? Assumed hetero until proven otherwise? Could Molly be in the closet if she had not named herself 'lesbian', anywhere, to anyone, even herself, or been named 'lesbian' and denied this interpellation? Was Molly only ever 'lesbian' in my projections of my own sexual objects and pleasures and my reconstruction of my own girl-hood desires? Might Molly's gift to Miss Sharpe simply have been an expression of appreciation of her teacher? Might the school have moved her from Miss Sharpe's class simply on pedagogic or organisational grounds? Could I be in the closet to Molly when she and her friends had not enquired about my sex life since the early days of the ethnography when I acknowledged 'having a boyfriend' when asked? I had not claimed to be hetero but admitting a 'boyfriend' once made me that over and over again. I imagine this:

Excuse me Miss Baxter, I have a new lover who is a different sex to the last one and I'd like to announce that to the class this morning during registration to be sure they all know that I'm currently sleeping with a woman. 'Of course. Year 11, Listen up, Miss Youdell has got something important to tell you all.'

I had not hidden my sexuality – when the 'dir'y ippies' started talking sexualities and asked me, I told them. They put previous boyfriend together with current girlfriend and made me bisexual. I accepted that; we were sitting in the tutor room heads together, voices lowered, sharing secrets, constituting sexualities as secret. I reminded myself that I was researching their discursive frames, not explaining mine. I was 'in' and 'out' in the school at the same time as I refused the notion of the closet. At the time I did not know who thought they knew what about me, but I was certain that if I changed my story mid-fieldwork it would have consequences precisely because we all 'knew' each other, and what I called queer elsewhere would have appeared in school as deception. I wondered whether I should have 'lied' to the students and identified myself (as what? bisexual?) from the beginning so that I was recognisable to them. I was certain that I could only do queer where queer was recognisable, and that the school was a space where polymorphous perversity and Foucault's turn from sex-desire to bodies and pleasure was unintelligible (Butler 1999; Youdell 2004a). Was the surge of bodily sensation that I experienced as Molly told me my urge to 'come out' (as anything other than hetero) and/or my fear of being 'out-ed'?

A female gaze and desiring female bodies press themselves through the lines of these stories, whether these are the projections of my own past and present desires or the familiar unfamiliarity of the uncanny desiring gaze of a girl. The possibility of such a desire pushes into the gaps, troubling the normative order of masculine subjects and feminine objects and hetero-desire. Perhaps the school stepped in to expel this uncanny eruption and return it to its silent place, taking care never to name the familiar secret it erased. Molly's friends knew about the gift and the 'best friend' claim and they teased her gently but did not sanction her seriously over it. How could this be the

case? What did this signify to them? What signification did they refuse? Buying Miss Sharpe an expensive gift did not force recognition of same-sex desire, love or romantic attachment among the girls. The gift was not grounds for the girls to call Molly 'lesbian' and banish her. They kept her inside their circle, inside the heterosexual matrix, viable. Without recognition, romantic same-sex attachment cannot disrupt the apparent universality of heteronormativity. Perhaps the uncanny of a girl's gaze and her same-sex desire can be glimpsed here, even if it is only the echo of my own.

In the corridor at break-time: Story 1

Modern Foreign Languages Corridor, early in morning break, Taylor Comp, London

DY is walking slowly along a rapidly emptying corridor waiting for something to happen. Molly falls in step beside her.

DY: Hi.

Molly: Hi, where are you going?

DY: Nowhere really, just walking.

Molly: Mmmm.

[We wander slowly, not talking for a few seconds.]

DY: You've been playing football?

Molly: Yeah, but I had to go off 'cos I've got an injury to my knee, I have to see the physiotherapist.

DY: Ouch. You go to a specialist to get it treated?

Molly: Yeah.

DY: [after a moment's pause] I'm lucky 'cos my girlfriend is a nurse so if I get something like that she can do it.

Molly: [pause] Your girlfriend?

DY: Yeah.

Molly: Oh!

[We continue to wander without talking, a few seconds later Molly spots a group of friends.]

Molly: See you! [hurries off]

(DY fieldnotes, Summer 1998)

In the corridor at break-time: Story 2

It felt so awkward, so contrived, so out of place. My heart was fast, my stomach aware, my cheeks warm. It wasn't quite the right moment, but it was in that moment that I raised the courage to do it. It was so awkward, our hetero-subjection ran so deep there. It felt so inappropriate – me, an adult researcher indicating to a 16-year-old girl not just a lesbian relationship but lesbians touching. Me receiving the curative touch of my lesbian lover. The prohibition felt absolute. And there I was trying to act as though I was just dropping it into conversation. She made her quick exit. My heart sank, I regretted it immediately. Should I have 'out-ed' myself to her? Did I upset her, hurt her, expose her, 'out' her, lose her?

This was not 'in passing'. But it was a momentary end to my passing. I had been wondering and worrying about such an encounter; what it would mean theoretically, what it would stand for politically, what it might mean practically. I had discussed it on a number of occasions in the Institute of Education's Gender Research Group,

which at the time was led by Debbie Epstein. We had agreed that saying anything was inevitably a ‘coming out’ in the discourses that framed the school and so saying anything would be constitutive of abiding subjects with ‘true’ sexual orientations, some of whom were ‘out’ (in my speaking, me), and some of whom were ‘in’ (in her as the target of my address, her). Saying nothing was, on this same discursive terrain, a deception, a passing, a place in the closet, even if I refuted that place. I had followed threads of essentialism, queer theory, subjugated discourses and ethnographic field relations until I was bound by the impossibility of resolution.

If I rejected the closet, where did I think the secret was told from? Beneath my insistence on the constitutedness of sexuality and the polymorphous nature of desire, did my telling belie an attachment to authenticity? Did I want to tell Molly about me or did I want to incite Molly to discourse? What did I expect her to say: ‘Now that you have spoken I too can speak’, ‘Thank you for unlocking my closet door’, ‘How fabulous, me too!’, ‘Thank heavens sweetie, I’ve just been dying to meet another queer to camp it up with!’ or just ‘Thank you for sharing’? While my attempt at casually dropping my ‘girlfriend’ into the conversation felt clumsy at the time and still seems clumsy now, the possibility remains that this might have been a risky moment of recognition, of naming without *the* name, where heteronormative boundaries were breached. Perhaps my telling constituted as intelligible, as viable, as real, a female gaze, a woman’s same-sex desire and a lesbian life wholly silenced in the formal discourse of the school and in the student milieu that Molly was part of.

Was Molly upset, hurt, exposed? Or was she just embarrassed by my disclosure? Did she take it as a revelation, an accusation, a loss, a discourse deployed where it did not belong? If, as Britzman (1998) suggests, attachment is the site where lost subjects are sought, where the extremes of love and hate erupt and are encountered, what subjects are lost and found here? What loves and hates erupt? What lost subject was I looking for in Molly? Had Molly loved and lost Miss Sharpe – the good, eager, ever-affable student reconstituted unwanted, unrecognisable, untouchable in the moment of the ‘inappropriate’ gift? Had Molly loved and lost me – the new friend always interested, always available, always understanding, now reconstituted unwanted, unrecognisable, unspeakable in the moment of the revelation? Have I loved and lost Molly – the projection of my own lost love and lost self, in that moment, in the heteronormativity of school spaces and schooled discourses, and in my own schooling? Lost subjects glimpsed and lost again.

The queer framing of this research precluded ‘coming out’ in the field (or afterwards, e.g. in this paper). Yet the unintelligibility of queer in the field required this ‘outing’; not as a return to identity politics, but an effect of the persistent pull of the coherent subject and the need to be such a subject in order to be intelligible. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) understanding of the molar nature of subjectivation, and the black hole that is risked when we attempt to refuse subjectivation, reminds me of the enormity of this task and its potential hazards. It may be that even (or especially) after-queer we need to ‘come out’ in education and research, both despite and because of the effects of this outing.

Queer residue

This is the first time that I have written about these encounters, despite their taking place 10 years ago. They have been on my mind at various moments over the years

but I have not 'known' what to 'do' with them. While this 'not knowing' has felt personal at times (Sommerville 2008), it has also been a reflection of shifting political moments and the conceptual tools available. The education field has come round to the legitimacy of studies of subjectivation during this period, so that writing that once sought to demonstrate how compelling these conceptual tools are, can now explore their limits and try out further framings. I remain committed to the intellectual and political project of queer practice. Yet my frustrations with the assimilations and recuperations of queer persist along with my sense of an unacknowledged cloak of rationality and a neglect of affectivities and the unconscious that leave the queer-ethnographer the knower, not the known (or unknowable). These concerns have led me to look for additional theories and tactics that might usefully augment or extend queer.

Taking up the idea of the uncanny in writing and reading these ethnographic encounters has enabled me to engage practices and feelings that otherwise may have remained outside the ethnographic account and analysis. Indeed, without the notion of the uncanny the ambivalent feelings that are part of these encounters, and my re-encounter with them, may not have been speakable. Discomforting questions remain: What are the effects of my attempts to glimpse and write about these eruptions of the uncanny? Is this writing an imposition or containment that loses the very excess I am trying to locate? Do my accounts deploy and incorporate me and Molly into the rational accounts of an abiding self? How can I speak/write about these encounters without pinning down their meaning and joining a citational chain that constitutes the boundaries of what is allowed and disallowed? Is this writing too discomforting, too risky and is it not discomforting enough? Can my accounts of these encounters be more than my own projections and desires? These questions remind me of 'the failure of knowledge' (Britzman 1998, 10); the impossibility of knowing completely or with certainty and the way that knowledge is exceeded by feeling and the unconscious, an insight that is echoed by Pillow (2003).

Not writing and then writing about these encounters with additional conceptual tools underscores the insistence of constraining processes of subjectivation, the struggle to evade them, and the subject's demand for intelligibility through recognition as well as that which exceeds subjectivation but which falls away as we try to glimpse it. Furthermore, Helene Cixous' (2009) insight into the paradoxical nature of urgency, which insists that something is done in the very moment that it is not done, helps me to understand the periodic return of my need to and deferral of writing these encounters. Uncomfortable reflexivity and the ambivalence provoked by glimpsing the uncanny have offered me ways of thinking, writing and reading these encounters with a new inflection, opening up the potential for a queer uncanny. Indeed, the ambivalence, incompleteness, discomfort and dislocation of uncomfortable reflexivity and the uncanny seem to offer a different sort of queer – one which retains practices of troubling as a central concern but which also looks to what exceeds this framework politically, affectively and psychically. This, for me, might be 'after-queer'.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Mary Lou Rasmussen and Susan Talburt as well as the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful considerations of the various versions of this paper. My thanks also to Tamara Bibby, Debbie Epstein and Jessica Ringrose for their insights into projection and the ways in which the unconscious escapes us.

Notes on contributor

Deborah Youdell is a professor of education at the Institute of Education, University of London. Her work is located in the sociology of education and is concerned with processes of subjectivation inside schools and the ways these are implicated in educational exclusions and inequalities.

References

- Ahmed, S. 2004. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Atkinson, P. 1990. *The ethnographic imagination: Textual constructions of reality*. London: Routledge.
- Britzman, D. 1998. *Lost subjects, contested objects: Towards a psychoanalytic inquiry of learning*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Butler, J. 1991. Imitation and gender insubordination. In *Inside/out: Lesbian theories, gay theories*, ed. D. Fuss, 13–31. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. 1997. *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. 1999. Revisiting bodies and pleasures. *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2: 11–20.
- Butler, J. 2005. *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Chisholm, C. 1992. The uncanny. In *Feminism and psychoanalysis: A critical dictionary*, ed. E. Wright, 436–40. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cixous, H. 2009. *Letter-being and time* (Newsletter). London: Research Forum for Culture and Communication.
- Delamont, S., and P. Atkinson. 1995. *Fighting familiarity: Essays on education and ethnography*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Delany, S. 1988/2004. *The motion of light on water*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 1983. *On the line*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Foucault, M. 1990. *History of sexuality volume 1: An introduction*. London: Penguin.
- Freud, S. 1990. The uncanny. In *Art and literature*. London: Penguin.
- Gillborn, D., and D. Youdell. 2000. *Rationing education: Policy, practice, reform and equity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Harwood, V. 2006. *Diagnosing 'disorderly' behaviour: A critique of behaviour disorder discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Henriques, J., W. Holloway, C. Urwin, C. Venn, and V. Walkerdine. 2004. *Changing the subject: Psychology, social regulation and subjectivity*. London: Routledge.
- Kenway, J., A. Kraack, and A. Hickey-Moody. 2006. *Masculinities beyond the metropolis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lather, P. 1991. *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Maclure, M. 2003. *Discourse in educational and social research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Moore, A. 2004. *The good teacher: Dominant discourses in teaching and teacher education*. London: Routledge.
- Pillow, W.S. 2003. Confession, catharsis or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 2: 175–96.
- Rasmussen, M.L. 2009. Beyond gender identity. *Gender and Education* 21, no. 4: 431–47.
- Rasmussen, M.L., and V. Crowley, eds. 2004. Wounded identities and the promise of pleasure: Special issue. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 25, no. 4: 427–509.
- Rasmussen, M.L., E. Rofes, and S. Talburt, eds. 2004. *Youth and sexualities: Pleasure, subversion, and insubordination in and out of school*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ringrose, J. 2006. A new universal mean girl: Examining the discursive construction and social regulation of a new feminine pathology. *Feminism and Psychology* 16, no. 4: 405–24.
- Schon, D. 1991. *The reflective practitioner*. London: Arena.
- Sedgwick, E.K. 1993. The epistemology of the closet. In *The lesbian and gay studies reader*, ed. H. Abelove, M.A. Barale, and D. Halperin, 45–61. London: Routledge.

- Silverman, D. 1997. Towards an aesthetics of research. In *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice*, ed. D. Silverman, 239–53. London: Sage.
- Somerville, M. 2008. ‘Waiting in the chaotic place of unknowing’: Articulating postmodern emergence. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 21, no. 4: 209–20.
- Stanley, J. 1989. *Marks on the memory: Experiencing school*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Stanley, J., and S. Wise. 1993. *Breaking out again: Feminist ontology and epistemology*. London: Routledge.
- St. Pierre, E.A., and W.S. Pillow, eds. 2000. *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education*. London: Routledge.
- Talbert, S., and S. Steinberg, eds. 2000. *Thinking queer: Sexuality, culture, and education*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Walkerdine, V. 1990. *School girl fictions*. London: Verso.
- Youdell, D. 2003. Identity traps or how black students fail: The interactions between biographical, sub-cultural, and learner identities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 24, no. 1: 3–20.
- Youdell, D. 2004a. Wounds and reinscriptions: Schools, sexualities and performative subjects. *Discourse* 25, no. 4: 477–94.
- Youdell, D. 2004b. Bent as a ballet dancer: The possibilities and limits for a legitimate homosexuality in school. In *Youth and sexualities: Pleasure, subversion and insubordination in and out of schools*, ed. M.L. Rasmussen, E. Rofes, and S. Talbert, 201–22. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Youdell, D. 2005. Sex–gender–sexuality: How sex, gender and sexuality constellations are constituted in secondary schools. *Gender and Education* 17, no. 3: 149–70.
- Youdell, D. 2006. *Impossible bodies, impossible selves: Exclusions and student subjectivities*. Dordrecht: Springer.