



On Being Haunted by King: An Elegy for Queer Youth

—Adam J. Greteman

A photo has haunted me for more than a decade. It's the photo of Lawrence King, murdered by a fellow middle school student, on February 12, 2008, at E. O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, California.

It's 2008...

In the photo, I see King, wearing a purple, white, black, and teal patterned sweater, hand raised showing off a caterpillar, hair neatly styled, a slight smile, perhaps a childish smirk, eyes looking maybe just past the camera. A snapshot of a middle schooler in the midst of living and learning.

This photo circulated widely in the media after King's murder. There's another that sometimes merges with this one in my memory—a school photo, most likely. But the haunting photo was the one that introduced me to the murdered eighth grader, days before Valentine's Day in 2008. Ellen DeGeneres, in a tearful monologue on her daytime talk show, displayed the photo, holding back tears as she told her audience about King's murder:

A boy has been killed and a number of lives ruined, and somewhere along the line the killer Brandon got the message that it is so threatening, and so awful and so horrific that Larry would want to be his Valentine that killing Larry seemed to be the right thing to do. And when the message out there is so horrible, that to be gay you can get killed for it, we need to change the message.

This was not a political message, DeGeneres noted. It was a personal message pulling on the so-called heart strings of a nation mourning, or perhaps just part of a nation mourning, arguably for the first time, a gay child, a gay child of colour now dead, in middle school. "Larry was not a second-class citizen," DeGeneres said. "It is, she concluded, "okay to be gay."

I remember watching this moment then, saddened by the emerging details of the case, but concerned with if and how the complexity would be taken up. I was then in the midst of my graduate education—studying queer issues in education, particularly teacher education, and the work of engaging the expanding ways youth encounter and express genders and sexualities. This was before the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell in 2010, before Time magazine declared a transgender tipping point in 2014, before *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015. King's murder—an inflection point now visible—touched close to my work, bringing the statistics about violence against queer students, particularly queer students of colour, to the nation's and my attention.¹ This, with the photo of a middle schooler, a slight smile, a childish smirk.

Yet the case cut too close, making visible the threats to and assaults on queer students in schools. I found myself unable...unwilling...unsure of how to write in and around the case. The details are too new, too sad, too real with King's face and name, there on the screen. King felt sacred, a figure to be protected from the "objective" eyes of the academy, where a middle schooler would be quickly taken up and used for varied purposes—as became quickly visible in the immediate aftermath. But I couldn't make an object of King then; something thwarted me, pushing me to just read and follow the case; to bear witness to a moment that made no sense while making all the sense in the world. Instead, I sought to allow King to grow alongside me as I worked to make sense, slowly reading, watching. A queer fantasy, for sure, of growing alongside a fallen queer child not born backward, but thwarted from becoming.

The case was in the national spotlight, and was easy to follow until it wasn't. Attention shifted, time passed, and work continued as new murders, new suicides, new threats to queer existence littered the landscape. This happening as new potentials, new promises, and new policies attempted to alter that landscape as well. Years went by. A criminal case was made against King's murderer, Brandon McInerney with the first attempt ending in a mistrial. The second, with the hate crime charge dropped, led to Brandon pleading guilty and being sentenced on December 19, 2011, to twenty-one years in prison. Brandon would grow up behind bars. Justice was served and the guilty party held responsible. This I suppose is true if one should find the justice system responsible and just. Yet...

¹ See Kosciw, Gretak, Zongrone, Clark, and Truong.

It's 2016...

Ken Corbett's *A Murder Over a Girl: Justice, Gender, Junior High* is published. Colleagues recommend it to me. I read it—well, I listen to it—and I do not realize that it is about Lawrence King. His picture had faded from view. I'd failed to hold him, keep him in mind. The photo returns to me—the middle schooler, hand raised, caterpillar on display, with that slight smile, that childish smirk. But the photo is beginning to reveal something else. My memories of Lawrence King—the gay boy murdered, the bi-racial gay boy murdered in middle school—and the case against Brandon were being unpacked, re-read, complicated amidst a changing political terrain. Part of this work uncovered a missed detail; insight into King's gender identity. Lawrence had begun to identify as Leticia weeks before being murdered. Leticia King. I return to the original news reports in my files to see if I missed something. But there is no mention of Leticia, no mention of King experimenting with gender, identifying differently. Rather, there are only accounts of King's sexuality refracted through his effeminate flirtations with Brandon. King was effeminate, I read, but such effeminacy was read through sexuality—as in King was gay, flaunting himself in the schoolyard asking another boy to be his Valentine.

The photo haunts me still, but its haunting takes on different shapes as I take in Corbett's analysis of the criminal trial. Lawrence merges with Leticia. The photo stays the same while its interpretation expands. The photo's present—then in 2016—was being unpacked from its past, illuminating the precarity of becoming trans, or of being recognized as trans, in some yet undefined sense from almost a decade ago. King's gendered future yet unknown as scholars look back to uncover and recover a life unseen and un-lived. What to make of these new details; details left unmentioned or interpreted differently in the reporting years ago. Erasure made apparent, but also the need for expansive modes of interpretation. Details that escaped my attention, my own failure to read expansively. Details perhaps not entirely understood "then," by me, when that "transgender tipping point" had not yet been pronounced.² Details not understood in 2008 and in not being understood, not allowing Leticia to be understood; King's murder taking a new shape—the shape of a new story emerging. Such details matter, yet these unseen details failed to allow teachers, parents,

² See Steinmetz.

peers, myself, to “understand” Leticia both then, as Lawrence becoming Leticia lived, and now as such lessons are taught to recognize the work of becoming a unique queer or trans subject in that strange space and time of school.

It’s 2018...

Gayle Salamon’s *The Life and Death of Latisha King* is published. Lawrence was becoming Latisha in Salamon’s account. It was Leticia in Corbett’s account. For Salamon’s, Latisha was trying on, experimenting with who they would become, revealing the phenomenon that is transphobia both in life and death. They, both a neutral pronoun here, but also plural. Lawrence and Latisha (Leticia) two in one; three in one whose plurality threatened and whose plurality was flattened. Lawrence—a gay kid murdered; mourned by the nation, epitomized by Ellen’s tearful plea that “being gay is ok.” Lawrence had had justice served, perhaps, but in serving such justice Latisha (Leticia) had been denied, made invisible, used as a “panic defence” by the powers that be to make the case. Justice blind to becoming thwarted, murdered before such becoming could become recognized, intelligible to others, in ways that allow for justice to serve such subjects in process.

I feel disoriented. Lawrence was a gay kid killed for being gay, for asking Brandon to be his Valentine, for flirting and being a middle schooler. Love requited with bullets from a budding white supremacist. A murder that sparked mourning, but not militancy. And recognition that gay kids exist and should be allowed to exist in peace. But King was more than met the public’s eye, transgressing boundaries of gender and sexuality. Now, in the future of King’s *then*, King’s becoming would be recognized. Latisha (Leticia), at least to those still paying attention, allowed King’s gender to become newly visible as it intersected with race.

Yet even such recognition is challenging. Lawrence... Leticia... Latisha... names matter so much, yet King’s name remains uncertain. To name, to be named, to choose one’s name being a part of becoming for many, a way of being seen as the self one sees one’s self as. King was... King’s friend Averi said... experimenting with names... names starting with La...LaTonya...LaQuisha...to honour their black side; strong black women that King perhaps identified with, saw herself as, admired.³ King wasn’t black on both sides, but King’s

³ See Cunningham.

blackness was central to naming, to experimenting with who they would become in their thwarted future “growing up.” And it is King’s gender as it intersected with race that becomes a decade later more central to how King’s story reveals the workings of white supremacy.

Still, we don’t entirely know. There is not even consensus on how to write King’s name... Latisha? L.A.T.I.S.H.A.? Leticia? L.E.T.I.C.I.A.? How did King spell it on the computer screen moments before being shot? Did anyone capture it? Did anyone see it beyond Brandon, who was provoked, by some accounts, at the sight of a name, King’s name, typed on the computer screen; a sight that McNerney couldn’t handle, the sight that pushed him to handle the gun and shoot as the cursor blinked, waiting for King’s next thought to be typed? Did King’s name, silently yet boldly, grace the screen of the computer as King lay there dying on the floor of the computer lab. Had King smiled (perhaps childishly smirked) as she had typed her name, seeing herself in those letters on the screen... perhaps the last image King saw blinking?

More than a decade later, after that morning in class, King’s name’s spelling—a seemingly simple thing—is neither simple nor singular. Lawrence. Larry. Latisha. Leticia. Perhaps that’s productive, perhaps that’s King’s legacy, one that teaches that names matter but shift, making them matter differently over time. The plurality of spellings performs the plurality of ways to become in time, over time, as discourses shift and readings expand.

Yet what does King’s legacy teach those of us in education, engaging students becoming selves?

Wikipedia—a place that people seem to go to learn things—only knows King through murder. The page is titled “Murder of Larry King.”⁴ Yet Wikipedia changes over time as entries are revised such that by 2019 the first line reads “also known as Latisha King”; this is a changing and expanding recognition of King’s plurality. Wikipedia teaches about King’s murder, making mention that a “witness” had said King had changed their name to Leticia. Was this witness King’s best friend, a classmate, who sought to allow Leticia to be seen? Was it a fellow student allowing a trans student to be, to come into existence, recognizing the bravery that such becoming entailed in the face of the school’s inability to protect Leticia as such?

Schools—the site of so much of childhood—are still not safe, although they may be safer for some—progress I suppose and important progress nonetheless.⁵ Yet it was King’s school and

⁴ See “Murder.”

⁵ See Sadowski.

those in it that failed to recognize King, failed to understand, failed to hear and listen, to learn of new ways of becoming. Or perhaps they didn't fail, but refused the lessons King was offering... too engrossed in the logics of homophobia, transphobia, toxic masculinity, white supremacy. These all made manifest in King's teachers' unwillingness to see, to understand difference, and work with King, their peers, in and through their process of becoming.

"Boys will be boys," some of King's teachers said, as documented by Marta Cunningham. "Keep it to yourself," said another. "I won't call you another name until you legally change it," still another teacher stated. All said to and about a middle schooler. Failed recognition. Burdens to carry on such young shoulders... "petite shoulders," King's friends said to Cunningham's camera.⁶ King's sexuality and gender and race becoming refracted through one another. Effeminacy read as gayness, but pointed toward transness. Yet transness was thwarted, unrecognized, not understood—a reality of transphobia *then* when trans was yet to be taken up by schools and educators. "Race" visible yet made invisible at the hands of white supremacy that reared its head.

⁶ See Cunningham.

School time is, perhaps always will be, misaligned with the times of becoming that push the edges of what is to make possible what could be. Queerness is not about "now," but about "there" in the future. This is, after all, what Muñoz claimed queerness to be. "Queerness," he wrote, "is not yet here" and in being not yet here, "queerness exists for us as ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future."⁷ Such a project is, as Muñoz claimed, an educational project. Queerness is an "educated mode of desiring."⁸ Yet queerness, still, is feared in schools, perhaps for its educational potential. Its mode of desiring often left outside the proper curriculum; seeping in here, or there—illegal in seven states with "no-promo homo" laws, and many more through other means, all forbidding instruction on LGBT issues in public schools.⁹ LGBT curriculum mandated only in two—California and New Jersey—maybe three, Illinois. What would it mean for schools—for teachers—to use school time to educate such a mode of desiring? What futures would be possible? Could be possible if queerness—its ideality—was educated as possible, as necessary for the work to be done on the horizon in schools where so many youth become or fail to become because the time of school refuses to see, to hear, to learn?

⁷ Muñoz 1.

⁸ Muñoz 1.

⁹ See Rosky.

It's 2020...

I've followed the case of Lawrence/Leticia/Latisha off and on, for more than a decade wondering about the changing conceptions of student. I've followed trying to see what the twenty-first-century was perhaps trying to open up and allow—for better and for worse—in schools where children come to encounter unknowns and come into presence. Pathetic figures whose pathos appeals to and reveals the conundrums of becoming queer and trans. After all, we only imagine queer and trans youth of colour as victims—bullied, beaten, murdered. Do we prefer our images that way? Images that pull at the heart strings; images that highlight the violence, but also images that create an image that's hard to overcome, to imagine otherwise.

King was murdered just as King was testing the waters of public safety, experimenting with an “alter ego” according to a friend, before public attention shifted to attend to trans issues in schools. No one was arguing for bathrooms and pronouns in the mainstream. No one was “saying her name” on the mainstream news, then. King was just a kid, a kid transgressing, transversing, translating in 2008. King came out at age ten as gay. So, he was a gay kid when murdered—the most “intelligible” and recognizable identity at the time, but one that would still be weaponized against King in court. In court, King would be blamed for his own murder because he had the audacity to flirt and assert a self becoming someone in public. Yet few listened, few heard King other than a few friends, as King sought to create a self visible in public.

King's death overshadowed his life: He became the “murder of Larry King”... “murder in the eighth grade.” Time, however, would do something for those who came after King—as scholars wrote amidst and contributed to ushering in changing times. King's friend Averi, again, helped contemplate this, King's legacy. “It was a bad thing that happened; a horrible thing that happened,” she told Marta Cunningham for her documentary *Valentine Road*. “We all learned a lot about life through this. And I know people on the outside have learned a lot about themselves through this.” King's death taught those left behind about life, about living after murder. King's friends helped teach us to see King as they moved through school, illustrating perhaps that, as Foucault argued, friendship is a way of life, especially for queer and trans kids becoming a self yet fully formed. Childhood experiments taken childishly seriously.

Lawrence...Leticia...Latisha, your photo—hand raised, caterpillar on display, a smile, a childish smirk, perhaps—has haunted me, guided me, for more than a decade. You are part of the shared queer past that we can use to imagine a queer future, indeed for the heirs to your reign as a middle schooler twirling around, becoming someone whom we will never know, except through our imaginations, our fantasies, and the futures that come from our then and there’s of becoming.

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