

Locked Eyes

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Locked Eyes

Ramzi Fawaz

When I woke up to the news of the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub on June 12, 2016, the first words that popped into my head were: “I have to get back into the classroom.” This was an odd thought, to say the least. I was, after all, reveling in the freedom of research leave. But more important, what exactly did the horrific murders of queer people of color at a place of conviviality have to do with the seemingly professional, ordered, *square* space of teaching? My mind was quickly flooded with other thoughts, communal practices of mourning, and intense reflection on homophobia, Islamophobia, gun violence, and the general catastrophic state of our world. But as the days and weeks unfolded, my dialogues with colleagues, friends, and loved ones kept returning to the classroom and the practice of queer pedagogy. For those of us who teach about GLBTQ culture and politics, queer ways of life, and the public dimensions of sex and sexuality, we couldn't help but asking: what would it mean to teach our students in the wake of such an event; how would our classroom practice be transformed; did we believe our teaching could ever prevent such atrocity and how?

These conversations lead me back to that first thought, always more and more urgent in my head: *I have to get back into the classroom*. When I reverse engineered this idea, I realized it sprang from a set of assumptions I hold deeply in my heart: I believe the kind of murderous violence that unfolded at Pulse is born of conservatism in its most classical sense, the idea that one must conserve or defend an idealized way of life that others are seen as eroding or destroying with their freedom or simply their existence in the world; I believe that conservatism can be questioned, and potentially undone, by dynamic engagement with different ways of life and by the presence of substantive interlocutors who question

one's worldview and demand accountability for one's beliefs and actions; and I believe that the classroom, like the dance floor, is one of many spaces such engagement is set in motion.

The dance-floor and the classroom are strikingly similar. Both are spaces people frequent on a weekly basis where they meet a mixture of strangers, friends, and acquaintances to engage in acts of intimacy: the flow of bodies and exchange of ideas. Like dance floors, classrooms demand the formation of stranger intimacies, where we come to know, take seriously, and engage directly with other people, face to face. We lock eyes with others and something unfolds from that look that is often beyond our capacity to predict. Both spaces have the capacity to transform how we relate to and flow with other people; and just as any good DJ curates a musical selection to orchestrate the mood of a dance floor, so too an instructor is tasked with shaping the emotional atmosphere of a class to draw students in and encourage them to "dance" with one another. We are also tragically aware that classrooms and dance floors are spaces whose social energy and utopian potential can be snuffed out by violence—we have become nearly as accustomed to seeing guns enter these spaces as energetic bodies, ideas, and exchanges. Yet more than anything, classrooms and dance floors can be spaces that incite countless pleasures: the pleasure of shared ideas and bodily sensations, the pleasure of expanding one's network of relations, the pleasure of losing oneself in a collective practice, only to find oneself again reborn at the end of a session or long night of celebration, more attuned to others. These pleasures are not theoretical or abstract, but *experiential*. To participate in a classroom is as grounded, and worldly of an act as dancing in a club, and both models numerous ways of being with others in public space.

The comparison between these two spaces then is not merely abstract, but rather a conceptual leap required for our survival. What does it take for someone to look out across the expanse of a dance floor animated by queer, brown, black, and gender-nonconforming bodies, and see that space as vibrant, loving, *a gift* to the world? Consider that it requires an extraordinarily impoverished imagination and dearth of worldly connection to view such scenes and wish to extinguish them. What then prevents someone from being taken over by this kind of lethal intent? Is it possible that the classroom, when understood as a model for the dance floor, can be that space where we expose students not only to concepts and ideas, histories and theories, but also a range of feelings about what it means to be with and among others who are different from you? What happens too, when we hold students accountable for how they respond to those feelings? When we make this fact visible, when we tell students that they are in our classroom to dance with others, we open a horizon of possibility and a realm of freedom that few, if any, could truly turn against.

In queer studies classrooms, we discuss the most visceral and intimate aspects of lived experience from sex and sexuality, to pleasure and desire, to family and alternative kinship—we make these realms public, objects of collective concern, so that our students can begin to imagine that a classroom might not be so far from a dance floor, a consciousness-raising session, a political planning meeting, even perhaps an intellectual orgy. Time and again, I have seen that magical moment when a student begins to feel enough intimacy, vulnerability, and self-awareness around a set of materials we are engaging in a queer studies classroom, that they are overwhelmed by the feeling of investment and care for *something* or *someone* outside themselves. It is a moment when feelings of closed-mindedness give way to something like openness to the world. It can happen to every kind of student, from every background and every political position: that shared experience of recognition when students lock eyes with one another, bare their souls by admitting how something has affected them, take one another seriously, and hold one another accountable for what they think and feel. It is something different than grasping a concept, or retaining facts, or having the “right answer.” It is an affective realization about the nature of freedom, as a bond between people sharing ideas. When this experience sits in your body, week after week, it is unbearable to imagine it snuffed out of the world. This is not the outcome of just any kind of teaching, but rather a queer pedagogy that dares to highlight the sensual, erotic, and affective aspects of worldly engagement with ideas and bodies.

That terrible June morning, I thought the words “I need to get back into the classroom,” because the classroom was the space where *I* learned how to dance with others, long before I stepped onto an actual dance floor. When I finally did, awkwardly, clumsily, at 19, I found that space alienating and unwelcoming, but not for that reason worthy of being dismissed, ignored, or eliminated; I recognized it as something enticing, a place I wanted to learn how to shimmy into, let go, and melt with the music. In time, I did. In the face of intense feelings of helplessness, knowing that my queer kin were suffering, I remembered what I know how to do best as a pedagogue: I know how to teach people to dance with each other, how to take pleasure in the encounter with the unfamiliar, how to recognize one another amid the lights and music. This is not theory versus practice or activism versus teaching. This is something we can do that has concrete results. It is possible for us to teach our students in a way that leads them to look out at a dance floor, and join in.

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Imagination of American Comics (NYU Press, 2016). His work appears in numerous publications including the academic journals *American Literature*, *GLQ*, *Callaloo* and *Anthropological Quarterly*. His new book, *Queer Formalism: Shaping Gay and Feminist Freedom*, explores the formal and aesthetic politics of movements for women's and gay liberation in the 1970s.