On Wholeness and Devotion

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On December 17, we attended a Yule Celebration at a cabin near Estes Park. Sitting in front of a stone fireplace to fight off the Colorado cold, our hostess asked us to open our hearts and minds to each other and the cosmic energy surrounding us. Sitting in a circle, each of us lit a candle to add our light to the circle. We were then asked to forgive ourselves a past transgression. Fellow participants cast each other's shame into the fire, consumed in forgiveness—a gift that comes more easily when giving it to others than to ourselves. We were then asked to write a word on a piece of flash paper of something we wanted to cultivate in the coming year. Bruce Parker chose *devotion* and Ren Dawe chose *wholeness*. Trusting our intuition, or perhaps the two glasses of mulled wine that preceded the ritual, we gave our words to the smoldering hearth and watched as they evaporated.

In the regressive step of *currere* (Pinar, 1994), we return to the past to capture it as we experienced it and as it influences our present. We focus our inquiries on wholeness and devotion in this article using the regressive step by engaging with our biographic pasts to better understand ourselves in the present. In our writing and activism, there is an understanding that while we must engage with our past selves and experiences, we must not succumb to them—a concept that underlies the regressive moment.

The current academic discourse around wholeness is often grounded in Clark's (1990) claim, "Life is shaped by either an assumption of separateness, in which the essence of reality is fragmentation, or an assumption of wholeness, in which the essence of reality is unity" (p. 47). Ren's autobiographical narratives challenge that binary while investigating the search for wholeness, its relationship to acts of separation, and their connection to *education as experience and experience as education.* Through the lens of transness, these regressive vignettes attempt to analyze wholeness through experiences of amputation, separation, and isolation as a queer academic.

Bruce's Devotions are based on an understanding of devotion as an intense and deep commitment or love that is expressed through action and ongoing practices. The Autobiographic Devotions, taken separately and as a whole, gesture toward a tentative understanding using the regressive moment. They are focused on facts, words, and imagination. They are, at best, partial and incomplete in their exploration.

Ren: 1 - Wholeness in Transness

As a trans person, the search for wholeness is synonymous with the search for identity. It is inherent to my existence in queer spaces, in academic spaces, and in general. Growing up, there was a sense of absence, an unnerving wrongness sewn into my skin. My mother often quoted an authorless set of hermetic principles, a favorite being "before you know what I am, first you must know what I am not." Such was the case with my life as a girl; in each girlish costume resided a sense of emptiness and discomfort.

The discourse of transness is often centered around this experience: gender dysphoria, the sense of unease aroused by a mismatch between biological sex and gender identity. Easily digestible phrases like being "born in the wrong body" and the linear concept of "transitioning" from one gender to another help to generate empathy

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for us—those presumed to be trapped in the assumed agony of transness. However, my search for wholeness was not in running from dysphoria but walking towards euphoria in environments built to suppress, oppress, and depress queer joy.

When I think of early sensations of feeling *whole*, I smile thinking of my first trans friend's 25th birthday when he drunkenly offered to stab me in the glute with a syringe of testosterone. I quickly and resolutely accepted, and a week of euphoria followed (placebo effect my ass). I think of the first time I saw my chest, swollen from a week pressed under bandages, and the way my body rocked with tears and laughter and ache. I think about myself now, on the brink of an, unfortunately, necessary radical hysterectomy.

As a long-term endurer of endometriosis and a newly-insured working professional, I have the privilege of accessing a procedure wherein my lesion-lined uterus and its accoutrement will be laparoscopically removed through my belly. The desired effect of this procedure is to reduce my pain; an additional effect includes sterilization. It is not the purpose of this piece to analyze the psychological mutations of pain. However, I want to make note of the special kind of horror that accompanies a chronic condition when it is wrought from anatomy intrinsically linked to the emptiness in which you used to (and still may) exist. There is a sort of reckoning with the irony that my pursuit of wholeness has been, and is about to be, wholly reliant on removing parts of me. There is a sense of finality and divorce, of literally and figuratively amputating pieces of me that are linked to my dysphoria.

I am both relieved and grieving in ceasing my association with things that have caused me immeasurable pain. When I research the psychological impacts of hysterectomies, the literature is (unsurprisingly) quite blind to the trans masculine experience. (Alleged) cis women, however, have often reported a sense of "emptiness" after removing their uterus (Silva et al., 2010). Part of me thinks that is a symptom of widespread internalized misogyny: that women's reproductive organs are inherently tied to their worth. Another part of me wonders what sort of space is left in the body after you remove an organ. I worry that I will feel empty, too. The reality is that there is a part of me not long for this world that is destined for, I don't know, an incinerator, I think? When I try to picture it, my mind paints the melodramatic image of a uterus and ovaries, gaping in a barren cornfield, surrounded by vultures. Something about the images of death and decay feels like it gives my soon-to-be-deceased organs a sense of confirmed life—a dramatic end for my dramatic loins.

There is a worry of losing an aspect of a "whole" human experience—I am no longer able to create human life. The psychological literature on infertility and its connection to depression, psychological distress, perceived health, and quality of life is fairly extensive (Klemetti, 2010). I have never wanted to be a child-bearer, nor do I think that my genes—lined with chronic illness and mania—merit inheritance. However, the fantasy of watching someone experience the world for the first time, the way my partners have looked at me when they loved me so much they contemplated wanting two of me, and the crushing social pressure to be a parent or die alone have left me with additional worries of emptiness. The pursuit of wholeness is not necessarily synonymous with the desire for pain relief, but in my case, it absolutely has been; this does not come without sacrifice. However, with this sacrifice comes some aspects of freedom: a hope for relief and, with it, a future unburdened by reproductive function. My gender is a wholeness destined to be felt despite its amputative means.

Parker: 1st Devotion - Facts

When I was in eighth grade, the house I grew up in was emptier and quieter than it had ever been. My brother had stopped coming home from college to visit on weekends, and my mother had decided I was old enough to stay home alone. Those nights were filled with the sound of records and imagined dances with Patrick Swayze to the *Dirty Dancing Soundtrack*; even then I was drawn to bad boys.

My room had a large shelf that was full of stacks of index cards. The stacks were labeled in permanent marker with title cards that read like "Shakespeare Characters" and "Poets 1." I had been devoted to studying these cards for two years. The front of a card might have had the name of a poem and the back the poet, or the front might have had a character's name from a novel and the back the novel's title.

On nights when I didn't feel like dancing, I would pace around the house for hours going through stacks of cards one at a time memorizing or quizzing myself on the cards I had already studied. While attending Pikeville Elementary, I felt dumb and out of place. When I transferred to John's Creek because of being bullied, I felt less out of place, but still behind my classmates academically. I had been an avid reader since discovering the library in 3rd grade but had never heard many of the words pronounced aloud. I believed I sounded uneducated. It was a quiz bowl competition for sixth graders meant to recruit members to the academic team that first allowed space for me to feel intelligent.

Today in a work meeting, a colleague mentioned *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I blurted out "Kurt Vonnegut" without intending to, almost as if I had read the title of the novel on the front of a light blue index card—the light blue cards were my favorites. They commented on how well-read I was, and we moved on. I didn't stop the conversation to explain that I could tell them the plot in about two sentences, character names, and a quote but had never read the novel. I also didn't tell them I was incredibly proud when, at my 8th grade district quiz bowl competition, the speed at which I recalled that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written by Kurt Vonnegut (1969/1998) won an important match for my team.

Starting the summer that separated sixth grade and seventh grade, the most prominent feature of my room became the stacks of index cards. I learned more facts about literature than many college students do, but it was disconnected and partial knowledge without context. More than a decade later, I came home from college, and on a cold night I burnt those cards, including the light blue ones, in a bucket with my best friend Rhonda at my side.

Ren: 2 - Wholeness as a Queer Academic

To consider "wholeness" as a queer academic makes it apparent that a lot of my educational experiences felt hollow and disconnected. Though I have always been a lover of history and literature, even the history and literature propagated by dreadful white men, the sense of isolation that came with my adolescent transness was augmented by a lack of representation in academia. Neither the content I was learning nor the teachers delivering the information to me gave me any indication of how I fit into the world as a genderqueer person—much less the confidence to try.

My first inauguration to bridging my queer life and academic life came from informal sources: chatrooms, video blogs, chain-smoking on porches long enough to ask a stranger a vulnerable question. I didn't learn the term "trans" until I was a teenager, and I didn't learn about Stonewall until I graduated high school. One of my instructors faced penalty after mentioning the flagrant and casual attitudes to

homosexuality in ancient civilizations. I had already graduated with my bachelor's degree before I learned about our trans early pioneers like Candy Darling (2015) and James Barry/Margaret Ann Bulkley (Zvi, 2017). It was several years more before I was finally able to process my anger and grief on their behalf about the ongoing misgendering of these pioneers in academic texts. We continue to proliferate history co-opted from their life's work in entertainment, medicine, queer representation, and beyond to fit within outdated, rigid, and partial curriculum.

In my senior year of high school, my English teacher hated me. He weighed my grading differently than other students to "push me" and, ultimately, to punish me. My queerness was a threat to the Catholic school we both occupied, and my unyielding determination to highlight the presence of subcultures in literature was disciplined. To me, it is the job of the teacher to take nebulous and complex concepts and make them understandable to those experiencing them for the first time. Creating obstacles to learning does not promote resiliency; it creates autodidacts with elitist mindsets. Once, I wrote a paper on the uniquely queer examples of self-isolation and self-destruction of Mercutio in *Romeo & Juliet*. I received a D, a handful of red pen marks highlighting grammatical errors, and the note "incomplete evidence for an empty concept, homosexual innuendo is not an academic theory." The absolute irony, I thought, to be taught not to analyze relationship structures in a romantic text. I still carry the long-standing rage and emptiness I felt in absorbing what he was saying and believing it: my queerness had no place in the academic world. And by that virtue, neither did I.

Parker: 2nd Devotion - Words

Growing up I always had my nose in a book. I refused to leave the house without at least two in case I finished one. I wanted to be an English teacher because I thought that was the best way to make my career about reading. We were required to have a writing portfolio to graduate high school, and mine included two writings I was proud of: a short story about religious intolerance and a personal narrative about my first queer relationship. Both received a distinguished score, which was the highest possible mark. This did nothing to increase my confidence in my writing. I wanted to be a writer, but until college I believed writing for publication was reserved for affluent straight white men.

It wasn't until I read bell hooks, Dorothy Allison, James Baldwin, Eric Rofes, Jeaneatte Winterson, and Minnie Bruce Pratt that I understood there were stories only people who were *not* white affluent straight men could tell and some experiences that could only be theorized by people who had to fight to have their voices heard. These realizations and my devotion to reading and writing led to my interest in curriculum theory. I obtained three graduate degrees in curriculum, which culminated in a dissertation process that took 10 years or two months to complete, depending on when you start counting. There was a point early in those years when I stopped reading and writing altogether. Instead, I filled my time with queer activism. I eventually found my way to completing my dissertation (Parker, 2018) and received my Ph.D. after my activism had earned a position in the Louisiana Governor's Office—at the time the only Democratic Governor in the deep South.

It took the months of loneliness in the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown to lead me back to reading and writing. Rhonda, my high-school best friend and soulmate, and I were in a period of not communicating, but our loneliness brought us back to each other. One quiet Saturday night in the small apartment in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that I shared with Micah, my partner, I decided to write Rhonda a letter. I started writing to her

that night, and in the coming months, it would seem like I never stopped except to read. I then wrote to her about the books I was reading and included quotes that I thought she would like. Over the next year, we exchanged more than 300 letters. Remembering my devotion to Rhonda reignited my devotion to reading and writing.

In one letter I wrote,

> Until I assembled all my letters to you in a binder and considered them each a part of a single document, my dissertation had been my favorite thing I had written, but now this binder is both the longest and the most honest.

In her response to that letter, she asked to read my dissertation. I mailed her a copy in a binder. She was the first person to read it, aside from the members of my doctoral committee and Micah, who copy-edited it prior to submission. Rhonda wrote a 15-page response that ended with her telling me that she was proud of me. While reading that letter, I cried for the second time about completing my dissertation. Those tears wouldn't be the last ones that a loved one brought to my eyes by reading the text.

During that year of my life, when each day found me mailing another letter, I read more than 100 books. I found my way back to curriculum theory texts that had inspired me early in my studies, particularly the work of Janet Miller and William Pinar. I grieved with Joan Didion (2008, 2011) while reading her memoirs about aging and death. I felt the abundance of nature in the words of Annie Dillard (2016). I walked and wrote inspired by Natalie Goldberg's (1986) guide for aspiring writers. I fell in love with the color blue alongside Maggie Nelson and became obsessed and envious of her ability to string together words into powerful, provocative, and beautiful sentences. After finishing *Bluets* (Nelson, 2009), I immediately turned to the front and began to read it again.

Ren: 3 - Wholeness as Experiential Education

I work in higher education, yet I have imposter syndrome, sitting on two graduate degrees I earned online from an inexpensive for-profit college. I worked hard for all the pieces of paper with my name on them in gothic print, despite voluminous commentary to the contrary from my brick-and-mortar peers. I have grieved my inability to have a "traditional" college experience. Over time, I have dulled my jealousy for those who were fortunate enough to have years of aimless general studies, academic advisors, big and beautiful libraries, and social support around every corner. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, I now manage multiple university portfolios as a Faculty Relations Manager for the largest Tech Ed company in the world.

In my working life, I quickly came to dislike how rigid curriculum can be in an online environment. I wonder, though, if this is really the fault of virtual space, as my faculty like to think. Perhaps, like my transness, the online environment just exposes the curriculum for what it truly is: outdated, rigid, and partial. I try to give my instructors as much free reign as possible, ensuring they know how to use the tools available to them to incorporate themselves and their personalities into their classes. I try to remind them (and myself) that nobody can truly control how one presents authenticity in an educational space—whether it is a zoom call, a lecture hall, or a drag ball.

Earlier in my academic career, I was the TA for an Anthropology class. My mentor, Mr. Brian Horne, was an "easy A," and yet, he was more determined to see his students succeed, to operate from a space of kindness, and to celebrate failure with informative forgiveness than any other teacher I have met. He would often forgo lesson plans for weeks and instead weave relaxed sociological conversations into our two-hour-long

blocks. Now, when my faculty wax poetic about the "old days" of teaching, Mr. Horne's class is the one to which I like to think they are referring. Part of me understands what they're saying—the intimacy of four white walls and wooden desks, the pedagogy of the erotic's allure in exploring new ideas in an enclosed space. Another part of me wonders if this nostalgia is rooted in familiarity with the elite, the exclusive, and the inaccessible. Are they longing for the days when poor people and marginalized communities were systematically barred from education spaces and ignored in academic texts? When the history of my [trans] community was kept a dirty secret while the history of cisness was kept sanctified, and unnamed as such, in countless textbooks? How could education possibly be whole without my community in it?

I do not believe I experienced "wholeness" in a classroom until my 7th grade history teacher told us that our history book was parading the lies of white men who were ashamed of the truth about their indigenous abuse and racism. This sensation of wholeness came from taking the lesson outside of the book it stemmed from, exposing differing truths, and considering real wholeness in regard to the history we were being taught. In admitting to the cultural amputation of entire segments of history, he showed us that the past is intact in our current world. This colonial cycle of oppressive education threatened to perpetuate its toxic secrecy unless we were brave enough to look at it as it has been, to change what is and what could be. It was our duty to place ourselves in our own curriculum when the experts and teachers would not. This was my first exposure to the concept of *currere*, though I would not become familiar with the term until I fell in love with a curriculum theorist 15 years later.

Seeking wholeness in education means educating the *whole person*. Whole Person Learning terms itself as seeing the human being existing as an interconnected agent, born incomplete and unfinished (Taylor, 2022). Whatever definition of wholeness one chooses and whatever theory of curriculum one may ascribe to, a person is a collection of experiences. This creates the obvious need to incorporate understanding *experience as education and education as experience*. The experiences of transness, of learning to be trans in a world devoted to suppressing free gender expression and of being trans in a learning environment, are critical to my sense of wholeness in both a personal and academic context. Furthermore, my story, and the academic world, will never be whole without it. If we are indeed born incomplete, ignorant, and unfinished and if indeed our curricula are outdated, rigid, and impartial, the queer experience as/of education is not just theoretically beneficial—it is gravely necessary as both learners and educators of and for the whole world.

The queer experience provides a means of opening an aperture to differing perspectives of perceived character in all academic contexts. The queer experience is a formidable teacher of cruelty and kindness. The queer experience is a historical analysis of freedom, pursuing joy against all odds, self-expression, and love and its resistance to be silenced or dispersed. The queer experience exposes both the singularity of the inner world and the deeply interconnected relationships and interdependent systems in the outside world. The queer experience is the bridge between and beyond binary systems of thought and its erosion of hierarchy. The queer experience is a concise lesson in human individuality and our destiny to be unique, unrepeatable, and motivated by the pieces of us craving definition. The queer experience teaches us about individuality, community, and what it takes to be a whole person in a fragmented world.

Parker: 3rd Devotion - Imagination

During a mid-day walk on a trail that runs alongside our apartment complex, I asked Ren, my partner, a question seeking reassurances that I shouldn't have needed.

Earlier that day he had told me that he was exhausted after spending the early morning hours processing with me about our recent arguments on the orange futon we share most every night for most of the night. We fought passionately. We do most things that way.

As I sat on the floor of my home office in contemplation, a memory from my childhood came back to me. I went to my desk to write him a brief note and ended it with, "Today and every day." Until that moment, the many times I had written it before had been referring to the present and the future, but now I meant it looking backwards as well. The writing below that was introduced by and attached to my note was started the week after the Yule celebration that sparked this article and was finished after our fight on January 8, 2023.

January 8, 2023

I recently realized that although I have been reading fantasy literature since I was seven years old, I have never possessed magic items before loving you this past year. You have given me four—the coin, the jar, the ring, and the key.

The Coin

You had been reading a book about currency and became enamored with a particularly rare and difficult-to-find coin that was considered good luck. You found one for both of us that we wear on black cords around our necks. It is the first time I have ever consistently worn jewelry. I rub the coin in moments of anxiety as a ritual of protection.

The Jar

Since befriending an older woman who read my Tarot Cards on her front porch for the first time when I was 16, I have understood Tarot as a tool for inspiring reflection. It was shocking when Cathy, a Tarot reader in Portland, asked me, "Is it possible someone cast a spell on you?" Without hesitation, I said, "Yes." She looked surprised and asked how I knew, and I was honest and replied, "Because he told me he did." When you told me you were neither embarrassed nor proud. I was deeply flattered that you would want me enough to cast a spell on me.

A few months later after we moved in together, I came home from another trip to Portland to find a small jar of honey with a poem you had written about me submerged in it. The note beside the jar read, "This is the love spell I made when we met. Consider this a gesture of me trusting you with my heart."

The Ring

You gave me a ring. Sometimes I wear it on my finger, and sometimes I wear it on the cord with the coin. It feels like it carries with it an unbreakable connection with you. You call it a power ring, and while wearing it, occasionally, my mind wanders just how much power you have over me.

The Key

Yesterday, you gave me a key you found in the parking lot of the Boulder Trader Joe's. You had shown it to me the night before and I wanted you to give it to me, but it felt silly to ask. It has its own black cord and hangs around my neck as I write this, leading me to wonder, not for the first time, if you were able to read my mind or at least my desires. This key and our fight earlier reminded me of some things I had forgotten, hours that are the most real memories of my childhood and that didn't necessarily happen.

When I was a lonely kid living in Coon Creek, Kentucky, I would climb the hills behind my house using sticks as staves to fight monsters and imagine myself a magician

who casts spells to protect my loved ones and the world from evil. I never imagined my gifts to be powerful. My power was in the fantasy versions of my friends or characters in books that I imagined fighting alongside me. I had read everything I could get my hands on about Dungeons and Dragons and Arthurian Legend, so these fantasies were filled with knights, witches, wizards, fairies, and monsters. They are probably why I still play fantasy games.

Queer and lonely, I fantasized about Lyric, a small framed half-fey prince who would be my partner in my adventures. He was blond, smaller than me, chaotic, all heart, and unstoppable. In the calmer moments, I would imagine sitting with him by the fire in our camp at night resting before battling the monsters that would need to be slain the next day. He was the answer to the question I asked myself when I first realized I was queer, "What is the point of being rejected by everyone I care about if all it means is being alone." He was my permission to myself to be honest about who I was.

Lyric was my first love. As I aged, I began to imagine that these fantasies were another life that I would teleport to as an escape from my real life, which was increasingly lonely and stressful. I used a key that Lyric gave me to teleport between my mundane life made up of school and loneliness and my imaginary one filled with epic quests and love. In my fantasies, I wore the key around my neck on a brown leather strap.

Maybe my devotion to you is influencing my memories and my imagination or maybe some things just don't make sense. Perhaps, our autobiographic past is always understood through our lived present and our desired futures. Either way, these days I am not entirely sure that Lyric, who I understood as my imaginary partner, is not somehow deeply connected to you. If that was you, thank you for making me feel loved even then. Did Lyric look like you, share your energy, and love me with consistent/chaotic devotion, or is my mind subtly reshaping my memories of my imagined adventures?

In the end, I am not sure there is a difference. It remains entirely a matter of devotion.

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