**The chalice (or, how to occult yourself, gender-wise): An affective exploration of ‘teaching about gender diversity’**

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This article is an experimental effort to look and feel over our shoulder at the process of editing an anthology of lesson plans on gender diversity for K-12 classrooms. Using theories of affect and assemblage, and a post-qualitative approach to acting on and being acted upon by data, we feel for the thresholds of the ‘teaching about gender diversity’ produced during one stage of the book’s creation: categorizing lesson plans into levels on a chart of variably hospitable school climates for gender diversity. In probing particularly ‘sticky deliberations’ about whether a lesson best fits a more or less hospitable climate, we identify a threshold that may hold significance for teaching about (and teaching teachers to teach about) gender diversity: the chalice. The chalice figures a moment in a lesson when gender becomes extra-ordinary: marked, sensitized, or highly visible. *Any* student – whether transgender or no – can become-chalice, and this becoming (and unbecoming) emerged as an intensive boundary between a lesson’s enactment in an unsafe, okay, welcoming, or affirming school. The article offers a provisional tool for the (however cisgender and gender-conforming) teacher to foster a classroom community as open as possible to all of the ways gender is lived: the teacher intentionally becoming the chalice themself through a practice of ‘occulting one’s self, gender-wise.’

Keywords: gender diversity, transgender, curriculum, affect, LGBTQ2S+

# Introduction: The excesses of curriculum

This paper is an experimental effort to look and feel over our shoulder at a fairly traditional ‘gender diversity curriculum’ that we assembled together over two years (Woolley & Airton, 2020). The book aims to teach the reader – presumably an in-service or pre-service K-12 teacher – how to incorporate gender diversity into their own taught curriculum, by modelling how others have done so before. To our knowledge, this is the first handheld anthology of K-12 lesson plans on gender diversity. By ‘gender diversity,’ we mean experiences and identities that belie cisheteronormativity1 and related assumptions about the linear relationships between sex and gender, gender conformity and non-conformity, and dominating and subordinated ways of living gender. The book’s lesson plans, spanning K-12 subject areas and grade levels, exceed a focus on transgender-spectrum2 issues and identities; the book contains *inter alia* gender-expansive lessons engaging puberty, exploring the relationship between gender normativity and colonization, and using children’s picture books or toys as prompts to support all students in surfacing what they know and how they feel about gender. Each chapter begins with a narrative in which its author(s) situate the lesson within their own histories of teaching and/or living in relation to gender diversity, followed by the lesson itself in a standardized template. While envisioning the book, selecting submissions, and coordinating revisions with the authors, we aimed for a book of classroom-ready lesson plans as clear, accessible and practically useful as possible. At our insistence, the publisher’s contract even stipulated an 8.5 x 11 printed format so that it could be easily photocopied during a busy teacher’s morning prep.

Of course, amidst our conscientious efforts toward clarity, accessibility, and utility, something else was happening: we were not simply working toward a faithful *representation* of what teaching about gender diversity looks like in ‘the real world,’ but rather ‘teaching about gender diversity’ was being *produced* – with, through, and alongside us – in the act of producing the book. The ‘teaching about gender diversity’ in our book is a stabilized and, therefore, necessarily failed representation due to the impossibilities of stabilizing something that is in motion and so always changing (Massumi, 2002). Due to our aforementioned theoretical commitments, we were aware that linear and logocentric aims like clarity, accessibility and practicality exact a toll. At the same time, we are regularly assailed by requests for resources, and understand that teachers’ cries of ‘there are no resources’ can be ways of refusing the difficult task of integrating gender diversity. We are interested in feeling for the ‘teaching about gender diversity’ that burbles up underneath and in-between the headers and boxes of our undoubtedly clear, accessible and practical book. What can we learn about the *actual* work (Massumi, 2002) of teaching about gender diversity by attending to the excesses of our effort to create a gender diversity curriculum?

## Overview of the article

In this article, and with the help of new materialist theories of assemblage (Bell, 2006; Delanda, 2006) and affect (Berlant, 2011; Massumi, 2002; Stewart, 2007), as well as post-qualitative (see Koro-Ljungberg, 2015; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013) scholarship that de-centres language and representation in inquiry by drawing on new materialist and post-humanist theories, we feel for the thresholds of the ‘teaching about gender diversity’ produced during the process of creating our book. This article’s data is seven hours of audio-visual Skype conversations recorded in summer 2018, in-between our respective offices – Lee in Kingston, Ontario and Susan in Hamilton, New York, on opposite sides of the Canadian/US border yet both located in ancestral Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territories. During these conversations we categorized the twenty-six lesson plans into a school climate chart of our own creation (described in a coming section).

The article proceeds in three sections. We begin by situating the article and the school climate chart within two relevant literatures. We then flesh out our new materialist theoretical framework and post-qualitative approach to mapping the ‘teaching about gender diversity’ produced during our Skype conversations (see Airton, 2014, 2019a, 2020). We figure ‘teaching about gender diversity’ as an assemblage in the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and suggest corporeal sensation or affect as a means of tracking how assemblages shift and become. In the third section, we offer ‘examples’ (MacLure, 2010, 2013) from our conversational record that initially emerged into significance affectively, and not semantically. In the conclusion, we suggest what this analysis offers teachers who seek to make their schools and classrooms more welcoming of all the ways that gender is lived.

# Literature review: Gender diversity the curriculum and the school climate

Gender diversity is an emerging topic of curricular integration in North American education systems, and is not without controversy. The addition of gender identity and gender expression human rights protections in some US and all Canadian jurisdictions (see Kirkup, 2018) has led many school boards and districts to develop gender diversity policies that often mandate curricular representation as an action area (Airton et al., 2019; Martino et al., 2019, 2020; Meyer & Keenan, 2018; Omercajic & Martino, 2020). That said, there remains little published scholarship on the particular topic of K-12 gender diversity curricular integration, as “inclusion of the experiences of transgender and gender-nonconforming people in school curricula is exceedingly rare” (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013, p. 85; see also Allan et al., 2008). The extant scholarship has largely explored elementary education, with attention paid to gender-diverse representation in children’s literature (e.g., Capuzza, 2020; Crawley, 2017), and occasionally what happens when teachers integrate such representations into the elementary classroom (DePalma, 2013; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2015, 2016; Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013). The former literature has generally found that “children’s picture books with transgender, gender expressive, and genderqueer characters … failed to subvert cisnormativity because they largely reinforced the foundational assumptions such as binarism and essentialism upon which it is based” (Capuzza, 2020, p. 337). This critique points to the limitations of gender diversity curricula that are additive (Banks, 2001), or, that simply add a representation of a transgender child with a static, gender-conforming and binary gender identity. The literature on classroom practices for gender diversity integration has documented particular teachers’ efforts to do what DePalma (2013) has called “radically holding the gender question” (p. 12), or, engaging children in activities that open gender up for conversations without tidy conclusions. This practice has been found to benefit from “carefully scaffolded pedagogical interventions … and … responding to the immediacy of the local school context and the students’ lived experiences” (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016, pp. 822-823), as opposed to individual lessons or read-alouds detached from how gender is precisely playing out where a lesson takes place. There is also a long-standing literature on the teacher’s body as gender (and gender diversity) curriculum, theorizing the transgender and/or gender non-conforming teacher themself as a curricular intervention in cisheteronormativity (see Iskander & Khayatt, 2020; Keenan, 2017).

The present article draws on and contributes to these literatures by insisting on the relevance of lived experiences and embodied knowledges to the practice of teaching about gender diversity, while also broadening what counts as ‘data’ on this practice. Teaching about gender diversity is a practice with a considerable history, despite not being yet well-represented in the literature; we (the authors) have been participating alongside colleagues and communities for decades in ways of teaching that open up gender beyond cisheteronormative stricture, and our theoretical framework and methodology allow us to study how this practice is produced by and through what (and who) we bring with us, enacting knowledges and commitments that may not be available to our consciousness at the time. And so, this article is an invitation to other gender (and sexual) diversity scholars to reimagine what inquiry can look like in this area.

*Situating the school climate chart*

The book’s afore-mentioned school climate chart (Figure 1) is grounded in the literature on gender diversity in K-12 schools, which is generally bleak. Despite advances in human rights protections, K-12 school structures are changing at an incremental and uneven rate relative to the urgent plight of transgender and/or gender non-conforming students (i.e., whose gender identities and/or gender expressions differ from expectations associated with their birth-assigned sex). Research has shown that these students face pervasive discrimination, harassment and violence in schools they are legally required to attend (Kosciw et al., 2018; Taylor & Peter, 2011). School staff are slow to respond to harassment or violence directed at transgender and/or gender non-conforming students, and tend to have little knowledge of gender diversity (Meyer, 2008; Staley & Leonardi, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016) as well as the law more generally (Schimmel & Militello, 2007). While intensive parental advocacy may lead to significant improvement in some transgender students’ school experiences (see Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018), many do not have allied parents/guardians (Grossman, D’Augelli, & Frank, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2010), and many are homeless or in the care of the state for reasons that include familial transphobia (see Durso & Gates, 2012). Studies (see Roksa & Potter, 2011) have also shown that a parent or guardian’s socio-economic status mediates their advocacy at school, meaning that multi-marginalized transgender students are unlikely to see the same improvement as their more privileged peers. For these reasons, many transgender students consistently miss school due to feeling unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2018), negatively affecting their academics and potentially leading to school attrition with associated consequences down the line such as underemployment, insecure housing and homelessness, with the latter being disproportionately experienced by transgender youth (Morton et al., 2018). Suicidality and self-harm among transgender young people have been consistently correlated with experiencing gender-related discrimination and violence at school (Veale, et al., 2017). We read this body of literature not as substantiating the experiences of individual students, but as evidence of school climates that produce elevated risk for students who *do not do gender like the majority of their peers*. Our use of this italicized phrase is intentional, and indexes the book’s commitment to a conceptualization of gender diversity that exceeds people who are transgender, in part due to recent research showing that gender non-conformity in one’s gender expression – regardless of one’s gender identity or sexual orientation – is a factor in experiencing verbal and physical harassment at school (Klemmer et al., 2019; Taylor & Peter, 2011).

Text

Description automatically generated*Figure 1: The school climate chart.*

Fortunately, researchers (e.g., Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Johns et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2013; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Meyer, Stafford, & Airton, 2016; Russell et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2006; Toomey, McGuire & Russell, 2012; Ullman, 2016, 2017) have also identified factors that contribute to less-harming school climates for transgender and gender non-conforming students, including LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, but also Gender and Sexuality Alliance or similar clubs, restorative justice programs, supportive classmates and teachers, school-wide policies against gender-based harassment and violence, opportunities for students to participate in governance and activism, and – perhaps most unsurprisingly – having one’s correct name and gender pronouns used. Recognizing that school climate absolutely interacts with the teacher’s curriculum and pedagogy, our book offers teachers the school climate chart as a way to appraise their school’s climate using findings from the above-cited literature on factors that contribute to harm or well-being. The chart is included in the introduction and describes four different school climates, organized from least (left) to most (right) welcoming of gender diversity. Each column’s description references factors that range from the presence of out transgender students, to consideration of responses (even hypothetical) to gender non-conformity among students or teachers. The teacher-reader is advised to make use of the school climate chart by either selecting an initial explicit lesson on gender diversity, collaging a unit or lesson sequence, or using each lesson’s extensions to enrich e.g., a Level 1 lesson for a Level 4 school. How each lesson plan came to be situated within a particular school climate level is the topic of this article, studied through a theoretical framework that looks for significance beyond language and consciousness: the primary tools we used to create the chart.

# Assemblage, affect, and post-qualitative methodology

Our theoretical framework draws on Deleuzo-Guattarian (1987; Bell, 2006; Delanda, 2006) assemblage theory and theories of affect (Berlant, 2011; Massumi, 2002; Stewart, 2007), in that we take up affect theory as an archive of writings on the everyday registration – at the level of corporeal sensation – of being caught up in larger wholes far exceeding ourselves, our intentions, and our consciousness: assemblages. We use affect to map this unfolding experience of being ‘caught up’ in the ‘teaching about gender diversity’ assemblage, which we argue is “directly compelling” (Stewart, 2007, p. 3). The next two sub-sections flesh out our theoretical and methodological keywords – assemblage and affect – and a third sub-section brings them together in a description of the article’s post-qualitative methodology.

## Keyword: Assemblage

Assemblages are entities composed of the relations among their components, which are constantly changing (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Assemblages require an *ontogenetic* (Massumi, 2002) rather than ontological lens because they are in motion, and an attention to how a thing *is becoming* (genesis) rather than to what it (statically) *is*. The aim of assemblage theory is to mobilize an ontogenetic lens on a world that is both human and more-than-human: in which what happens and why it matters are irreducible to what the sovereign human subject registers, understands, and believes to be significant at the time. An assemblage has properties (what it can be) and capacities (what it can do), but these are neither essential nor static; rather, an assemblage’s properties and capacities emerge in real-time from the collective exercise of its components’ capacities (DeLanda, 2006). Therefore, studying an assemblage involves attending to what its components do, and mapping the emergent properties and capacities of the assemblage that emerge from this doing. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) original writings on assemblages have been clarified and extended by others (e.g., Bell, 2006; DeLanda, 2006), including in ways amenable to studying assemblage becoming as social phenomena that affect human subjects.

Jeffrey Bell (2006) situates the Deleuzian conceptual archive in opposition to traditional Western metaphysics which embraces transcendence, suggesting that a thing reaches its fullest expression when it ceases to change and becomes ‘complete.’ A transcendent ontology of gender diversity, for example, would hold it possible to arrive at the fullest expression of human gender variation, such that it could be perfectly represented and, moreover, taught about via the kind of representations that the lesson plan genre provides. There are accounts of transgender life, for example, that reflect a transcendent ontology: that only recognize as ‘transgender’ the transgender men and women who undergo medical transition in order to ‘pass’ as a person of their gender identity. Such accounts can be found among transgender people, and more broadly among the general public. Arguably, accounts of nonbinary3 transgender life may also reflect a transcendent ontology of gender diversity if they produce a singular ‘nonbinary’ embodiment, or a particular way that one must become legible in order to be ‘really’ nonbinary.

By contrast, Deleuzian metaphysics replaces transcendence (as above, that a thing is ‘complete’ when it ceases to change) with *immanence*, in that a thing’s being can be simultaneously in process andcomplete. Bell (2006) terms the continual process of both/and that produces somewhat-stable identities *chaosmos*. Chaosmos is at once bothcosmos, or “stable, structured strata that are in some sense complete” and chaos, or “unstable, unstructured, deterritorializing flows” (p. 4). For Bell, assemblages are dynamic systems on the edge of chaos. They are dynamic because they are always changing and in motion, but not to an extent – too sudden, too fast, too erratic – that they lose consistency and fall apart altogether. The cosmotic assemblage dies (un-becomes itself) because it resists change and adaptation. A complete, identifiable assemblage has sufficient consistency to function but “is forever open to an outside it presupposes, an immanent chaos which both threatens the system and allows it to create novel adaptations” (p. 178). An *immanent* ontology of gender diversity holds that human gender variation will always be local and in process, within and exceeding ‘transgender,’ ‘cisgender,’ ‘nonbinary,’ etc. – and that its fullest expression is the continuous but gradual emergence of identifiable ways of living gender, legible-enough in the present but far enough away from what we know to be the coming of the new.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) proposed that an assemblage is defined – i.e., comes to be identifiable as ‘X’ and ‘not Y’ – along two axes, and we take up Manuel DeLanda’s (2006) useful account of what these are and how they operate. The two axes are: (1) the roles of individual assemblage components, and (2) the whole-assemblage processes of *territorialization* and *deterritorialization* in which components participate. Components – including human subjects – have roles that can be expressive, material, or mixtures thereof. Expressivity includes spoken and other language but also movement, sound, and touch. In social assemblages, DeLanda specifies that components playing a material role “at the very least involve a set of human bodies properly oriented (physically or psychologically) towards each other” (p. 12) but can also include food, labour, tools, machines, and body parts. According to DeLanda (2006), “processes of territorialization ... define or sharpen the spatial boundaries of actual territories ... [and] increase the internal homogeneity of an assemblage” (p. 13). By contrast, processes that blur or weaken boundaries or increase internal heterogeneity are deterritorializing. An assemblage can respond to a stimulus by territorializing (gradually becoming more homogeneous), deterritorializing (gradually becoming more heterogeneous through a back-and-forth movement that produces a change but still-identifiable assemblage), or re-territorializing (swift and sudden component responses that snuff out changes in process).

By combining Bell (2006) and DeLanda’s (2006) conceptualizations of assemblages, we were able to explore how the ‘teaching about gender diversity’ assemblage was produced and producing in the process of creating our book. Key to our methodology is the relationship between assemblage and affect, in which affect is the vehicle through which an assemblage’s responses to stimuli become apparent to the subject.

## Keyword: Affect

For the purposes of this article, we take up affect as the means by which one’s component-status in assemblages becomes apparent in everyday life. For affect theorists in the lineage of Baruch Spinoza (see Robinson & Kutner, 2019), affect is distinct from emotion. Massumi (2002) helpfully separates emotion and affect as follows: “an emotion is subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is … intensity owned and recognized” (p. 28). Affect is unowned because we are affected prior to narrating ‘my emotions;’ or, the qualified, personal experience that we call emotion is not the first thing that happens, or the most significant. As Colebrook (2002) suggests, “‘affect’ is what happens to us when we feel an event” and is not “the meaning of an experience but the response it prompts” (p. xix). Here, affect does not originate within the subject, but is channelled by bodies, both human and more-than-human. Rather, affect is autonomous. Bodies and subjects are to be understood as permeable (Brennan, 2004) in addition to being non-sovereign (Berlant, 2011). Affect is thus a fleeting sensation through which we can sense (then perhaps come to narrate later on) that something has happened because it has moved on and moved through us. In this way, the body apprehends much more and prior to what the subject can hold itself to know at the time.

### **Method: How we worked with data (as it worked on us)**

As we have argued, affect can be considered a corporeal indication of the subject’s becoming caught up in things that exceed the human and their sovereign understanding (assemblages). This intensity rises and falls in relation to how close the assemblage has come to its thresholds: to chaos or cosmos, where it unbecomes or dies. If “actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them” (Massumi, 2002, p. 35), our study of the ‘teaching about gender diversity’ assemblage produced in and producing throughout the process of creating our book is a practice of studying what escaped us at the time. What escaped us (affect) was, in our rendering, the sensation of being caught up in the moving thing (assemblage) that we were seeking to stabilize as the topic of our book: gender diversity, and teaching about it. Yet, the simultaneously intensive *and* ponderous experience of categorizing lessons in the school climate chart was viscerally familiar to the first author, whose prior study (Airton, 2014) engaged something like the theoretical and methodological framework we created here; as Elisabeth A. St. Pierre (2019) has argued, post-qualitative inquiry “must be invented, created differently each time, and one study called post qualitative will not look like another” (p. 4). With a sense that something might be happening, we began recording our conversations about which lessons belong where in the chart.

One year later, we sat down to review these audio-visual recordings, far removed from the illusory yet seductive possibility of sovereignty, or that we could claim to know why we said or did anything at the time. Following Mazzei (2013; Mazzei & Jackson, 2017), this approach insists that conversations express a non-sovereign, mixed agency on the part of interlocutors, in this case ourselves. DeLanda’s (2006) point that the subject is an assemblage of sub-personal components, and that conversations are (fleeting) assemblages of subjects is well-taken. We often say or do things sporadically, immediately in conversation that express an agency but not one that is pre-meditated or sovereign. We erupt, interrupt, start and stop at speeds greater than pre-meditation allows. We surprise ourselves, by sitting still and quiet or by standing up, whether literally or figuratively. Very seldom, in our experience of this and other inquiries, does someone review the record and not find themself to some extent a stranger. Upon reviewing the recordings, the ways in which we engaged each other were unplanned, and were often surprising to us in both form and content. Analysing the seven hours of video involved repeated viewing and partial multi-modal transcription in a process of performing collaborative analysis (Lenz Taguchi, 2013) with the distant Lee and Susan of one year ago, or what Lenz Taguchi has called ‘analysing the analysis’ that led to each lesson plan’s placement in the school climate chart.

Our theoretical framework required that language is “deposed from its god-like centrality in the construction and regulation of wordly [sic] affairs, to become one element in a manifold of forces and intensities that are moving, connecting and diverging” (MacLure, 2013, p. 660). We tracked rhythms and patterns in our conversations’ expressive/semantic content and material form. Corporeal, affective intensity and its ‘absence’ – i.e., a flat, humdrum line with ‘nothing happening’ – were our barometres. We followed inflections, outbursts, and flat lines, as well as speeds and durations of speech, sound and silence. We established the modal rhythm of our conversation as we worked through each lesson plan together and arrived – sometimes quickly, suddenly and seamlessly, and sometimes haltingly and stickily – at a ‘decision’ to place a lesson plan in one or another chart level.

In reviewing the audio-visual record of our Skype conversations, we see the on-screen Lee and Susan – assemblage components exercising their expressive and material capacities in service to the ‘teaching about gender diversity’ assemblage – begin by selecting a lesson plan and re-reading it together, often silently and sometimes muttering. During this re-reading, either Lee or Susan begin speaking, usually by authoritatively positing a school climate level. What follows is either swift agreement (uncommon), a pause of variable duration (fairly common), or unfolding tentative agreement (most common). Unfolding tentative agreement usually sparks more silent skimming, and a less authoritative positing of a higher level (i.e., that the lesson should be taught in a school climate more hospitable to gender diversity than the level originally posited by the first speaker and now retracted). Our baseline established, we then looked and felt for departures from this rhythm, whether that departure was a seamless lack of deliberation or a sudden, swift end to deliberation. We sorted conversations about each lesson on a continuum from seamlessness to stickiness, noting the most and least laborious ‘decisions.’ We approached everything that actualized (Massumi, 2002) in our conversational record – both speech and silence, movement and stillness – as never ‘just what happened’ but always producing the ‘teaching about gender diversity’ assemblage in which we are caught up.

# From sticky to seamless: The threshold is a chalice

Re-territorializing events emerged into striking significance: when a meandering, tentative deliberation between two different school climate levels is swiftly, suddenly cauterized. We considered each re-territorializing event’s expressive content (i.e., semantic meaning), and found a pattern in where deliberation abruptly ceases: each event takes shape in relation to what we have come to think of as ‘the chalice.’ In our usage, ‘the chalice’ figures an onto-epistemological relationship between the phenomenon ‘gender diversity’ and a human or non-human entity that ontogenetically emerges as its vessel in a particular moment of teaching. By onto-epistemological, we mean a mixture of what gender diversity is (ontology), and how we come to create, understand, or authorize knowledge of gender diversity (epistemology). As with our method of following affect to significance, the term ‘chalice’ emerged during a conversation about the thresholds that came to bear its name. In discussing these thresholds and struggling to bring their affective significance into language, Lee’s hands consistently came together as if preparing to drink from running water, but reverentially held aloft at eye level and away from their body. Noticing this expression and how it stuck around, we gave it a name: the chalice.

In common usage, the term ‘chalice’ connotes a drinking vessel that is in some way unordinary. Arguably, its singular referent is the Holy Grail, which held the blood of Jesus Christ at the Crucifixion and is sacred within several Christian denominations. While we are not personally drawn to its religious connotation, we find its sacredness compelling; being offered something to drink in a chalice as opposed to an ordinary cup or glass tends to call one into an attentiveness reserved for extra-ordinary circumstances. After all, in our deliberations, the chalice emerged in relation to lesson plan features where gender becomes extra-ordinary: marked, sensitized, or highly visible.

Our thresholds also resonate with the chalice’s most basic function: a vessel that contains. Vessels are not often distinguished from their contents; for example, ‘tea’ connotes and is universally figured as a cup of tea, and ‘wine’ as a glass or bottle of wine. Onto-epistemologically, ‘the chalice’ in our usage *is* what it contains: ‘gender diversity’ as a highly contextualized gender otherness. The chalice emerged in relation to lesson plan features where gender not only became marked, as above, but where a particular kind of human or non-human entity was marked and thereby produced as the vessel of gender’s otherness in the course of the activity (etc.) described. In the coming sections, we stage three different chalices: student, externally-produced text, and student-authored text.

***‘The chalice’ can be a student***

In our conversations, we were each alone in our respective office, seeing the other’s face and torso through the screen. This ‘alone-ness,’ however, does not bear out within an assemblage theory framework. We were not two people in conversation, but two ‘teaching about gender diversity’ assemblage components among many others who were *potentially* present because they were affecting. We use ‘potential’ to reflect affect scholar Brian Massumi’s (2002) insistence that “the body is as immediately virtual as it is actual” (p. 30). The virtual is a “pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies, … a realm of potential” (ibid.) which materially affects the human subject and their experience regardless of whether a potential actualizes in the subject’s direct experience as one’s own actions or the actions of another. For Massumi, “what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt—albeit reduced and contained” (ibid.), legible as a welling-up that, we argue, is as materially significant as the doings of ‘real, live’ students and teachers whom we might observe enacting one of the book’s lesson plans. Caught up, affected and affecting in our classroom climate deliberations, we were not alone but joined by a host of potential others. In particular, re-territorializing events invariably saw us joined by what we might call ‘potential students’ whom we co-produced, vigourously narrating the student’s felt potential presence in the goings-on described within a lesson plan. These potential students were remarkably affecting.

Some of these potential students were transgender or intersex. In a deliberation about a middle years lesson plan on pubertal body changes that de-centres the sex/gender binary, we were immediately joined by a potential student duo: one with an intersex condition who knows this about herself, and another who is starting to realize that her experiences of her body are not mapping on to what she hears from others, but who might not yet (or ever) have access to the term ‘intersex’ to describe herself. In these students’ company, thinking and feeling our way through the lesson was seamless, with a swift Level 1 categorization when we noted that neither student would encounter a rendering of ‘the female body’ that made her own body unthinkable as such, and that neither student would be asked to share information about her own body with others. No student would become the chalice: become ‘gender diversity’ itself, in that moment, through exposure (see Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, & Airton, 2016), such that a Level 1 school’s hostility to gender diversity would find no sticky target.

Similarly, in deliberating a secondary mathematics lesson wherein students statistically model the recent explosion of identity-driven gender-neutral pronoun usage (see Airton, 2018a), we walked with a potential nonbinary student with they/them pronouns through the opening activity where students share identities that are important to them and common terms of reference for the same that they find to be alienating. A note to the teacher suggests informing any transgender-spectrum students about the activity in advance, offering the right to pass. A threshold: would our potential nonbinary student accept the lesson’s invitation to voice and centre their gender identity? What kind of a classroom climate might hold them safe if they did choose to incur this attention, perhaps for the first time? We noted that a Level 3 climate is one where transgender and/or gender non-conforming students feel visible and supported but receive unwanted (but not malign) attention; the attention is a condition of being here, already felt by our nonbinary student and informing their decision to participate. Our deliberation swiftly shut down, we declare Level 3 and move on.

In addition to these potential transgender-spectrum or intersex students (and fellow assemblage components), potential cisgender students were *as* likely to emerge as the student-chalice in our deliberations, and not less likely, as one might expect. Cisgender students became the chalice in lesson plans that would see their own gender become hyper-visible: an object of scrutiny, with the potential of being called into question by peers or family members. For example, in a secondary drama lesson, students learn to prepare a dramatic monologue by creating a character with sufficient depth to support their performance. The teacher then distributes a monologue to each student with any information about the original character’s gender excised from the text, a decision kept from the students. Over several periods, students develop their character, practice delivering their monologues before a small group of peers, and ultimately perform in front of the whole class. A final period engages students in reflecting on how they mobilized gender in character development via questions such as: “Did you assign your character a gender—if so what impacted your choice? If not, why do you think that was not an important identifier? Are there specific ways we may choose to hold our bodies or modulate our voices in regards to gender norms?” Our sticky deliberation pertained to whether this lesson belonged in a Level 2 or Level 3 school, hinging on the following extension idea:

A reveal of the gender of the monologues in the original written text. In partners, students could read through the original monologue with the gender identifiers that had been removed and discuss similarities and differences from the performer’s interpretations. Students could then further discuss perceptions and performance of gender in society at large and why it matters if a character has an assigned gender.

In the midst of our deliberation, a potential student emerges into sensory presence: a cisgender boy publicly realizes, after performing his monologue in front of the class, that his character is a woman or girl. Other students monitor his response to this realization: sufficiently distancing? Sufficiently nonplussed? What does this require, and can he marshal it fast enough such that his becoming-chalice softly unfolds and lightly passes by? Or does it become sticky, remaining after the lesson?A threshold: we agree – suddenly and now seamlessly – on Level 3. A Level 2 school, where some students are gender non-conforming but face challenges, and few or no students are out as transgender or under the LGBT2Q umbrella, will not do. The potential cisgender boy, receiving extra scrutiny for his gender after delivering what is now revealed to be a ‘woman’s monologue’ against his context’s particular iteration of misogyny, needs a Level 3 school in order to weather becoming- and then unbecome the chalice.

One potential cisgender student recurred across our conversations, to the extent that he eventually acquired a name: ‘Little Jeremy.’ Little Jeremy emerged and participated in our deliberations over lessons where students individually complete reflective activities about their own relationship with gender, and then immediately share their work with the entire class. The stickiness: is this a Level 3 or Level 4 lesson? Recall that Level 4 is as close to a gender diversity utopia as the relevant literature allows, whereas Level 3 is what most would consider to be a positive climate for transgender and/or gender non-conforming students, despite their receiving unwanted (but not necessarily malign) attention. In one conversation, we waver at length between 3 and 4 until Little Jeremy weighs in: after some quiet writing time in class, Little Jeremy shares first and reads his heartfelt gender poem out loud to everyone, in which he has fully leaned into the teacher’s invitation. His forthright, detailed and vulnerable poem about his boyness exceeds what the class can contain, eliciting punishing laughter and more subtle forms of peer distancing. Other children refuse to share; those who do are clearly editing on the fly or as they read, dialling down what might stand out. A threshold: we realize that we have misread the lesson plan. The task begins in small student-selected groups who create a poem together, creating a buffer of chosen peers and the possibility of ‘testing’ one’s ideas against the consensus of the group before a big reveal to all. The product has composite authorship, and Little Jeremy is not all on his own; each small group, a chalice. Our deliberation swiftly terminated, we bring the lesson down to Level 2.

Lastly, there were re-territorializing events in our conversational record where the student-chalice was not necessarily transgender *or* cisgender, but where this boundary blurred given how naming one’s gender at all can be exposing, for anyone: a becoming-chalice. For example, in a secondary lesson about gender pronouns, the teacher begins by leading students through an activity where they are asked to consider what pronouns they would infer for a dozen or so public figures who are intersex, nonbinary, gender-fluid, transgender men, or transgender women, and all of whom openly, unabashedly, and educatively mobilize their gender. After an extensive debrief, students participate in a second activity where they learn how to ask about another person’s pronouns, as well as practice sharing their own in a circle. In our deliberation, after the usual pattern of silent skimming punctuated by muttering, Lee immediately jumps in with a Level 2 declaration, but Susan is silent. Lee tries something else, lowering the climate bar even further: “Level 1…?” At this provocation, Susan swiftly begins to argue against this activity taking place in schools where (per our climate chart) “there is little to no tolerance for gender nonconformity, and there are no reliable in-school supports for transgender students.” A host of potential students emerges to participate in this conversation, becoming-chalice by virtue of having to state something that is just (should be?) so very obvious about themself: their gender pronouns. The having-to-say-it, even when prompted, destabilizes gender’s obviousness, whether one is stating the pronoun others know (e.g., a cisgender student or out transgender student) orone which others have not heard from you before (e.g., coming out as in some way transgender). Susan recites the Level 2 description: “Gender nonconforming and/or transgender students and staff likely feel wary or isolated.” Our potential students are wary or isolated, in our midst, acting on us and through us. The hammer falls: a suggestion to annotate the school climate chart, and tell the teacher-reader of our book only to facilitate pronoun sharing if they are in Level 4’s gender diversity utopia. A threshold: Level 4 with pronoun sharing, or Level 2 without.

***‘The chalice’ can be a text***

In addition to students becoming-chalice – or becoming the ‘gender diversity’ taught about in the lesson at hand – the chalice was sometimes a text. As a text, the chalice emerged in two ways: first, as externally sourced (i.e., not by/with/from students) and the only chalice; and second, as a student-authored self-representation in circulation beyond the classroom in which the lesson takes place.

*The text-chalice is externally-sourced*

Our externally-sourced text-chalice deliberations uniquely ruptured our habitual rhythm with their uncanny seamlessness. For example, a middle years mathematics lesson explores numeric and pictorial representations of data, inviting students to apply their knowledge of nominal, ordinal, and scale variables to evaluating whether different ways of categorization effectively represent a quantitative dataset. The final step asks the teacher to quickly define ‘transgender’ and definitively state that there are many ways transgender people identify. Students are then invited to evaluate two Canadian and two American large-scale surveys that include a gender identity question: the most recent national censuses from each country, the US Transgender Survey (James et al., 2016), and the Ontario Trans PULSE survey (e.g., Bauer & Scheim, 2015). Which, the teacher asks, is exemplary in terms of representing the many ways transgender people identify? There is no question about whether transgender peoples’ genders are valid: the given-ness elides argumentation. When our deliberation begins, Susan immediately declares Level 1 and Lee immediately agrees, with an ensuing verbal ping-pong of comments on the lesson’s use of the most privileged form of knowledge production: generalizable, and purportedly bias-free. This chalice is wrought from post-positivist gold: a gender diversity recognized by government and validated by Science.

Another text-chalice example emerged in a secondary English Language Arts lesson plan. Before the lesson begins, students have read the story of a transgender boy named Luke from a popular anthology of first-person transgender teen narratives. Guiding questions encourage empathy for a boy struggling with a heavily gender-segregated school climate and rigid norms for girls or boys to follow (Level 1, in our chart). Luke, read as a gender non-conforming girl, navigates this climate as best as he can, receiving sanction along the way. The lesson itself begins with a journaling exercise guided by questions about gender (what it is, how various things come to be associated with either binary gender), and an ensuing discussion has students sharing their answers in an almost omniscient register, phrased with a ‘we’ that transcends individual student responders: e.g., how does the media tell us what it means to be a certain gender? Next, the teacher briefly shares guiding definitions (including transgender, gender identity, and gender expression), and a small then large group discussion engages students in analysing key moments in Luke’s narrative for their impact on his experience of school and his sense of self. A final class activity sees students searching for the barriers Luke encountered, but in their own school, and creating an action plan to address them. Only in the closing homework assignment are students asked to explicitly reflect on their own gender: how it might have been shaped by society’s expectations. This is not shared; no student-chalice emerges. Our habitual silent skimming is broken only by comments about how little revision this lesson required such that we initially do not even remember it. No school climate level is posited; the ‘deliberation’ has no threshold. As if we have already agreed on Level 1, Lee suggests that the only non-Level 1 element is the text going home before the teacher has scaffolded the topic. Into the chart, an annotation: Level 1, but the teacher should consider reading time in class instead of sending home the text.

*The text-chalice is student-authored and in circulation*

The second text-chalice emerging to pre-empt deliberation in our climate chart conversations was a student’s enduring representation of their own gender, circulating without them in the school or classroom community. In an elementary lesson, students share their knowledge of activities that are ‘for girls’ or ‘for boys,’ with the teacher probing and gently challenging each answer. In a subsequent show-and-tell activity, each student shares their favourite toy, eventually mixing up the toys and communally sorting them into three bins marked ‘girls,’ ‘boys,’ or ‘all children.’ More teacher-led questioning and troubling ensue, culminating in a group discussion: have you ever been told that you can’t play with a toy because it is for someone of a different gender than yours? How did that make you feel? Students are then guided in identifying something that they like or like to do that does not follow expectations for their gender; after each student writes or illustrates a page about their own gender non-conformity, a book is created and sent home, with a copy in the classroom library. Our initial silent skimming produces an easy Level 1 declaration from Lee; Susan readily agrees at first, but we keep merrily skimming along until we stop, suddenly. A threshold: the students will create, present, and then ‘publish’ a representation of their own gender non-conformity. This representation will go to every student’s home, and be on display for all to see in the school library. This misinterpretation – the author never suggested the *school* library, ‘merely’ the classroom library in which every student had produced such a self-representation – animates our ensuing deliberation over Level 2 or 3. A threshold: Level 2, but the book becomes an optional extension, with just one copy that lives in the classroom and is not reproduced or sent home to each family.

Lastly, in a secondary Language Arts lesson, students engage in a scaffolded process of creating ‘gender fanzines’ about pop culture figures whom they admire, where fanzines are self-published and often photo-copied miniature magazines filled with collage and fan art or writing on a particular topic. Our habitual rhythm carries us through a skim of the lesson’s hook (defining terms like gender expression and applying them to three teacher-selected pop culture figures), and introducing the fanzine genre. Hedging with an explicit mention of the pop culture focus, Lee posits Level 2, but Susan does not come along, instead highlighting a section of the fanzine template titled ‘About the Author.’ In this section, the student-author is asked to introduce themself, describe how they present their gender, and share a personal connection with their chosen figure’s experience of gender. Susan suggests Level 3, but prevaricates when Lee is silent, suggesting ways in which the lesson could remain in Level 2 but with some light modification or qualification. Lee latches on to Susan’s proposal: ‘About the Author’ can stay, but there is no display of the fanzines, and class presentations in which this information is shared are removed to a heavily-qualified extension, subject to teacher judgment about their own classroom and school climate.

# Two themes: Authorship and durability

Having fleshed out several iterations of the ‘chalice’ – the onto-epistemological vessel of gender diversity produced during our most sticky and most seamless school climate deliberations – we note two themes. The first theme is authorship. To illustrate, the externally-sourced text chalice functioned quite differently than the student-chalice (a particular student produced as gender otherness, in a lesson’s time and place). A student-chalice, such as intersex or transgender students, Little Jeremy, or a cisgender boy revealed to have performed a ‘woman’s monologue’ regularly emerged to end a sticky deliberation about whether a lesson could be categorized in a more risky climate level (i.e., 1 or 2); a student-chalice produced a ‘safer’ climate categorization (i.e., 3 or 4). By contrast, the text-chalice that was externally sourced (e.g., census or population-level survey data, trans teen narratives) tended to pre-empt deliberation altogether and lead to Level 1 or 2. However, the student-authored text-chalice functioned like the student-chalice, producing a Level 3 or 4 categorization. Onto-epistemologically, a student-authored self-representation cannot be held entirely separate from the (potential) student who creates it. Put simply, the text circulates *as* the student, and not separately as just their creation.

The second theme among our examples is the chalice’s durability. Once a student becomes-chalice, how quickly or softly can they unbecome and recede again into the background? Or, is the student-chalice sustained as such, producing the student as a candidate for gender-normative discipline by their peers? If a student-authored *text* becomes-chalice, is it spotlighted in ways that may overstate its significance to the child who created it, possibly setting in motion an identification process that seeks to accommodate a child now thinkable as a transgender boy or girl (see Pyne, 2014)?4 We wonder what conditions produce the extraordinariness of some children’s becoming-chalice, in ways that stick around and become a sign of their (binary) trans-ness and locus of adult anxiety. Forms of staging, ceremonial or sacred attentiveness, honorific elevation – where these were present and individualized to any particular student at any given time, our deliberation swiftly shut down.

# Conclusion: Becoming the chalice, or, occulting yourself gender-wise

From being guided to significance by affect, we find ourselves able to offer a suggestion to teachers that was not included in the book, but emerged as a result of engaging our editorial process via assemblage theory, affect theory, and post-qualitative methodology. Offering a practical suggestion is to insist that these often abstract bodies of theory can be in service to the (compromised, non-sovereign) human subject, including the subject who takes up the position of the teacher (see also Airton, 2019a, 2020). With Kuntz (2020), we “believe that post-qualitative inquiry work brings with it a belief that we might be productively otherwise and this belief is animated by an ethical commitment to change” (p. 3; see also Brinkmann, 2019): to fostering the coming of the new against a context of foreclosure. Thus, we suggest that teachers who are interested in fostering a classroom climate as open as possible to all the ways students live gender seek to produce contingent ‘gender diversity’ curriculum objects calibrated to emergent moments within their classroom, but – critically – that are not a student or student-authored text that may in its impact be materially indistinguishable from its creator. Instead, we offer teachers – and our readers who are teacher educators charged with preparing teachers – a practice provisionally termed *occulting* one’s self, gender-wise.

The term ‘occulting’ found us during our writing process, and stuck around long enough that we sought out a definition from the online Oxford Dictionary of English (Stevenson, 2010). As a transitive verb, ‘occulting’ is something done by a celestial body (e.g., a planet) in order to “conceal (an apparently smaller body) from view by passing or being in front of it” (p. 1227). In a way, this is what we are asking the teacher to do: become the chalice themself so as to bear the onto-epistemological burden of gender otherness from a position of comparative power. Figuratively, this means ‘placing one’s self in front of a smaller body,’ namely, a student likely to become produced as gender otherness via acts of teaching. As we have highlighted, this student may not be who teachers expect: who is transgender or markedly gender non-conforming (Airton, 2009, 2013). We may not know who will become-chalice until they have so become. The following suggestions sketch out a practice of occulting one’s self, gender-wise, as a K-12 teacher or teacher educator:5

* Refuse students’ attempts to attribute (binary) gendered interests or life choices to you based on your gender identity, such as liking sports, bearing or raising children, enjoying particular television shows or films, wearing a white flowy dress to your wedding, etc. This refusal could be explicit or occur via gentle scepticism. Omission, embellishment or fabrication are likewise encouraged (e.g., if most/all of your interests are gender-conforming). Perform not knowing about a particular gender-categorized person, topic, etc. that students expect you to know about.
* Similarly, regularly share information about yourself that is likely to contradict students’ assumptions about you based on your gender identity. You might, if you have not already, work on developing an interest in an area that is not stereotypically associated with your gender identity, but is shared by your students.
* Resist students’ positioning of you as an authority in support of claims about binary gender, again using gentle scepticism.
* Share your own gender pronouns upon meeting your students for the first time and when guests visit your classroom, especially if no one has ever gotten them wrong.
* Think or wonder aloud about how you might react or behave in particular circumstances, in ways that run afoul of your students’ gendered expectations, within their hearing.
* Make visible your own relationship with gender in everyday conversations with students by sharing what you do like about being your gender with its attendant contextually-specific expectations, and what you do not like as much.
* Model ways that your relationship with your gender has changed over time, or share what you did/liked in the past but less so now, or that you might like/do otherwise in the future.

While we cannot know in advance (or possibly ever) whether these practices are reliable, and in what dosage, our ‘findings’ suggest that they might be useful to enact in advance of a more explicit gender diversity curriculum integration to prepare the way.

Previous scholarship (e.g., Blount, 2000, 2005; Clifford, 1987; Connell, 2015; Keenan, 2017; Khayatt & Iskander, 2019) substantiates how education has continually sought to produce the teacher’s body as legibly gendered and binary, including via teacher dress codes, sex-determined curricular or extra-curricular duties, and the weeding-out of gender and/or sexual minority teachers. Our suggestion of occulting yourself, gender-wise subverts gender-conformity among teachers, inviting those with the most security (gender-wise, at least, but recognizing the ways in which *inter alia* racialization impacts how gender is read and negotiated) to consider experimenting with ways to become-chalice, momentarily, fleetingly, as a way to perhaps prepare one’s students for a more explicit lesson about gender diversity, like those in our book.

Having completed this process, and looking back through the book, we see this ‘teacher-chalice’ in some places. We have contributions from diverse transgender and/or gender non-conforming (whether transgender or cisgender) educators who will have always-already occulted themself, gender-wise because of how they do gender, and how they mobilize the same in an ongoing lived curriculum of gender diversity in which their students participate. Some of the book’s lessons demand that the teacher-reader occult themself in some way, as the author does in their teaching. These educators’ classrooms are a ‘Level 4’ regardless of where they are teaching, perhaps because they themselves carry the onto-epistemological burden of gender otherness, and perhaps not.

We close by noting an irony of the article: that our suggestions for occulting one’s self, gender-wise, are far more minor and incidental than the lesson plan-based approaches in books like our own. Who is to say that ‘teaching about gender diversity’ is something that happens via explicit curriculum delivery? ‘Teaching about gender diversity’ could be how the teacher holds and moves their body in a moment on a particular school day. This sort of ‘gender diversity curriculum’ can be enacted in places where a book like ours may not travel, and that gives us tremendous hope.

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# Notes

1. The term *cisheteronormativity* is an adaptation of the more familiar *heteronormativity* to account for transgender studies critiques of how heteronormativity presumes and produces cisgender subjects, bodies and desires as the norm. *Cisgender* is an adjective that applies to people who are not transgender, or, whose assigned sex and gender identity are in alignment.

2. In this article and in our other work (e.g., Airton, 2018b), we position transgender as a spectrum in order to signal the range of identities and ways of living gender that have come to be situated under the transgender ‘T’, whether binary or nonbinary, fluid or consistent.

3. Nonbinary people have a gender identity that is not neatly *either* man/boy *or* woman/girl. Whereas mainstream societal understandings of ‘transgender’ have tended to be binary (i.e., that transgender people are necessarily either women or men), nonbinary ways of living gender are re-emerging, particularly among youth and young adults, and tend to be situated under the transgender umbrella due to a departure from expectations for people of one’s assigned sex. Many nonbinary people have gender-neutral personal pronouns of reference, such as singular they/them (see Richards, Bouman, & Barker, 2017).

4. While we strongly advocate that schools become supportive of transgender students, we note that many adults in schools are not sufficiently educated about human gender diversity to avoid reinforcing binary assumptions about transgender children’s gender identities and gender expressions, or to affirm the gender non-conformity of cisgender children without presuming they are or will be transgender (see Pyne, 2014) and therefore necessarily ‘at-risk.’ Our critique here speaks back to the assumption that becoming-identifiable to cisgender adults as a transgender child or youth is a necessary good given how schools are currently organized.

5. These suggestions have been adapted from Airton (2019b), which was published during the process of writing this article.

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