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"I am not the braided girl!": Assembling and queering the narratives over my body

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Abstract: Queer people have long faced systematic oppression, often labeled mad or deviant for sexualities deviating from heteronormativity. This paper employs autoethnographic inquiry to assemble and queer the narratives through my personal narrative, deeply entangled with Queer Theory. My mother's "Braided Girl" story signifies how society defines gender and how cisnormativity excludes other gender expressions. Through this personal narrative, I assemble my lived experience of gender dysphoria—a struggle triggered by bodily changes and the restrictive labels assigned by a heteronormative society. I learned my body defied binary classifications and the eugenic terms. These lived experiences inform my educational practices and research ethics to avoid labeling or categorizing participants, respecting the agency for genders and sexualities. Queer narratives are plural, resisting reduction to singular categories, as a Queer account is never a fixed truth. This work transcends simple categorizations like storying, restorying, or counterstorying, instead offering a Queer narrative that critically articulates a uniquely Queer lived experience. Informed by my lived experience with gender dysphoria and the violence I encountered as a youth within home and school contexts, I argue that nonviolent, supportive environments are not merely beneficial, but mandatory. We are required to shift the educational paradigm: we must begin viewing Queer youth as inherent assets rather than as deficits.

Keywords:
narrative, Queer, binary, gender, society

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Prologue

My mother often tells me that she dreamed I would be a girl. I am not the only one whose parents have a particular gender expectation for their children. My parents, in fact, have different ideas about my gender. My father adheres to a heteronormative, patriarchal worldview, expecting me to conform to a specific kind of masculinity. He trains me through his own example of how a "true" man should speak (with a low, not high, voice), dress (only in darker colors), and act (in opposition to feminism). He envisions me marrying a woman and becoming the prominent leader of my future family. This mentorship of gender from my father always makes me cringe.

In contrast, conversations with my mother consistently lead me toward my femininity. She "embraces" my feminine traits and, in doing so, breaks certain norms for me. She allows me in her kitchen, a space where many boys of my culture are not permitted. Furthermore, she never shows disagreement with my decision to skip Friday prayers at the mosque, even though both my parents are active members of their conservative Muslim community. In Islam, it is considered a sin for adult Muslim men to miss this weekly service.

Given this gender binary, I feel more certain of my father's expectations for me. His view aligns with a "straight to the point" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 15), which creates a predictable gender path based on cisheteronormative society. Although I pretend to be willing to follow his path, I do not expect to achieve his goals for me. I prioritize our relationship and do not want to be confrontational about my Queerness[1]. I admit that I still care about his reputation as a conservative Muslim scholar, even though my Queerness would be seen as nothing but a source of harm to our community. As Butler (2024) discusses, the gender binary is often upheld by a pastoral power that views any contestation of it as a demonic force. I find myself in a liminal space (Anzaldúa, 1987), caught between my religious environment and my Queer self. The real tension is not with others but within myself, as I both reject and accept the binary in my craving for a safe space.

Compared to my father, I have more room to speculate about my mother's perspective on gender. She practices Islam just as diligently as my father does, so I can assume she may not accept my Queerness. She may even uphold heteronormativity and expect me to continue the cisheteropatriarchal system (Heaney, 2024) through a straight time. On the other hand, I can also presume that she may not see me through my father's lens. This assumption is rooted in a story she used to tell me about "the braided girl." When I was a child, I was often bullied at school for my femininity. The bullies would call me *banci*, a term for a hermaphrodite. I came home crying one day, and my mother responded, "Of course you are not. If you were a banci, you would have both genital organs. See, you only have one." She then smirked and continued, "But when I was pregnant with you, I had a dream of a woman who offered me a girl. I saw in the dream that the girl wanted to follow me, so I took her. The girl was very cute. She was a braided girl."

This dream leads me to two speculations. First, after having my older brother, she might have hoped for a girl. It is a common pattern for many families to want a pair of a son and a daughter like in the concept of a perfect nuclear family (Kok, 2018). My oldest sister was adopted after her mother, my father's cousin's wife, died in childbirth. Given this, my mother would have ideally hoped for a biological daughter after my brother's birth. She expected me to be her daughter. Second, I speculate that my mother did not intend to be pregnant with me but

[1]See the work of Levy, D. L., & Johnson, C. W. (2012). What does the Q mean? Including queer voices in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, *11*(2), 130-140.

felt she had been given a "girl" to care for. I remember her saying she was surprised to find out she was pregnant with me, especially since my brother and I are only 18 months apart.

Ultimately, both of my parents see me through the binaries of normative men and women. My father expects me to be a "true" man, embodying a specific kind of masculinity (Heaney, 2024), while my mother sees me as "the braided girl," a symbol of femininity. I find a form of violence in both perspectives, as I feel alienated from my true self. My true self cannot be defined by the binary, as I am both or neither. I feel a liminal space of tension. Anzaldúa (1987) posits that being in the borderlands is violent physically, psychologically, and spiritually, as constant conflict always occurs there. I was depressed and ashamed of who I was, as I could not fit into either of my parents' narratives. This led to me experiencing gender dysphoria throughout my teenage years. Gender dysphoria in youth emerges when the assigned gender conflicts with the gender that is expressed or desired by the youth, which can lead to fear, depression, shame, and self-harm (Diamond, 2020). I was confused about who I was, and this condition was only worsened by constant bullying at school and in my neighborhood, as if there was no place for someone like me.

Orientations

Within the framework of autoethnographic inquiry[2], my narratives illustrate an intellectual journey that connects my Queer lived experience with Queer Theory. These stories integrate fragmented pieces of the self, forming what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call plateaus. A story represents the self (Ochs and Capps, 1996), but this self is never linear; it is a rhizome of lived experiences. Therefore, the self is not a stable, hierarchical concept but is prone to fabrication and transformation from various pieces.

Twenty years ago, I could not articulate my experience of being a victim of gender as an assignment, rather than a performance (Butler, 2009). At that time, I was certain that gender was defined by a binary of man and woman, and I believed I had to fit into one or the other, rather than becoming something "transformed." This belief in a stable self, limited by a binary, kept my stories confined to either path.

Derrida (2001) critiques the idea of an epoch as a fixed, historical period. Such epochs create a metaphysics that delimits stories and prevents them from affecting the present. Consequently, the future becomes the focal point rather than an "inverse suspense" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 194) that looks back at what and how a story happened to bring about hidden transformation; it also functions as a "differance" (Derrida, 1978, p. 10) that allows for ongoing transformation without finality.

The narrative of the self is never a singular and static "I" (Butler, 2001, p. 23). I can retell the story of my origin repeatedly, but each telling will be different and influenced by "its own exteriority" (Butler, 2001, p. 23). This proves that a story is never fixed or certain. This process is related to how we continuously transform through "A Thousand Plateaus" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. iv) of self, "becoming-subject" (Braidotti, 2014, p. 169), "difference and delay" (Derrida, 1973, p. 129), and "a fictional direction" (Butler, 2001, p. 26). The stories I

[2] Autoethnographic inquiry (Douglas & Carless, 2013[3]) is an approach to learn about the social, political, cultural aspects of general context through the exploring the personal elements. In other words, autoethnographic inquiry attempts to connect autobiography and personal with the social, political, and cultural by honoring emotions, self-consciousness, embodiment, and introspection.

[3] See Douglas, K., & Carless, D. (2013). A history of autoethnographic inquiry. In T. E. Adams, S. Holman Jones, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of Autoethnography* (1st ed., pp. 84-106). Routledge.

present in this work are not fully accountable or fixed. Instead, I embrace uncertainty through making "speculation" (Koro, 2022, p. 136), challenging a binary narrative and counternarrative. I attempt to blur this binary through the lens of my becoming, transforming, deferring, differing, and incomplete stories.

As Butler (2001) argues, the Queer self is not a fixed identity, but an intricate, immeasurable weave of relationality created through psychological, social, and material entanglements across time and space. This complex web is too vast for the self to fully grasp through simple self-confession. Instead of a bounded, individualistic account, the self can find this intricate weave by narrating its story alongside the lives of others (Butler, 2001; Bradway, 2024). This process is more than personal storytelling; it is a critical practice of self-narration (Bradway, 2024). This perspective resonates with Bhattacharya and Keating's (2018) interpretation of Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of autohistoria-teoría, which blends personal storytelling and theories to examine the sociocultural and political realities. In this framework, personal narratives serve as a tool for developing profound critical, spiritual, and analytical insights that help us conceptualize individual experiences within a broader sociocultural and political context (Bhattacharya & Keating, 2018). Therefore, this work uses the autohistoria theory as an approach to the autoethnographic inquiry.

The Queer stories I weave throughout this work delve into the concepts of uprootedness (Carlson, 2023), the Queer line (Ahmed, 2006), and *mestiza* double consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987). My understanding of uprootedness has evolved into a process of disorienting the self from one space to create another. This concept is closely linked to articulation, which I see not as an individual act but as an "ecological force of movement" (Carlson, 2023, p. 90). For me, articulation is about telling a multifaceted truth about the self—a self that is diverse and opens up possibilities beyond social norms. This moves beyond the singular "I" to include the collective "we."

Carlson (2023) also argues that being uprooted can be confusing and disorienting. When I uprooted myself from the heteronormative definition of what a boy should look like and do, I felt confused. I preferred colorful shirts to dark ones; I refused to smoke and chose to cook in the kitchen; I saw my girlfriends as a source of solidarity, not sexual desire. Similarly, my mother's expectation of the "braided girl" disoriented my perception of what a girl should be. I do not fit the concept of the braided girl because I do not like having long, braided hair. I am more than a girl who just shows femininity; I can also do masculine things.

In her work on the Queer line, Ahmed (2006) argues that Queer is a spatial and directional concept. To be straight is to orient oneself toward a presumed heterosexual standard. Queer subjectivity, in contrast, involves turning in a different direction, placing individuals in a position of deviance from this norm. This is further developed through the metaphor of the line, where the queer subject is not simply a horizontal or vertical line but exists slantwise or as a bent line, twisting the straight path of heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2006). Queer studies have since broadened the definition of Queer to include all genders and sexualities that do not conform to heterosexual culture.

Anzaldúa (1987) argues space is a multifaceted concept that is both geographical and psychological. The physical borderlands where cultures and languages meet give rise to a psychological borderland where boundaries are undefined and paradigmatic divisions are blurred (Nasser, 2021). It is in this precarious, in-between environment that the subjugated and the silenced can find a place for themselves, navigating a space of vulnerability and disagreement (Nasser, 2021). The borderlands are a liminal space that shapes the self and resistance.

Anzaldúa (1987) also theorizes mestiza consciousness as a persistent refusal of a stable and unitary identity in favor of political action and self-formation (Nasser, 2021). Rather than being either masculine or feminine, a mestiza consciousness creates a new point of reference that includes all sides (LeMaster, 2014). I embrace both sides within me. By releasing myself from the cuffs of gender, I blur the difference between male and female, creating a space for a becoming/transforming/different self. This blur opens the possibility of constant destabilization of the gender binary.

From the story of "The Braided Girl" that my mother told me, I learned how society defines gender and sexuality. Cisness has excluded other genders that do not fit into the binary and heteronormativity (Heaney, 2024). Through my personal narrative of my mother's story, I recall my life experiences of gender dysphoria as a youth due to my body changes and the labels that my environment assigned to me. I learned that my body is different from that of a girl, a boy, or a hermaphrodite.

Queer people have been oppressed through labels and categories like “mad" or "deviant" for engaging in sexualities that do not fit into heteronormativity (Foucault, 2023, p. 7). Gender assignment, labeling, and categorization are all acts of violence against gender. Consequently, my narratives have taught me to be ethical in my educational research by avoiding the labeling, categorizing, and representing of my participants' genders, allowing them agency over their own bodies. For example, in research education, some researchers still simply assign genders to the participants that we always find in the demography information of the participants.

In many research practices, researchers categorize their participants in ways that can strip them of this agency. Their stories are plural and cannot be reduced to a single or two stories only. I am more than just stories of "man" or "woman." I am constantly becoming and transforming from different pieces of lived experience. As a result, my work does not fit neatly into categories of storying, restorying, counterstorying, or destroying in educational research. Instead, it is a Queer narrative that critically articulates both heteronormative and homonormative narratives about the body by honoring unextractable unique stories of Queer youth in educational research. Research practices such as semi-structured interview along with coding has been pervasive that neglects rapports, participation, co-authorship, and agency of research participants (Hou, 2025).

In the next section, I will begin my auto-history. I will then present my mother's story of the braided girl and explain how I Queer that story. Finally, I will offer a critical reflection on educational research practices.

Beginnings

In the United States, I am a first-generation immigrant married to an American-born Queer man. My heritage traces back to a Muslim, Indonesian-Malay family in Palembang, Sumatra, a region where Islam is the predominant religion. I am a native speaker of the Palembang Malay language, which is deeply influenced by my parents’ tribal Kuripan dialect. Indonesian is my second language, which I acquired through formal schooling. Additionally, as part of my religious upbringing, I learned Arabic, and I began my study of English during my secondary education.

I am one of four siblings. My oldest sister, Santi, was adopted by my parents at birth after her biological mother, my father's cousin’s late wife, passed away. We share a kinship bond. She was a nurse but now focuses on her family. My biological brother, Sandra, is the second child and a staff member at a furniture company. I am the third, and my youngest sister, Ayu, is a public-school teacher. I am currently a third-year Ph.D. student in education. I also had twin

brothers who passed away in 2004 shortly after their premature birth. My parents were both small business owners; my mother ran a cake shop, and my father managed a grocery store in Indonesia.

My mother grew up in the village of Kuripan in Sumatra, Indonesia. Her father died when she was seven, leaving her to help my grandmother with the rice fields and farms. She was particularly close to her sister, Ros. While my mother worked the fields, Aunt Ros handled the housework and prepared the food that my mother would sell. This sisterhood was so strong that they built their houses next to each other, and they still meet every afternoon. My mother brought this same sense of sisterhood to our home. Santi and I took on the household chores, with Santi handling cleaning and laundry while I managed the kitchen. This shared work forged a strong bond between us. Unlike us, Sandra was rarely home, often busy with friends, while Ayu was still very young.

My father, also from Kuripan, dropped out of elementary school to help my grandmother with the farms, as formal education was not a priority at the time. He was the one who brought my mother to Palembang, the largest city in the province of South Sumatera. Both of my parents are practicing Muslims. My father led our evening prayers, with the men at the front and the women at the back, as is common in the tradition. When I once asked him about this spatial division, he explained it through the story of Adam and Eve, framing Eve as a complement to Adam, made from his rib.

My parents have had a good marriage for more than 45 years, but my mother once told me a story about my father having a mistress before he started his own business. He was working at a logging company and living away from home. In his loneliness, he met someone else. According to my mother, it was the other woman who pursued him. This narrative of blaming the woman for infidelity is a common one. When my mother's relatives informed her of the affair, she went to the city to be with my father. My father's family blamed her for not being closer to him, but my mother defended herself, saying he was the one who did not want her to follow him due to their financial instability.

After my mother moved to the city, their financial situation improved. She worked as a maid for a Chinese Indonesian woman who was very fond of her. When my mother first told my siblings and me about this job, we felt embarrassed. As a child, I was an easy target for bullies at my school, who often used stories and gossip to attack their peers. I was bullied for my mother having been a maid. I was furious with her for telling the neighbors about her past, not realizing that school could be such an unsafe place for a child.

As studies reveal, schools are often spaces where bullying flourishes and personal dignity is attacked (Fram & Dickmann, 2012; Jacobson, 2010; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). Bullies are adept at finding anything to target. My elementary school classmates, for example, observed and mocked my small body. They also noticed that I socialized more with girls than with boys. They labeled me banci, a derogatory Indonesian term which literally means hermaphrodite, or an animal with two genital organs. In my hometown of Palembang, this term was used similarly to the concept of the two-spirit person in some Native American cultures, where individuals are believed to have two spirits (Athira, 2020; Pope, 2015). It is worth noting that some cultures see sex, gender, and sexuality in more fluid ways; for instance, two-spirit people are highly respected in many Native American societies for their artistic and intellectual contributions (Athira, 2020). When I asked my mother if I was a banci, she paused and simply told me I was not. Her response, while intended to be reassuring, only reinforced the rigid definition of the term for me. I am still left to wonder about what she believes about my gender orientation (Ahmed, 2006).

My mother's rejection of the term banci for me suggests she sees me through a binary gender lens. I am aware that she understands gender through categories like male/female and man/woman. While I can only speculate what she thinks of my gender now, I assume it must be one of these categories. I have never dared to ask her again, fearing that her expectation would impose itself on my body and take away my authority over my own gender identity. However, I can speculate that because she allowed me to spend time in the kitchen and play with my female friends, she must have accepted my feminine side. I acknowledge this part of me; I have always felt more comfortable with and built stronger solidarity with women than men. When I was in school, my male schoolmates doubted my masculinity for being with girls. Being with girls was my resistance to the normative masculinity, which excludes femininity (i.e., being and acting as girls) and thereby strengthens the binary and segregation of gender. Resistance to normative masculinity is connected to the relationship with peers (Way et al., 2014). Creating relationships with my girl peers blurs the gender binary by uniting the masculine and the feminine. However, due to the bullying I received in school, I felt more comfortable being called feminine than being called masculine, thereby resisting the domination and violence of gender superiority.

This takes me back to the bullying I faced from boys for my femininity. One bully even mocked at my voice for being more treble than bass, pointing out what he saw as a different level of gender (Butler, 2004; Kentlyn, 2006). The girls in my class, however, stood up for me. While not all of them were kind, one girl who was particularly rude would mumble "*Ichiban*" while smirking at me. Ichiban was a popular brand of strawberry and milky candy. I felt deeply offended, but I could not understand why. I can speculate that the mix of white milk and strawberry produces a pink color. As studies show, colors like pink have strong gender associations, and a boy or man using them can draw questions (Grisard, 2017; Wong & Hines, 2015). Perhaps she was referring to my femininity through the pink candy. However, if I use the theory of literal and figurative references (Onishi & Murphy, 1993), I can see that the word Ichiban morphologically sounds like banci.

My parents taught us about solidarity by sharing everything, from an omelet made from a single egg to a package of instant noodles split between two people.For a time, I shared a bedroom with my brother, Sandra, but he disliked it. There was a distance between us that I could not explain. He was proud of his masculinity and was known as a lady killer. Once, an ex-girlfriend of his came to me, asking me to pass on a message after he started ignoring her for a new girlfriend. I empathized with her but felt I could not get involved since Sandra and I weren't close. One day, he decided to sleep in the living room, which our parents noticed. They were aware of our strained relationship and asked him what was wrong. He simply said he wanted more space. I knew he wasn't telling the truth. The day before, he had complained about the posters of pop singers like Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys that I had on our shared wall, wanting me to take them down. He was a fan of rock music, particularly Linkin Park, which I did not like. Rock music is often dominated by heteronormative men, and it creates an identity tied to masculinity (Clawson, 1999). It represents youthfulness, rebellion, and a specific kind of white heteronormative masculinity (Kearney, 2017). In Indonesia, there were female slow rock singers, but they weren't enough hard rock for Sandra. He also started smoking, an activity he offered to me, but I always refused. This was another symbol of masculinity in our heteronormative society, particularly for Indonesian male adolescents (Hadisuyatmana et al., 2020).

Sandra was bothered by my femininity and excluded me from his vision of a younger brother with whom he could smoke cigarettes, listen to hard rock, and talk about girls. I was not that person. Unlike Sandra's overt display of masculinity, my father's was more subtle. He rarely commented on my gender or sexuality. While quiet, he always spoke to Sandra more than me, only talking to me about important things like my schoolwork. He relied on Sandra for all the handy work around the house, and they would watch and discuss soccer late into the night. I, in turn, would go to my room and talk to my sister, Santi, whose room was next to mine. We would gossip about Hollywood stars and their affairs. Santi admired Justin Timberlake's "cute face," and I, while not yet out, admitted that I did too. She was the one person with whom I felt comfortable talking. We truly were "sisters."

During my senior year of high school, my gender dysphoria worsened. The struggle between my male body and my internal feminine self became more intense. I was attracted to some of the boys in my class. One, in particular, who sat in front of me, would talk to me about everything. He often asked me to go to the cafeteria with him, and he would buy me fries when I told him my pocket money was limited. I allowed myself to speculate that he might be interested in me, too. I wanted to express my feelings for him but was terrified of being rejected and bullied. I could not fully trust him, as he was popular. I fought against my growing feelings for him, and I sought answers in my religion. In Quran (29:31) as cited in Quran.com (2025), I found the story of Sodom and Gomorrah where God punished people with rocks for refusing to listen to the Prophet Lot and abandon their same-sex practices. This led me to believe that God hates Queer people (Cobb, 2006). I became more worried and self-oppressive, believing I was living in sin. I even considered suicide but feared I would be punished by God after death. I felt trapped.

One evening, I went down to the living room with an acne treatment mask on my face, something I did to combat my lack of confidence. My father walked past me and, in a moment that broke me, said he was embarrassed by me. "Even girls don't do what you do," he said. I lost all fear of death. I went to my room, took a robe, hung it on my door frame, and stood on a chair. Bursting into tears, I said goodbye. I hanged myself, but the pain of dying was too much to bear. I put my feet back on the chair. I wasn't strong enough to end my life. This is the reality of how bullying and gender shame can inflict a serious impact on youth. Bullying, along with victimization and stigmatization within different youth contexts such as home and school settings, has led to anxiety, fear, depression, and self-harm (Diamond, 2020). Reflecting on the stories of violence against Queer youth—such as Latisha King, who was murdered by a classmate (Greteman, 2019); David Reimer, who committed suicide after a long struggle with gender dysphoria (Halberstam, 2014); and Brendan Martinez, who received shame and rejection even after his death (Cacho, 2021)—I see the importance for educational research to raise awareness of the harms that surround Queer youth experiencing gender oppression in its different forms and contexts.

After high school graduation, my father asked me what I wanted to study in college. His offer was a mixed blessing. He would only pay for a college close to home, which meant I would have to stay with my family for another four years. I desperately wanted to leave the house and the bullying, feeling I did not belong. Yet, I knew I was a good student, better than my other siblings, and that I could be successful in college. I also saw that many of my neighbors who did not go to college ended up in manual labor jobs that I was not skilled at. I had spent my time in the kitchen and doing housework, not learning to use tools like a screwdriver. College offered an escape from the manual labor of masculinity (LeMaster, 2014). I accepted my father's offer.

Complications

A Braided Girl: My mother’s story

I have had many dreams in my life, but this one was different. She came to me almost every night. From a distance, I would see her in a slow carriage with a woman whose face was always obscured. The woman was never in a rush. I could not move, forced to wait for them to pass. The sound of the carriage wheels grew louder, making me feel both nervous and excited. I was nervous because I did not know them—*would they hurt me this time?*—and excited to see the girl in the carriage. They would pass me without a word, as usual, and the girl would smile, her hair always in a braid.

On another night, I dreamed of the girl and the woman again. Still, I could not move or speak, only watch. They approached in their slow carriage, the woman looking as awkward as before. The girl, in a black skirt and white shirt, came closer.

"Will they just pass me this time, too?" I asked myself.

"Surely, they will," I answered. The carriage drew nearer, and my nerves and excitement returned. The girl smiled, but to my surprise, the woman smiled at me this time, too. To my shock, they stopped!

"Do you want this girl?" The woman asked me again.

"Why? Don't you love your daughter anymore?” I was surprised that I could speak.)

"She wants you to be her mother now. Are you willing to?"

"Yes, of course. She really wants me to."

"Please take care of her." She gave the girl to me.

Then, I woke up. I did not expect anything to come of it; it was just a strange dream. I told your father, but he did not take it seriously. He just said it was a dream. However, I felt the dream meant something and that it foretold a change in our family life. After I "accepted the offer" in the dream, I never had it again. My nights became as dreamless as my days. I kept thinking about what was coming, hoping it was a blessing but fearing bad luck for accepting the offer. Still, I had a strong feeling that something was on its way.

Two months later, I realized my period was late. I did not feel nauseous or dizzy like I did with your brother, but I knew I was pregnant. I asked your father to take me to the clinic to confirm it. We were informed that I was pregnant. I was so glad that it was a pregnancy instead of bad news. It was too early to know the baby's sex, but I was certain the braided girl was inside me. I never checked the sex, not only because I was so sure, but also because doctor visits were expensive then. We already had a boy and a girl, and we had spent so much money. Still, this meant we had everything prepared from my previous deliveries. Nonetheless, I was absolutely convinced the braided girl was in me.

Seven months later, on the night of August 5, 1986, people in Palembang were waiting for a total lunar eclipse. It was predicted to be a full eclipse. At 10 p.m., as the moon began to turn from bright to red, I felt a familiar happiness, which was soon interrupted by a sharp ache in my stomach. I knew I needed to go to the restroom, but the sensation was different.

"My water broke! No... I'm about to deliver the girl!" I said to your father and my sister.

The calm moment quickly became frantic. People rushed to get me to the nearest hospital. My sister, Rose, grabbed her bag, and your father called for transportation. He could not find a car and ended up getting a "becak," a man-powered tricycle. I was put inside. At the

hospital, the nurses and a midwife brought us into a room. At 1 a.m., during the full lunar eclipse, they welcomed a baby into the world. They congratulated me for having a boy.

"A boy?" I said.

Yes, a boy came into the world. The boy was you. You are my braided girl.

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The braided girl in me: My story

The story my mother told me shaped myself throughout my childhood. I spent my days playing with the neighborhood girls, and I considered myself part of the braided hair girl squad.

My childhood wasn't all fun, however. My friendships with girls made me as vulnerable to bullying as they were. The girls became my biggest support system, and we formed an alliance to protect each other from the boys who teased us. The boys often used word banci to insult me, a term that refers to hermaphroditism. Confused, I went to my mother to confirm my questions about sex, asking her directly if I was banci.

"You're not banci, of course," she replied. "If you were a banci, you would have both a penis and a vagina."

At the time, her answer made me feel better. However, I was not fully satisfied. I had my brother at home as a point of comparison, and people treated us differently. My brother was asked to do "masculine" jobs, like building a pigeon coop for my father, cleaning motorcycles, and setting up a tent. I felt I could do those jobs too; I was not weak. I wanted to be included.

In middle school, I helped my mother in the kitchen, taking on the role of cooking. I learned to fry fish and chicken, sauté vegetables, cook rice, and prepare different types of soup. In addition, I swept and mopped the floors, washed the dishes, and did the laundry. I was no different from my sister; we both worked together to help our mother with the house chores. It was a structured life, but the structure did not belong to me—it belonged to "them." They saw me enjoying my assigned gender role, but it was just that: an assignment. I could not escape it because it was determined by family and societal structures.

I began to feel like I was banci. I had two gender roles. First, as a teenager, my body was changing, which made me think of myself differently. I became confused about who I was. I questioned why I had hair growing on my body, why my voice was getting deeper, and why my shoulders were broadening. I noticed I was different from my sister and my girlfriends, who were growing differently. Second, despite these physical changes, my role in the house remained the same.

"Why can't I do what my brother does?" I questioned, challenging the situation.

It was then that I started to feel there was something wrong with me. I did not fit into the straight line. I was a target of bullying for both my masculinity and my femininity. I was supposed to choose one or the other; I could not be both. I could not be a banci. But the choice was never mine. I had no choice but to struggle through years of uncertainty, confusion, anger, distrust, despair, disappointment, envy, sadness, fear, and all the other negative emotions that I could only tell myself. I felt like I was free on the inside but imprisoned on the outside. I was so confused and depressed; I almost killed myself in a desperate attempt to find liberation. The process of being uprooted for liberation is vulnerable, confusing, and disorienting (Carlson, 2023). As a youth, my Queer self asking for liberation led to confusion and self-harm because of the lack of support from family and schools. My solitude as a youth, against all odds, was a danger.

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I am not a braided girl!: Queering the narrative over my body

All the stories of my past exist within my body. I could not argue with them because there was no space to do so; that space was like a large, open prison. My academic journey took a new direction during my Ph.D. The first book that changed my scholarly path was Foucault's *Madness, Language, Literature* (2023), introduced to me by my advisor, Dr. David Carlson. In this book, Foucault examines how knowledge is produced through the label of "mad" by looking at different types of literature, politics, and societies. People were marginalized for their professions, such as jesters and poets, whose actions and words were outside societal norms. People with disabilities were seen as deviant for their different bodies, while those with depression were considered "mad" and subjected to medicalization (Foucault, 2023, pp. 5-6). Similarly, Queer people were oppressed for engaging in "sinful" sexual acts that did not fit into heteronormative categories of masculinity and femininity (Foucault, 1978, p. 9).

Through this concept, I began to see myself as being in a societal prison. I realized that my gender had been shaped by a demand to act in a “masculine” way to gain recognition. Furthermore, acting in a heteronormative manner would make my life easier, as I would be considered "normal". Being normal brings privilege, but I do not want that privilege if it means being imprisoned in my own identity. I have agency over my body to seek liberation, even if it's not always easy.

In her concept of the "Shape of Mystery," McKittrick (2006, p. 39) discusses the blending of oppression, capacity, control, and agency. I now claim the latter two for myself: control and agency. I have control over my body and mind and the agency to free myself from being categorized. I do not need to fit into the categories of masculinity or femininity. I am Queer, and I embrace the masculine body I have with the feminine self within it.

The challenge to liberate myself and others from society will always exist. As Butler (2024) reminds us, the struggle for existence is ongoing and becoming more difficult as across the globe, there are movements that seek to subordinate and punish Queer people, labeling us with phantasm or demonic ideologies. In sports, trans people face rejection. In my scholarly work, I am aware that anti-gender movements often come from dominant groups that want to perpetuate patriarchal ways of knowing through subordinate and superordinate positions. Through their dominance, they control knowledge production and decide whose stories get heard. They create representative stories about other people's bodies as if they own that knowledge. For this reason, I reject any labels that others might place upon me.

I am not just a braided girl. I am Queer, and I am happy with my masculinity. My femininity is a part of me, but only one part. I create many stories to express my gender beyond house chores. I have washed my own motorcycle, worked in a warehouse lifting heavy items, used screwdrivers, and lifted a heavy glass table. I have walked for miles in the Ohio winter to bring my groceries home. I am not a braided girl in a carriage with others pushing me; I push my own carriage toward the life I want.

The solidarity I found with my childhood girlfriends, who stood up for me against bullying, informs my scholarly work on the importance of building community and alliances.

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A poem: We make the paintings

The East meets the West
The South meets the North

The Brown meets the White

The distance still exists
But it seems closer now
We make the connections

The height seems real
But it seems easier now
We make the ladders

The colors make difference
But it seems blurrier now
We make the paintings
***

Critical Reflection

The story my mother narrated about her dream involves a nonphysical world. Just as Toliver (2021) writes in *Endarkened Storywork* that her mother was her first storyteller, my mother was also mine. She told me fables about animals to teach me morality, but the "Braided Girl" story was different. It prompts me to constantly speculate and think, which makes the narrative beyond expectation and far from a story with a single, clear answer. Thus, this essay is not a final or fully accountable work (Derrida, 2001; Butler, 2001).

I also incorporate historical nonfiction, drawing on moments from my life at school and at home. I chose these stories to restory my mother's narrative from my own perspective. My mother, as my first storyteller, shaped me through her gender expectations. However, her story and my personal experiences led me to a different conclusion than Toliver's (2021) *Endarkened Storywork*. I have come to view storytelling not as a cultural inheritance but as a form of cultural contestation. I hesitate to use the term counter-storying because I am not simply opposing a single, grand narrative. Instead, I am Queering the narrative to challenge the pervasive nature of categorization.

In narrative research, scholars often fall into the binary of master narrative versus counternarrative. Our research methods often rely on categories like restorying, counterstorying, and destroying. In many educational studies involving Queer participants, researchers label or code stories, assuming that narratives must fit into a category. This approach neglects the unique, un-categorizable nature of Queer narratives, which, as Butler (2001) argues, are never final or fixed truths. The stories I have presented here are more than acts of resistance. While they show resistance, they are also complex tapestries of resistance, disorientation, acceptance, refusal, confusion, love, and flight. I attempt to blur the binary of gender and its categorization into "deviance" and "normality."

I have also incorporated poetry, which I consider another mode of storytelling (Kress, 2019). My poetry presents the dichotomies and binaries of my lived experience. However, rather than simply countering narratives (East, South, and Brown) against the dominant narratives (West, North, and White), I Queer them. This practice introduces a blurriness to the binaries by raising the tension in liminal places to seek new opportunities beyond binaries and segregation. Countering a narrative simply creates a binary between a dominant narrative and the counternarrative (Tian & Duan, 2023). The binary has become a practice of grouping and

limiting possibilities. For example, positioning women as a counternarrative against the domination of men has been the central "battle" and has excluded the narrative of Queer people who do not fall under the binary of men and women. My poetry Queers these separations by embracing nonbinary, nonviolent ways of being that allow for transformation, thereby blurring the binaries for a unique self (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

These narratives reflect my intellectual journey, connecting various stories with Queer Theory. My mother's "Braided Girl" story taught me how society defines gender and sexuality, while the concept of cisness has excluded other genders that do not fit into the binary and heteronormativity (Heaney, 2024). Through restorying my mother's narrative, I recalled my own experiences of gender dysphoria as a youth, which stemmed from my bodily changes and the labels that my environment assigned to me. I learned that my body is different from what they called "a girl" or "a hermaphrodite." This aligns with research by Karkou and Joseph (2017), who argue that changes in adolescents' physical selves can profoundly affect their perspectives. Queer youth who deal with gender dysphoria and the expectations of their families and society deserve our consistent focus, especially in the face of ongoing anti-Queer movements (Butler, 2024). Educational researchers have a responsibility to advocate for these young people who are silenced and scared in their normative environments due to their gender and other intersecting aspects of their identity, such as age, race, immigration status, religion, financial dependency, and disability.

My Queer narrative has also taught me about research ethics. I will strive to avoid labeling, categorizing, and representing my participants' genders, as they have the agency to name their own genders and sexualities. Researchers often categorize participants in ways that can strip them of this agency. Stories and genders are plural and cannot be reduced to one or two options. I am more than just a man or a woman. I am constantly becoming and transforming from different lived experiences. As an implication, Queering the narrative mandates moving beyond research interviews and coding. Data collected through interviews potentially becomes "an illusion" (Koro-Ljungberg, 2013, p. 275). It needs rapport and trust as the process is catharsis allowing youth as research participants to be open to release the sensitive feelings and stories that possibly cannot be revealed through formal interviews.

In the educational context, there is an urgent need to create safe classroom and school environments for youth. Findings from Diamond (2020) addressed the increasing number of Queer youth experiencing gender dysphoria due to the difference between their assigned gender and the gender expression they wish to convey. Furthermore, bullying, victimization, and stigmatization within school settings have led to anxiety, fear, depression, and self-harm (Diamond, 2020). Reflecting on the stories of violence against Queer youth—such as those of Latisha King (Greteman, 2019), David Reimer (Halberstam, 2014), and Brendan Martinez (Cacho, 2021)—I contend that educational practices are susceptible to political-institutional systems of oppression that inflict violence on youth's gendered and racialized bodies. Drawing from my personal experience with gender dysphoria and as a survivor of gender violence, I assert that a nonviolent school environment, alongside supportive home environments, is mandatory. This necessity goes beyond matters of accessibility and curriculum content; it is crucial for viewing Queer youth as an asset instead of a deficit or a deviance.

Through this reflection, I am also aware of the potential limitations in challenging the stereotypes derived from the gender binary. Once we move away from the binary, possibilities become broadly open. However, this diversity may imply a challenge for schools in providing fit and proper accessibility and content for the diverse Queer youth learners. The educational policy

may also hinder the implementation of nonbinary education due to political dynamics, and the massive Queer content and material bans such as in U.S. schools, especially since the gender movement is still seen as a threat and "phantasm" (Butler, 2024, p. 47). Therefore, to change the policy depends on political will of the policymakers to put aside political and ideological ego.

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