I use a feminist, quasi-poststructural theoretical framework to investigate teachers who both illustrate and complicate the distinction between what Erica McWilliam terms pedagogical eroticism and pedagogical abuse. My primary data sources are interviews and artifacts collected from Hannah and Kim, high school English teachers who have had a sexual relationship with a student. I frame their cases with Mary Kay Letourneau and Heather Ingram, two headline-heavy teachers whose backgrounds and affair patterns are similar to Hannah’s and Kim’s. All four women have in common a troubled family history, a void from an unhappy relationship, and a holistic pedagogical approach; and they fell in love with their students in the process of saving them from academic failure. The women exemplify cases in which a teacher-student boundary was clearly crossed, although it is not always clear who the victim was, or if there was one at all. My intent is to illustrate how this boundary crossing happens so that educators can understand the conditions under which such a crossing is made possible and recognize the indicators that the sexual dynamic present in any pedagogical relationship may be something different, something dangerous. I consider when the condition of eros becomes the problem of abuse, making the argument that the Cartesian duality pervasive in education is a contributing factor. My data
chapters take the reader through the development of a teacher-student affair, with particular
attention to the onset of the relationships, the justifications the teachers used to rationalize their
choices, the teacher/lover role tension they experienced, and the denouements of both the
relationships and the women’s teaching careers.

INDEX WORDS: Cartesian duality in education, Teacher-student relationships, Eros in
teaching, Educator sexual misconduct, Qualitative research, Docile bodies,
Feminist theory in education, Teaching as performance, Holistic teaching,
Teacher savior
(NO)BODIES IN EDUCATION:
BLURRED BOUNDARIES IN TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>iv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

## CHAPTER

1. **THE “PROBLEM” OF BODIES IN TEACHING**
   - Performing (Asexual) “Teacher” | 4
   - (Hetero)sexualization of Teachers’ Bodies | 9
   - Eros and Teaching | 12
   - Sexual Misconduct | 16

2. **METHODS: DOING THE RESEARCH**
   - Part I: Getting IRB Approval | 33
   - Part II: Doing the Research | 54

3. **HANNAH’S AND KIM’S BACKGROUNDS**
   - Family History | 68
   - Unhappy Relationships | 78
   - Teaching Persona | 83

4. **THE ONSET: CROSSING THE LINE**
   - Letourneau | 98
   - Ingram | 102
   - Hannah | 105
CHAPTER 1

THE “PROBLEM” OF BODIES IN TEACHING

“Teacher charged with sexual assault.” (Green Bay Press Gazette, Nov. 2004)

These headlines and literally hundreds like them across the world—from Japan (“Teacher predator slapped with more schoolgirl sex charges,” July 2004) to Australia (“Teacher dodges jail for sex with boy,” November 2004) and the United Kingdom (“‘Sexy Miss’: Not a dream come true,” February 2002)—suggest a growing awareness, if not incidence, of what Shakeshaft (2004) defines as educator sexual misconduct (ESM), a term she uses for two reasons: It places emphasis on the perpetrator, and it expands the actions covered beyond the physical to include inappropriate or suggestive talk. In a report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, Shakeshaft synthesized over 900 relevant citations on the phenomenon of ESM. However, only 19 of them were research reports, and even these for the most part weren’t focused on ESM but rather were sexual harassment or child abuse studies that contained references to ESM. As Shakeshaft claims, “Educator sexual misconduct is woefully under-studied. We have scant data on incidence and even less on descriptions of predators and targets” (p. 51).

Scant as the empirical data may be, anecdotal evidence indicates that ESM is widespread, and most people consider it a problem. In a recent talk McWilliam (2004) discussed how her graduate students are often imbued with the critical-theoretical tendency to look at educational
issues as *problems to be solved*, and in their fervor to save the world, they tend to leave unexamined how the problem under investigation came to be. McWilliam is more interested in exploring how and why an issue came to be considered a problem and examining the assumptions underlying its problem status than in fixing it. In so doing, she argues, in some cases what is assumed to be a problem to be solved can be re-framed as a *condition to be lived with*.

I’ve never really wanted or felt called upon to save the world, but I see similarities in how assumptions govern attitudes about my research interest: sexual dynamics between teachers and students in secondary classrooms. Teachers are not supposed to have bodies because education is supposed to be about transferring knowledge to students’ minds—an attitude that dates back to Descartes and the Enlightenment. Although constructivist and liberatory pedagogies have challenged this banking model of education—educators now consider students’ lived experiences and the sociocultural context of the classroom as contributing to the construction of knowledge—an atavistic suppression of embodiment remains in teaching. Along with bodies, conventional wisdom dictates that teachers aren’t supposed to have desires; what pleasure they derive from teaching should be sublimated into a passion for the subject matter rather than a passion for the students themselves. Historically, the solution for the “problem” of teachers’ bodies and desires has been to deny, mask, contain, and suppress them, much like how the discourse of silence surrounding sex and sexuality functions in schools (Fine, 1992; Levine, 2002): Both are predicated on the assumption that not talking about “the problem” will make it go away.

In contrast to this assumption, hooks (1995) argues that the silence surrounding teacher-student desire may create more problems than it hides: It is “important not to deny erotic
feelings between teacher and student, [because] that denial precludes the recognition of accountability and responsibility” (p. 38). Paradoxically, the very pretense of an asexual classroom is what fosters sexual misconduct; it isn’t difficult to conceal an activity that supposedly does not happen. Additionally, cultural assumptions that women are incapable of rape and that boys want sexual attention from women can mask abuse, as a man who was pursued by his teacher when he was 14 claims: “A predatory woman teacher is every bit as possible and reprehensible as a predatory male teacher; indeed they may well be more likely to get away with their abuse of power!” (Winterman, 2004). Recent attention to ESM by women teachers—about 20% of reported cases, according to an Education Week study (Hendrie, 1998a)—certainly disrupts these gendered cultural assumptions.

A central question of this study is whether and when the sexual dynamic of teaching that hooks (1994) and others (e.g., Barreca & Morse, 1997; Gallop, 1997; McWilliam, 1999) believe is a condition present in most classrooms becomes ESM. The distinction between pedagogical eroticism and pedagogical abuse (McWilliam, 1996) is key for teachers and teacher educators: It is a Maginot Line, heavily fortified with disciplinary measures (in both the literal and Foucauldian senses) but easily breached. I believe that any attempts to solve the problem of ESM punitively without considering the conditions that enable it to become a problem in the first place are at best a bandaid, concealing but not healing.

In this chapter I examine what theorists have said about the assumptions girding the binary of eroticism and abuse and explore what a blurring of this line makes possible. Using Butler’s (1996) notion of performativity, I explain how the schoolmarm identity that functions as the default norm for women teachers is interpellated (Althusser, 1971) and how it can be resisted. I then discuss how women teachers’ bodies, no matter how thoroughly masked in the
schoolmarm uniform, are sexualized. Both of these premises—that “teacher” is a performance, and that teachers are sexual beings—are necessary for a discussion of the erotic element of teaching, as incorporating eros into pedagogy is one means to disrupt the Cartesian duality’s disembodiment of teachers in education. Finally, I consider when the condition of eros becomes the problem of abuse—the crux of this dissertation—and discuss the cases of Mary Kay Letourneau and Heather Ingram, two headline-heavy women teachers who both illustrate and complicate the notion of pedagogical abuse.

Performing (Asexual) “Teacher”

In Butler’s (1996) argument that gender is a social construction rather than a biological given, she claims that “there is no performance prior to the performed, that the performance is performative” (p. 381)—that “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler, 1990, p. 181). In other words, there is no subject prior to the acts that construct that subject; there is no primordial “female” who exists before culture inscribes what it means to be female upon her, before she takes up or refuses what options for being female are available to her. According to Butler, it is in and through the performance of gender that males and females are constructed.

Just as bodies perform gender—a performance that in turn constructs the gendered subject—teachers, too, perform “teacher,” a kind of subject that Althusser (1971) might say is subjected by ideological forces. In contrast to the humanist assumption that individuals are autonomous, self-contained authors of themselves, Althusser argues that people are produced through interpellation:

I shall then suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into
subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” (p. 174; emphasis in original)

Teachers, then, are interpellated subjects; they are “transformed” by ideological assumptions about what “teachers” are. Imagine an administrator, representing the dominant ideology and discourse of the school setting, recruiting a potential faculty member: “Hey, you there! I expect teachers to look and act a certain way. Will you conform?” According to Althusser, the subject’s freedom is limited to choosing to submit to this hailing—or not answering the call.

A “familiar blandness” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 60) characterizes the uniform of those interpellated as “teacher.” Of course there are colorful exceptions, but Weber and Mitchell claim these prove the rule:

There are and always have been many dramatic and colourful exceptions that provide unconventional responses to the question "What do teachers wear?" . . . they all momentarily rupture the image of teacher as asexual and drab, offering alternative possibilities: Teacher-as-cool; teacher-as-sex-symbol/object; teacher-as-goddess; teacher-as-hero; teacher-as-gentleman; teacher-as-rebel, and teacher-as-artist. Many of these exceptions, however, only serve to underline common social expectations that teachers will conform, and not rebel. These romantic images capture our attention because of their very exceptionality, because they remind us that this is not how things usually are. (p. 59)

The uniform codes teachers as “asexual and drab,” an expectation that my pilot study participants were keenly aware of. Grosz (1995) describes this coding: “Bodies speak, without
necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become incarnated” (p. 35).

McWilliam (1999) links the asexual schoolmarm image, which operates as the norm for women teachers, to the more sinister function of limiting access to knowledge. She reasons that the schoolmarm image is “in keeping with the important work that schools have to do to ensure that knowledge is itself seen as a de-sexed or unsexy commodity” (p. 115), citing Foucault’s observations about education:

It’s quite an achievement the way teachers manage to make learning unpleasant, depressing grey, unerotic! We need to understand how that serves the needs of society. Imagine what would happen if people got into as big a frenzy about learning as they do about sex. Crowds shoving and pushing at school doors! It would be a complete social disaster. You have to make learning so rebarbative if you want to restrict the number of people who have access to knowledge. (qtd. in McWilliam, 1999, p. 115)

Foucault (1975/1995), in his history of the prison system, helps to explain how this social coding of teacher-as-asexual-and-drab came to be incarnated. He discusses how inmates internalized disciplinary measures: Knowing they could at any time be under the watchful gaze of a guard whom they could not see within a centralized tower (the Panopticon), they began to monitor their own behavior. Foucault argues that disciplinary power in society functions much like this Panopticon-guard, ever-watchful of its members’ conformity to dominant ideology. In a disciplinary society, people self-discipline even when they don’t think anyone is looking. Most feminist scholars believe this self-monitoring behavior is particularly true of women:
Being a woman in our culture means, among other things, that you live out your life in subjection to the virtually constant demand to police your body, to keep it always under strict mental control . . . . You must master that body and keep it under strict surveillance at all times. (McWhorter, 1999, p. 140)

Evans (2002) states that Butler’s term citationalit y “refers to the ways in which social norms are cited through body movements, dress, and speech” (p. 26). In their seamless citation of “teacher,” teachers become docile bodies (Foucault, 1975/1995), in compliance with social norms for teacher appearance and behavior—norms that are enforced and regulated through teacher dress codes in some places. Grosz (1995) argues, however, that recent attention to the body has resulted in a slight shift in Foucault’s concept:

[T]his docility is [sic] no longer functions primarily by external regulation, supervision, and constraint, as Foucault claimed, but is rather the consequence of endlessly more intensified self-regulation, self-management, and self-control. It is no longer a body docile with respect to power, but more a body docile to will, desire, and mind. (p. 2)

Grosz’s conception of disciplinary power suggests that teachers do not comply with external expectations because they fear being punished by society’s guards. In regulating their appearance they are exhibiting control over themselves, which provides its own satisfaction. Foucault (1976/1990) describes the interrelated enjoyment of monitoring oneself or others and resisting control by others as “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (p. 45; emphasis in original). Disciplinary power and resistance to it occur in tandem; one does not exist without the other.

I noticed this back-and-forth circulation of power and resistance in the way my pilot-study participants talked about their and other teachers’ bodies. On the one hand, their docile-
bodied response to the schoolmarm norm was to imitate it—to perform “asexual teacher”—and to critique other women teachers whose skirts fell short of the performance. But within these asexual performances were pockets of resistance: dissatisfaction with the image they were expected to uphold and a playful pleasure taken from the erotic element of the classroom dynamic (Johnson, 2004b).

At first the realization that teachers are limited to preexisting discursive scripts might seem depressing; there doesn’t seem to be any room for agency (which assumes there is a subject to have agency) if they are pawns of a performance that is already choreographed for them. But Butler (1996) provides an escape route:

[I]f repetition is the way in which power works to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity, if heterosexuality is compelled to repeat itself in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose? (p. 381; emphasis in original)

Butler claims the “I” can never “repeat itself, cite itself, faithfully” (p. 376); even if teachers wanted to, they could not seamlessly simulate their performances. There would be inconsistencies in their repetitions—times when they didn’t seem like themselves. There is wiggle room to disrupt the teacher script, to refuse its lines. Teachers can enact a “constant ‘civil disobedience’ within [their] constituted experience” (Rajchman, 1985, p. 6), which reminds me of Cixous’s (1975/2000) facetious phrase: “Hold still, we’re going to do your portrait, so that you can begin looking like it right away” (p. 217). Teachers don’t have to hold still, and they don’t always have to look like their portrait. Though women teachers cannot be free of the
asexual schoolmarm image that constitutes the norm to which they are subjected, they can resist that image in their daily practice in their failure to repeat it.

There is a price to be paid for such acts of rebellion, though. There was a time during my teaching days when my attire became the subject of disapproval in the late spring when warm weather and no air conditioning led to rigorous attention to dress code violations. I flirted with the no-tank-top rule with sleeveless shirts and eschewed nylons altogether—hence exposing my limbs to students’ gaze, apparently a threat akin to table legs in Victorian times. I remember quite vividly an occasion where one of our school counselors stopped me on my way out of the teachers’ lounge:

“Tara, have you been called in to see the principal yet?”

“No…why?” I was puzzled, not detecting the note of sarcasm in her voice.

“Well, don’t you think your skirt is a little short?”

As this woman embraced the schoolmarm image, I should not have been surprised at her censure. However, I was sufficiently shamed at the thought that maybe I was dressing provocatively, perhaps in an unconscious desire to entice my students, that I retreated within my docile body. I never wore that outfit again.

(Hetero)sexualization of Teachers’ Bodies

In my pilot study of five women preservice teachers’ experiences with sexual dynamics in their classrooms, self-consciousness of their bodies in the classroom was a common theme (Johnson, 2004b). No matter how thoroughly they disguised themselves in the drab, asexual teacher uniform (Weber & Mitchell, 1995), they were acutely aware of being noticed by students—particularly males. Richardson (1985) helps to explain this gendered dynamic:
In our society, being aware of and responding to the sexuality of the other, either consciously or unconsciously, is the way in which males and females have learned to relate to each other. Even in nonerotic settings, male-female interaction is continuously influenced by the other person's sex. Encounters between a man and a woman, no matter how incidental, have an underlying sexual element. Although this element may be suppressed, ignored, or otherwise not acted on, as is usually the case, nevertheless, it is still there. (p. 14)

Classroom settings aren’t supposed to be erotic, and yet they are—they can’t help but be, as long as there are sexed people within it. Indeed, I believe the act of teaching exacerbates this dynamic; there is something sexy about sharing one’s passions—regardless of the discipline—with students and having that passion be reciprocated. Siegesmund (1999) describes it well:

The teacher embodies the passion, the sensuality, of the discipline and thereby models it, allowing the opening where this passion can be experienced by students. In so doing, the students, if they want, can make this passion their own. Passion, the sensuousness of teaching, is not limited to the experiential encounter with the discipline but is part of the interaction between teacher and student. (p. 47)

Some theorists take their understanding of the embodied “sensuousness of teaching” a step further. Tompkins (1996) associates her teaching with romantic love: “Sometimes the feelings I have toward my students are romantic. It's like being in love” (p. 144). Passion and desire commingle in McWilliam’s (1996) comparison of teaching to seduction; she argues that teachers seduce students into loving the subject matter, and—by extension—loving the teacher as the bearer of that knowledge. Gallop (1997), too, understands teaching to be sexualized:
I believe that our professional impulses are sublimated sex drives. The pleasure I get from working with graduate students, the intensity of my wish that certain promising graduate students will choose to work with me, and the satisfaction I get from seeing the imprint of my teaching in their work all strongly suggest a sexual analogy. (p. 87) Though Gallop and Tompkins only teach adults, I argue that the analogy can apply to other levels or kinds of teaching. The embodied rush—the pleasure—I get from my work, whether it be in a high school or university classroom, whether it be teaching or research—is not unlike a sexual experience.

Age doesn’t appear to matter from the students’ perspective, either. Walkerdine’s (1990) research in a nursery school demonstrates that even four-year-olds sexualize their teachers. Two boys tell their teacher, Miss Baxter, to “show your bum off... Take all your clothes off, your bra off,” to which Miss Baxter responds by telling them ineffectually to “go and find something else to do please” (p. 4). Walkerdine theorizes that the boys take the positions of men through language, and in so doing gain power which has material effects. Their power is gained by refusing to be constituted as the powerless objects of her discourse and recasting her as the powerless object of theirs... she has been made to signify as the powerless object of male sexual discourse. The boys’ resistance takes the form of a seizure of power in discourse such that despite their institutional positions they achieve power in this instance. (p. 5; emphasis in original)

No matter how much a teacher tries to downplay her sexuality through dress and demeanor, her position of authority is attractive; in reducing the teacher to sex object, a student captures some of that power for her/himself. According to Foucault (1976/1990), power does not reside in an individual but rather gets produced everywhere, is relational, and is constantly
shifting. To believe a teacher-student relationship, sexualized or not, can ever be in balance overlooks the back-and-forth negotiation that constitutes power and resistance:

[T]he teaching body has been . . . framed as the site of potential oppression, given the power relationship of teacher over student. The idea that the relationship is eminently reversible—that a student may be more powerful than her/his teacher—may be denied in infantilising and feminizing representations of students. (McWilliam, 1996, p. 9)

Richardson (1985) and Walkerdine (1990) understand this omnipresent sexual dynamic to be gendered—both in that it occurs between males and females and that males are usually the aggressors in the pairing—though Richardson acknowledges the heterosexism implicit in this view. Given that male students are culturally imbued with power by virtue of their gender, it complicates the assumption that teachers are always already potential power-abusers when women teachers, at least those engaging in a feminist pedagogy (Maher & Tetreault, 2001), tend to be power-mitigators. The issue of power is also complicated in female teacher/male student relationships, a point I will return to later.

Eros and Teaching

The silence surrounding the erotic element of teaching worked just fine, argues Rouse (1983), until didactic, transmission-model approaches to instruction began to be questioned:

Until recently there was no problem here; we were sure of the relations among teacher, text, and student. . . . But now a proliferation of critical methods suggests that the old way no longer satisfies, that we would know our students in a different way. The choice we make of critical method may well depend on the kind of relation we now wish to have with young people—on the particular erotic quality that method implies. (p. 536)
When teachers teach whole students—not just their minds—a different kind of teacher-student relationship is possible, one where love of subject matter blurs with love of students. However, hooks (2003) argues that the mind-body duality pervasive in society makes educators uncomfortable with this blurring:

When as professors we care deeply about our subject matter, when we profess to love what we teach and the process of teaching, that declaration of emotional connection tends to be viewed favorably by administrators and colleagues. When we talk about loving our students, these same voices usually talk about exercising caution. They warn us about the dangers of getting "too" close. Emotional connections tend to be suspect in a world where the mind is valued above all else, where the idea that one should be and can be objective is paramount. (p. 127)

Denying emotional connections in the classroom has its negative effects. Hooks (1994) describes just such an occasion:

During my first semester of college teaching, there was a male student in my class whom I always seemed to see and not see at the same time. At one point in the middle of the semester, I received a call from a school therapist who wanted to speak with me about the way I treated this student in the class. The therapist told me that the students had said I was unusually gruff, rude, and downright mean when I related to him. . . . I realized that I was erotically drawn to this student. And that my naïve way of coping with feelings in the classroom that I had been taught never to have was to deflect (hence my harsh treatment of him), repress, and deny. (p. 192)

In the field of education where bodies are contained (Pillow, 2000) and sexuality is suppressed (Fine, 1992; Gallop, 1997), it is not surprising to followers of Freudian psychology that erotic
pleasure seeks subconscious outlets in school settings. Britzman (1998) explains hooks’ psychic response in terms of conflicting wishes:

The unconscious wishes to do whatever it wants without regard for others, consequences, social convention, logic. One might call this wish the "force of Eros." But this interferes with the ego's wish to forget, ignore, and turn away from that which the ego cannot stand or bear to know. In this conflicted design, what is refused cannot go away but is instead repressed, only to return through indirection, in new and disguised forms such as negation, dreams, slips of the tongue, baffling and bungled actions, jokes, fantasy, irreverence. (p. 7)

Hooks deflected, repressed, and denied the attraction she could not “bear to know”—what Britzman might call negation. Work from my pilot study suggests dreams and slips of the tongue are also outlets in “disguised forms” for repressed teacher desire (Johnson, in press).

Hooks unconsciously covered her erotic attraction for her student by treating him harshly because her sense that those feelings were inappropriate was deeply ingrained. The source of this sense, she argues, comes from the mind/body dualism that pervades education. This duality dictates that instruction should take place solely between minds, which leaves no place for acknowledgment of the body’s role in teaching and learning. As Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch (2003) argue, "Because the body has been considered more as a 'problem' or a 'sin' than a 'treasure,' there is much that is unsayable about bodies in classrooms" (p. 702). Like O’Brien (2000), I question “the assumption that the sexual has no proper place in the pedagogical process and must, in fact can, be banished” (p. 49; emphasis in original). An examination of the erotics of instruction (Barreca & Morse, 1997) is one way to trouble the mind/body duality for teachers who want to make room for bodies in classrooms.
Pairing “teaching” with “erotic” might at first seem shocking, but Lorde (1984) argues that “we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex. And the lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our disaffection from so much of what we do” (p. 55). Collins (2000) likewise argues that “this erotic power is so often sexualized that not only is it routinely misunderstood, but the strength of deeply felt love is even feared” (p. 150). Collins and Lorde, both feminist scholars, attribute the fear of eros to patriarchal influence; women have been taught to distrust this means to power and fulfillment. According to them, separating the erotic from teaching by sexualizing the passion women feel for their work prevents women from fully actualizing their potential. “Erotic” does not have to be equated with or limited to “sexual,” however. As hooks (1994) says, “[T]o understand the place of eros and eroticism in the classroom, we must move beyond thinking of those forces solely in terms of the sexual, though that dimension need not be denied” (p. 194). Rather, teachers need to appreciate that “eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that . . . enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination” (p. 195). It is this potential for pedagogical eroticism to enrich the classroom that might be useful for teachers to consider.

However, the notion that eros has its place in the classroom is not widely accepted in society; popular culture is saturated with warnings to teachers who conflate passion and teaching (Maher, 2004). Fox’s TV drama Boston Public has aired multiple episodes depicting student-teacher attractions gone awry; I’ll illustrate three here. There is English teacher Milton Buttle’s dismissal after his relationship with a student is discovered. Buttle crosses a clear boundary in having sex with a currently-enrolled student, but even a relationship with a graduate is
dangerous, as a second situation suggests. Shortly after social studies teacher Lauren Davis confesses to a colleague that she is titillated by being called “Miss Davis” during sex, the former student she is dating begins stalking her. The dangers of mixing teaching and passion are also evident in the February 10, 2003 episode when a female student’s obsession with novice teacher Kimberly Woods, which the dialogue suggests is encouraged by Woods’ extra attention, results in the teacher’s transfer to a different school. This last incident adds a homophobic element to the warning; it implies same-sex desire on the part of a student is reprehensible even when it is not reciprocated.

These examples of *Boston Public* characters who are punished for their passion affirms Maher’s (2004) claim that desired or desiring teachers represented in popular culture are usually met with “violent or potentially violent repercussions” (p. 46). It is difficult to argue that there might be a place for eros in the classroom when eros is equated with sex; teacher-viewers get the message that it is better to rein in erotic impulses lest they become sexualized. However, if these portrayals are at all indicative of the kinds of relationships that can develop between teachers and students (and the proliferation of reports about teacher-student sex in the media suggests that they are), it cannot be denied that this sexual dynamic exists. Rather than recoiling against the notion and assuming its pathology, it might benefit teachers to explore its possibilities in order to better understand the difference between what McWilliam (1996) terms pedagogical eroticism and pedagogical abuse.

**Sexual Misconduct**

Perhaps more than a patriarchal stifling of erotic energy as some feminists claim, the conflation of pedagogical eroticism and pedagogical abuse may occur in response to the very real “problem” of sexual misconduct in schools. As Hendrie (1998c) claims, “It may start with a
warm smile or an affectionate hug. . . . But often, far more often than many people think, those friendly moments mask the first steps by a teacher or a coach down the road that leads to sexual relations with their young charges” (¶1-2). Her viewpoint is indicative of the fear that any kind of physical intimacy may lead to misconduct, a concern that has led in many cases to banning “all physical contact, such as hugging, between teachers and their pupils” (Zehr, 1999, p. 3).¹

Although Hendrie’s (1998c) suggestion that “friendly moments” are a prelude to seduction may be overstating it a bit, there may well be something in the sexual dynamic of any given classroom that opens the door for sexual misconduct. The incidence of ESM is more presumed than documented, although a six-month study done by Education Week suggests that “at a minimum, hundreds of cases involving sexual abuse are unfolding publicly at any given time around the nation” (Hendrie, 1998c, ¶4). One study of 2,065 8th-11th graders’ experiences with sexual harassment in schools indicates that nearly 10% of students have been targets of ESM (AAUW, 1993). Another survey of 4,340 adults showed that 4.1% of them reported having had a sexual experience with a teacher, although the survey specified only teachers and only physical sexual acts (Cameron et al., 1986). Shakeshaft (2004) claims the AAUW study is “the most accurate data available at this time” (p. 20). She bases her claim on the study’s involvement of school-aged participants and its generalization of ESM to include all inappropriate acts, although I suspect the elevation of the AAUW study may have more to do with the fact that Shakeshaft herself was involved in it than its superior methodology or results.

Part of the problem in determining incidence of ESM is that many cases—some studies suggest as many as 80-96% of them (Shakeshaft, 2004)—go unreported. Shakeshaft claims

¹ I met a teacher at the 2004 AERA annual meeting who said his school had instituted a rule governing touch: If teachers wanted to praise or comfort their students, the only acceptable way to do so physically was to pat them, palm-up, on their heads.
students don’t tell because they’re afraid they won’t be believed, although at least some anecdotal accounts suggest another reason: Some students claim their relationship was consensual; they do not see themselves as victims. In any event, incidents reported to school authorities are seldom prosecuted. Hendrie (1998b) explains why:

Sexual contact with students may be hard to verify, and some forms of it may not even be illegal. As a result, it is not uncommon for school systems to lack the proof they feel is needed to fire an employee suspected of sexual involvement with students. Facing the prospect of costly and risky court fights, some districts cut deals. Such agreements vary, but in many cases they entail keeping silent about accusations as long as an employee resigns. (¶ 11-12)

Recommendations to administrators for preventing ESM tend to be twofold—to stop the problem before it starts by disallowing any physical intimacy between teachers and students, and to maintain a vigilant eye over faculty:

Because the line separating the venial sin from the dimension of lust is narrow and easily crossed, those who lead schools must be alert and purposeful. Rumors must be diligently tracked and resolved; truth must be found; it may never be presumed that an allegation of lust is too preposterous to merit concern. . . . Believe it and be ready to investigate the charge. (Ross & Marlowe, 1985, p. 92)

Ross and Marlowe claim that the "problem" of teacher-student desire is a "taboo" that "we all know really happens" and "needs to be aired, explored, and analyzed" (p. vii). Although I support these two administrators’ call for exposing the sexual elephant in education’s closet, their corrective method for doing so echoes of panoptic surveillance. So does Shakeshaft’s (2004) list of warning signs of ESM, which she developed based on her research:
• Any employee, including volunteers, might molest.
• Educator sexual predators are often well liked and considered excellent teachers.
• Special education students or other vulnerable students are often targets of sexual predators.
• Adults who have access to students before or after school or in private situations are more likely to sexually abuse students than those who don’t (coaches, music teachers, etc.).
• Physical signs of sexual abuse include difficulty walking or sitting, torn clothing, stained or bloodied underwear, pain or itching in the genital area, venereal disease, pregnancy, and changes in weight.
• Behavior indicators in students might include age inappropriate sexual behavior, late arrivals to class, changes in personality, and increased time at school with one adult.
• Rumors are an important source of information on educator sexual misconduct.
• Behaviors of adults who molest include close personal relationships with students, time alone with students, time before or after school with students, time in private spaces with students, flirtatious behavior with students, and off-color remarks in class. (p. 49)

If Shakeshaft (2004) is to be believed, “well liked,” “excellent teachers” who have “close personal relationships with students” and who are involved in extracurricular activities are suspect. But this series of descriptors characterizes some of the best, most dedicated educators I know. If administrators start lending credence to rumors—as both Ross and Marlowe (1985) and Shakeshaft suggest they should—not only will educators become vulnerable to attack, many fine teachers’ careers may be destroyed by people with other agendas. The latter is more likely to
happen in “right-to-work” states where teachers are not protected by unions; if teachers have no substantial recourse for defending themselves against false allegations, under this kind of panoptic regime it would not be difficult for school districts to rid themselves of teachers who don’t toe the line. The constant threat of sexual accusation can function as a disciplinary tactic to normalize teachers into indifferent, automaton-like educators. I’ve heard teachers, particularly males, talk about how they’re afraid to comfort a crying student or to be alone with one lest they give the appearance of impropriety. It’s unfortunate that good teachers have to second-guess their instinct to help a student in order to protect themselves—and yet they must in a culture in which intimacy is sexualized.

Gendered Differences

What I find most problematic about Shakeshaft’s (2004) literature review is her conflation of male and female teacher offenders. She provides statistical data: Studies of reported incidents yielded a range from 80-96% male offenders, although surveys of students suggested a much more even ratio. Two separate studies based on student rather than official reporting showed only 57% male offenders. A similar pattern (but with the sexes reversed) occurs in data on the targets of ESM: Official reports showed anywhere from 60-75% girls, but when students were asked, the percentage was typically in the mid-50’s. For the most part the incidents were heterosexual combinations, although Shakeshaft does not specify the gender of the 8-28% same-sex cases. In an episode of Primetime Live (2004), ABC News correspondent McFadden affirmed the growing acknowledgement, if not incidence, of female teachers involved with male students:
We did a simple computer search and found over 50 cases of female high school and middle school teachers charged with sleeping with their male students in the past 2 ½ years. And those are just the ones that made the papers. (p. 14)

Shakeshaft (2004) attributes the discrepancy between official incidents and student surveys to cultural norms: Boys are less likely to report sexual offenses than girls. Hislop’s (2001) profile of female sexual offenders supports Shakeshaft’s claim. Hislop summarizes why women abusers are rarely reported in three points:

Males who are abused are reluctant to report the offense. Society’s sexual expectations of males can make it hard for them to tell the difference between abuse and a “lucky score.” . . . Males may also feel that failure to protect themselves is a failure that they would rather not share with others.

Females [victims] may tend not to report abuse because acts that are abusive often closely resemble acts that are considered acceptable in our society. They may also be reluctant to reveal their participation in same-sex sexual activities.

Society, as a whole, does not believe that women can be offenders. Stereotypes of women as non-sexual and naturally protective make it hard for cases of abuse to be believed. (p. 49)

According to Hislop, both male and female victims have difficulty conceptualizing a sexual act as abusive—boys because they are acculturated to want sex, and girls because they are acculturated to receive it. Denov’s (2004) interview study of 22 police officers and psychiatrists reveals a discourse of denial around the concept of female sexual offenders that substantiates Hislop’s third claim:

psychiatrists constructed the female sex offender around similar poles of representation to that of police officers: she was cast as either the harmless, benign woman incapable of
sexual aggression, or the aberrant woman who is set apart from “normal” femininity. (p. 112)

It is not my intent to dismiss the reality of male victimization and female predation. However, I question to what degree boys don’t report incidents because they’re socially predisposed not to admit they have been abused or if they don’t believe they are victims in the first place. I suspect it’s a combination of both, but there isn’t enough research to substantiate either position.

There is evidence that indicates differences between male and female teachers that Shakeshaft (2004) ignores in her description of offender characteristics. Shakeshaft claims, for example, that “many are chronic predators” (p. 22), but Hendrie’s (1998a) report tells a different story: “[I]t is far more common for men to seduce more than one girl and to abuse a series of students over time. Such behavior is rare among women” (¶ 41). Hendrie cites research that shows several gendered differences, which I’ll summarize below:

- Women seldom use force to compel sex or threats to keep students silent
- Women are less likely to deny their actions (This finding is debatable; Allen’s [1991] study of 65 female and 75 male sex offenders concludes the opposite)
- Of sex offenders who target teenagers, women are less disturbed (in terms of their level of diagnosed psychoses) and more easily treatable than men
- Women tend to commit offenses later in life
- Women tend to justify their actions as a love relationship; men typically claim the sex was consensual

Matthews, Matthews, and Spelz’s (1989) qualitative study of 16 female sexual offenders found that women abusers tend to fall in one of three groups: *Predisposed (Intergenerational)*, women
who were sexually molested themselves as children; Male-Coerced, those who are forced by
men to be co-abusers; and Teacher/Lovers, those who claim to be in love with the teenagers with
whom they are romantically involved. As is demonstrated in other research, the first category is
the most prevalent. Despite the limited amount of work done with female sexual offenders,
Hislop (2001) claims that “the conclusion that women who sexually abuse children often have
their own histories of sexual victimization is among the more robust findings of studies of this
kind” (p. 109). But Matthews et al.’s study is the only one I’m aware of that posits something
like the “Teacher/Lover” category, which is the one I find most relevant to my research. The
women in this study do not fit the other two groups.

Hendrie (1998a) claims the “Teacher/Lover” category describes infamous women such as
Mary Kay Letourneau, and I am inclined to agree. The ESM pattern for women teachers is
qualitatively different from that of men. Their motive (love) and method (passive,
unpremeditated) do not fit Shakeshaft’s (2004) general description of teacher offenders:
“[S]exual abusers in schools use various strategies to trap students. They lie to them, isolate
them, make them feel complicit, and manipulate them into sexual contact. Often teachers target
vulnerable or marginal students who are grateful for the attention” (p. 31). She explains the
selection of marginalized students further:

Because most educator abusers seek to conceal their sexual contact with students,
offenders often target students that they can control. In some cases, control is
characterized by force. However, most abuse occurs within the much subtler framework
of grooming and enticement. While almost all children respond to positive attention from
an educator, students who are estranged from their parents, who are unsure of themselves,
who are engaged in risky behavior or whose parents are engaged in such behavior are
often targeted, not only because they might be responsive but also because they are more
likely to maintain silence. (p. 32)

I think there is an alternative to Shakeshaft’s default-male characterization of offenders’
targeting of marginalized students, which I illustrate in chapter 3. Simply stated, it is this:
Women teachers who have been “good girls” all their lives fall in love with “bad boys” while
trying to save them from academic failure. Shakeshaft’s generalization that targets “often drop
out or avoid school” (p. 43) is false under this condition; sometimes the teacher-savior is the
main motivator for the bad boy to stay in school.

Cases of ESM by Women

In illustrating the gendered differences of ESM I am not suggesting that female offenders
be treated less harshly than men or that love or good intentions is an excuse for bad choices.
Regardless of the perceived maturity of an older high school student, a teacher is in a position of
authority over him or her, and abuse of that power is unethical even if the student in question is
legally an adult. However, issues of power are complicated when women teachers engage in
relationships with male students, a point I made earlier. McWilliam (1999) illustrates this kind
of mitigating complication with a personal example:

As a classroom teacher, I was for a short period of time the practicum supervisor of an
emotionally vulnerable student teacher of twenty-six years of age who became involved
in a relationship with a very sophisticated boy of fourteen in one of my high school
English classes. . . . For the boy there was great kudos from his peers; for the young
woman there was pain and anguish and a problematic start to a teaching career.
My concern as a supervising teacher was that there had been a breach of professional
ethics. I was concerned about how the young teacher made it impossible for herself to
teach the boy or his peers as a professional, but I did not think of child rape at any stage. It did not seem reasonable. This was because I understood rape as a penetrative criminal assault on the body almost exclusively by men. . . . I did not think child rape an appropriate way to classify what had occurred when I saw how easily the boy seemed to take pleasure in, then disengage from, the situation, while the young woman continued to suffer long after. She had been a good teacher in many respects, who had made . . . a serious professional error. (p. 33)

Mary Kay Letourneau—the Seattle teacher who was jailed for 7 ½ years for having sex with her 13-year-old 6th-grade student, Vili Fualaau—provides a more extreme example: *Legally* Fualaau could not consent to sex, and yet he never wavered from his position that he was a willing participant. Now that Letourneau is free and he is 21, they have plans to marry. The notoriety surrounding the pair’s affair has yielded lucrative promises of movie and book deals, so Fualaau, an unemployed high school dropout, could be financially set for life. The question of who the victim was in their relationship is debatable. I am inclined to think that Letourneau, like McWilliam’s student teacher, made “a serious professional error”—one that cost her much more than it did him.

What is perhaps more interesting to consider than the degree of Letourneau’s guilt is how women like her are constructed by the media. Some journalists label them as sexual predators and pedophiles (although I’ve learned the proper medical term is “hebephile” when the target is a teenager). Others reluctant to use such terminology to describe Letourneau-like women who, aside from their one transgression, do not fit the typology of a sexual abuser tend to couch their constructions of these women as pathetic victims of their own psychoses. In either
characterization—predator or victim—the explanation for the teacher’s behavior is medicalized. McWilliam (1999) explains how Letourneau’s “sickness” is blamed:

According to her lawyer, “The accused was powerless as a result of psychological and pathological forces beyond her control.” . . . Mental illness is . . . available as an explanation, and may seem compelling in the context of “novelty” sex crimes involving women and boys. (pp. 32-33)

Olsen (1999), who based his extensive chronicle of Letourneau’s life on multiple interviews with friends, neighbors, and colleagues as well as an interview with Letourneau herself while she was in jail, suggests that Letourneau’s bipolar disorder diagnosis provided a convenient explanation for her conduct: "Why was it that Mary was willing to set aside everything she had held so dear for the love of a boy? The very idea that there was a name for it [bipolar] made it somewhat easier to take" (p. 288).

Others attributed Letourneau’s choices to a mental breakdown. Dr. Julia Moore, who diagnosed Letourneau as bipolar while she was in prison, looked to recent events to answer what had driven Letourneau, "who had been functioning at a reasonable level for years" (Olsen, 1999, p. 284), over the edge: Her father's cancer, her disintegrating marriage, a miscarriage—all had happened within a year of her affair with Fualaau. Still others of a more psychoanalytical persuasion looked to childhood trauma and her relationship with her father, claiming "it was in her genes" (p. 51). That the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree was the consensus of many who made parallels between her father's affair with a former student (and subsequent two illegitimate children) and hers.

In an interview aired on 20/20 with Barbara Walters (2004), Letourneau herself answered the “why” question in much the same way her psychiatrist had:
I think Steve [her husband] and I, we were struggling. . . . there were some real life issues with—within my family, Steve, and the children and my father was [ill] . . . I believe very strongly there was a much healthier way to work through everything that was going on at the time. And it didn't happen that way. We—we didn't ask for help. And now there's a lot of hurt right now. (p. 8)

Letourneau’s language suggests that, had she had a “healthier way to work through” her problems—had she asked for help—she might not have turned to Fualaau for comfort during this dark time in her life.

I am not discounting the likelihood that Letourneau’s mental health contributed to her affair or the possibility that she could have prevented it had she asked for help. However, I am more interested in why psychological explanations are sought than in whether they are true. Glavin (1997) helps to explain why society needs a medical explanation for seemingly outrageous cases of ESM:

As we in the teaching profession know, the headline-grabbing teacher who recently seduced her students into murdering her husband is scandalous only in the way that Baudrillard maintains Watergate was scandalous. We have to insist this one's different, and bad, to camouflage her, or his, and our, deep and continuous pedagogic connection to seduction as usual. (Glavin, 1997, pp. 12-13)

Fualaau’s extreme youth makes the Letourneau case “different, and bad,” but her behavior cannot be explained by the normalizing assumption that female sex offenders were themselves victims of abuse; her childhood was at worst loveless, according to her friends (Olsen, 1999). But neither is her bipolar diagnosis an excuse in and of itself; I imagine most adults with personality disorders do not have sex with minors. A more satisfactory explanation lies in a
combination of the “Teacher/Lover” category and Glavin’s argument. A sexual dynamic is inherent in the teacher-student relationship, and sometimes—“far more often than many people think” (Hendrie, 1998c, ¶2)—it gets acted upon by teachers who believe they are in love with their students.

Stories less scandalous than Letourneau’s are harder to dismiss as freak aberrations. Take the case of Heather Ingram, a young, unmarried Canadian teacher whose affair with Dusty Dickeson, her 17-year-old student, resulted in house arrest and the end of her career. Ingram would not have been prosecuted in most American states; although her behavior was arguably unethical, it wasn’t illegal according to the current statutes of 37 states (see http://www.ageofconsent.com/). However, Canadian law stipulates that sex with anyone under 18 by someone in a position of authority is a crime.

Letourneau and Ingram are similar in many ways: They do not have histories of sexual abuse; they were highly-regarded teachers; they were in unhappy relationships; the sex was consensual (according to the “victims”); and offspring resulted from their affairs. A difference is that Ingram frames her affair, which she has discussed in her book (Ingram, 2003) as well as in appearances on Oprah and Primetime Live, largely as a regrettable mistake which could have been avoided had she just waited a few months for Dickeson to graduate, whereas Letourneau is not so penitent; she claims her only regret is hurting her family (Olsen, 1999). When Walters asked Letourneau if her affair was worth it, she replied,

I don't look at life that way. I do my best. So if you asked me that question, did you do your best through every situation, I can say I did my best. I did. I did do my best. (20/20, 2004, p. 14)
In fact, Letourneau resisted the medical treatment she received upon her initial arrest because the therapists working with her required that she admit the relationship was wrong: "She thought they were mean-spirited and didn't care about anything but categorizing her as a pervert. . . . They wrote it all down, shook their heads, and told her she was a sick woman" (Olsen, 1999, p. 234). Letourneau’s adamant refusal to confess her sins—to be a docile body—probably earned her a harsher sentence than if she had been more compliant with their predatory construction: "It didn't matter to Mary Kay if her defiance only made things worse for her first in jail, and later in prison. She was the type who had to prove a point" (p. 56).

If one accepts that the sexual dimension of teaching is a condition of the pedagogical process rather than a problem to be banished, the question then becomes a matter of degree: When does pedagogical eroticism become pedagogical abuse? The Maginot Line is breached when teachers physically act on their desires by engaging in a sexual relationship with students. I am most interested in cases such as Ingram’s that can’t be dismissed with medical explanations: cases in which the students weren’t minors and the teachers weren’t mentally ill. Hannah and Kim, two of my research participants, fit this description. Although I will continue to demonstrate characteristics of ESM by women with parallel examples from Letourneau and Ingram, from here on out the focus will be on Hannah’s and Kim’s stories.

All four women exemplify cases in which the line between pedagogical eroticism and abuse was clearly crossed, although it’s not always clear who the victim (if I define “victim” as “someone who suffered”) was, if there was one at all. My intent is to illustrate how that happens so that educators can understand the conditions under which such a boundary crossing is made possible and recognize the indicators that the sexual dynamic present in any pedagogical
relationship is becoming something different, something dangerous. The following research questions guided my investigation:

1. How can/do participants construct themselves as desirable and/or desiring subjects within a larger discourse that constructs teachers as asexual?
2. How can/do participants negotiate the tension between pedagogical eroticism and pedagogical abuse—that is, where do they place themselves on that continuum and how do they justify (or not) their positioning?
3. How does the “line” between eroticism and abuse get drawn differently—that is, what sociocultural factors make it possible for that “line” to exist, and what factors—e.g., gender, location, marital status—affect the line’s construction? How do participants cross that line, and what happens when they do?

I encountered certain methodological difficulties during the course of my study because of the taboo nature of the project. I discuss these issues in Chapter 2 before continuing with Hannah’s and Kim’s cases.
CHAPTER 2

METHODS: DOING THE RESEARCH

I know, I know—Chapter 2 is supposed to be about my research methodology. What I did, how I did it—that sort of thing. My qualitative research coursework as well as my two-year research apprenticeship with my advisor, Peter Smagorinsky, have groomed me not only to conduct research but also to produce a text describing the process. I could mimic the three-part sequence of description, analysis, and interpretation that Wolcott (1994) advocates by first describing my data collection methods, then explaining how I analyzed the data, and finally following through with how I arrived at my interpretations. I could “transform” the data, to use Wolcott’s term, in a tidy, linear fashion to the satisfaction of most readers looking to stamp my work with the qualitative seal of approval.

But I have a two-fold problem with writing a standard methods chapter. First of all, it would not capture my research process. I don’t doubt that critics of my work will attack my research methods as a tangential means to dismissing or avoiding engagement with the subject matter itself, and I refuse to play into their hands by writing a false account in order to simulate conventional notions of rigor and reliability. If I were really to describe how this case study of two women teachers came to be the monograph before you now, it would bear only a faint resemblance to qualitative models like Wolcott’s (1994) or Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996)—both excellent resources for novice researchers to get started. But the truth is that these and other how-to texts like them only got me as far as collecting and coding my data. Analysis for me was not a discrete step but rather occurred all along, in flashes of insight that intensified particularly during the writing phase. In Part II of this chapter I’ll try to capture how these insights happened
and the poststructural perspective that informs my understanding of them—albeit elusive and, for staunch empiricists,\textsuperscript{2} untenable.

The other problem I have with writing a standard methods chapter is that there is nothing new in what I did. Although part of the reason for describing one’s methodology is to allow readers to judge whether the research process was sound and therefore the findings credible, another reason for including methodology is instructive: so readers can learn. They can emulate or modify successful strategies or avoid pitfalls in their own research, and thus the field of educational research builds on itself. But the field can’t advance if there is a normative pan-agreement among qualitative scholars to claim \textit{This is what qualitative research looks like, and this is how it gets done}, which strikes me as more static than productive. Well, of course standard qualitative research benchmarks are \textit{productive} in the sense that they produce a certain kind of researcher and a particular kind of text, but I am more interested in disrupting those normative productions than in faithfully instantiating them here. Therefore, what I’m focusing on in this methods chapter is what \textit{was} new and different about my research process—what I think readers can learn from: My experience with obtaining human subjects approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my institution. The narrative that follows is the story of how I almost didn’t get to do research on sexual dynamics in the classroom in the first place.

But first, a caveat: Please read to the end of Part I. I debated both internally and among colleagues about the wisdom and ethics of a public accounting of my story because some powerful people are not painted in a positive light—at least initially. As Richardson (2000) writes, \textit{“For the most part, I have found no ethical problem in publishing stories that reflect the abuse of power by administrators; I consider the damage done by them far greater than any}\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{2}Peter has been heard to say, “I’m an empiricist at heart.” Here’s to hoping he isn’t a staunch one—or, if he is, that he will curb the tendency just this once.
discomfort my stories might cause them” (p. 932; emphasis added). My “for the most part” here is my concern, much as it is for my research as a whole, that readers will seize upon a scintillating scene and unfairly denounce the principal players without considering the context of the rest of the story.

Part I: Getting IRB Approval

As a high school English teacher I learned pretty quickly how to pay lip service to what was fast becoming the modus operandi of schools in the mid- to late-1990s, the tenure of my teaching: standardized test preparation and its attendant curricular requirements. As long as my students produced acceptable test scores and I fronted what Foucault (1975/1995) terms a docile body, seemingly in compliance with the norms of the school, what happened behind my closed classroom door was unquestioned. I never really felt the effects of disciplinary power until I openly and defiantly challenged the school’s practices my last semester of teaching, when I knew I was graduate school-bound and untouchable. That is not to say that disciplinary power wasn’t operating on me prior to my resistance to it; as Foucault (1975/1995) explains, disciplinary power works most effectively when it is invisible:

in order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert. (p. 214)

Indeed, the “faceless gaze” of disciplinary power in the form of patriarchy had normalized me long before I became a teacher, predisposing me to docility—to being a “good girl” by obeying
the rules. But it wasn’t until I questioned the rules that those structures became visible as they
mobilized to contain me, to bring my behavior back in line with the school’s ideology.

With the glory days of graduate school serving as a three-year buffer between the parallel
power structures of the public school and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) whose approval I
needed to carry out my dissertation research, I had forgotten the necessity of performing docility.
As a student seduced by feminism and poststructuralism, I’d learned to unmask the grand
narratives that structure society’s discourses and trouble the assumptions that gird my daily
living. Privileged to be a student in a department that lauded nonconformity, my unorthodox
research agenda of exposing sexual dynamics in the classroom had been wholly endorsed. One
professor outside my department—she was an instructor in the qualitative research program—
did warn me that any future aspirations of a dean-ship might be compromised by my choice of
research, which in retrospect strikes me as an early indicator of the lack of support awaiting me.
Other than her, my mentors and colleagues affirmed that my work was important and necessary.

Wooed into a false sense of security by my supportive department, I moved forward
confidently with the human subjects application for my dissertation. I thought I might encounter
a few obstacles because of the sensitive nature of my research but naively assumed the IRB
would agree with my dissertation committee that the proposal itself was fundamentally sound. I
was mistaken. Once again I felt the effects of disciplinary power, only this time there was no
escape; I was ironically contained in and by the institution that had once set me free.

Outside the Board Room

Dissertation directors are expected to accompany their advisees to full board reviews, and
so Peter and I arrived 10 minutes early for our 12:45 appointment. The IRB meets the last
Friday of every month from noon to 2:00 to review applications, and mine was the second of
four on the docket for December 2003. Peter had never had a full-board review for a project nor had he advised a student who had, so this was a new experience for both of us. As we settled into the chairs that Peter confiscated from nearby empty rooms—there were only two provided in the hallway, and the first doctoral student-faculty advisor duo on the docket were already seated—I nervously speculated about what the IRB might not condone.

I had met with the IRB’s chairperson prior to submitting my human subjects application, anticipating the project would require full board review and hoping for a heads-up on potential trouble spots. I had found a way around what I thought was most problematic about my research: protecting my participants’ confidentiality. I wanted to ensure there could be no legal ramifications if I learned a participant had had a sexual relationship with a student, and obtaining a Certificate of Confidentiality (COC) from the National Institutes of Health seemed the best means to do so. As the COC website explains,

Certificates of Confidentiality are issued by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to protect identifiable research information from forced disclosure. They allow the investigator and others who have access to research records to refuse to disclose identifying information on research participants in any civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceeding, whether at the federal, state, or local level. Certificates of Confidentiality may be granted for studies collecting information that if disclosed could have adverse consequences for subjects or damage their financial standing, employability, insurability, or reputation. (NIH, 2004, ¶ 1)

Along with substance abuse and other illegal or risky behavior studies, a criterion given as an example of COC-worthy research is “Collecting information on subjects' sexual attitudes, preferences or practices” (¶ 7). The description fit my potential participants; by obtaining a
COC, I could not be forced to disclose their identities in the event that anyone attempted to pursue and expose them.

The chairperson had heard of COCs but was dubious about how well they stood up to contestation or whether one was appropriate for my research; she gave me a couple of contacts for further exploration and advised me to include documentation as attachments to my application. I had an inkling from this conversation that my solution to the problem of confidentiality might be met with some resistance, so I built an alternative option into the application: a waiver for signed consent. I figured if the IRB didn’t go for the COC, I could at least inhibit traceability of my participants’ identities by not having any written record of their participation.

I highlighted this and other aspects of the proposal I expected to be problematic to Peter as we waited outside the IRB board room for an audience. In addition to the issue of confidentiality, I thought the IRB might not allow me to include former students of my participants in my data pool. Even though I knew better than to ask to interview current students who would be subject to school and parent approval, I wanted to learn about the other half of the teacher-student classroom dynamic and was hopeful that students who were out of school might be considered safe informants. I also wanted to videotape a focus group discussion of two or more participants engaged in dialogue around my topic. Although I knew video data were problematic, it was worth a try. I thought the worst that could happen was that the IRB would deny me these options for obtaining informed consent and methods of data collection, but I expected these modifications could be routed through expedited review and thus would not delay my work significantly.
And so we waited. Occasional bursts of jovial laughter emanated from within and the human subjects office secretary crossed the threshold a couple of times, but other than that the door remained forbiddingly closed until 12:45—our appointment time—when the first applicant was called in. As she was from my department, I was familiar with her research; she too was proposing an alternate route to informed consent because the Cherokee tribe whom she was studying took exception to signing documents. A half hour later the door opened and she left crying—definitely not a good sign. My stomach, already in knots, tightened tenfold.

And we waited some more. It became apparent that the IRB first deliberated about a case before hearing it, so I assumed at this point they were discussing mine. By 1:30 the third and fourth applicants had arrived and were chatting desultorily. My nervous bladder cried for relief, but I was afraid to get up for fear I would miss being called. Finally the door opened again and I half-stood, anticipating my turn. But no; we were bypassed for applicant #3 because, the IRB chair explained, a board member speaking specifically to that case had to leave early. Visibly seething, my advisor began pacing. I was struck by the power this group of people wielded; to whom could we complain, really? This was it. The last check point before I could embark on my dissertation.

Finally, after a 1 ½ hour wait, we were called in. I was asked to sit with my advisor to my right, thus closing the square of close to 20 faces focusing their attention on me. I wondered if my conservative, Midwest Dutch-girl appearance contrasted with the impression they had formed of me based on my application—did I look like someone who wanted to research sexual dynamics in schools? I attempted to adopt a professional, inquisitive mien as I looked around the room of mostly white faces. Although there wasn’t a clear hierarchy implied by the layout of
the room, one white-haired, aquiline-featured man wearing a white lab coat and stethoscope\(^3\) radiated the markings of authority. Aside from the IRB chairperson, I recognized two professors at the table, both highly regarded scholars in the field of qualitative research. I knew them from my coursework; my institution has an exemplary qualitative research program from which I had taken a number of courses. I smiled at them hesitantly.

After a perfunctory apology for the delay, the IRB chair began with the nonnegotiable items: I was not to talk to former students. I was not to visit classrooms for observation data. I was not to have my participants engage in focus group discussions at all, let alone videotape them. Their reasoning was that any one of these methods of data collection could breach confidentiality: former students would know whom I was researching; someone could see me visiting a classroom; and my participants could tell on each other if they met. These concerns were not unreasonable or completely unexpected; although I was disappointed, I had been prepared to be reined in.

But then the chair’s tone changed. What had been a clear delineation of points became a series of hedges and false starts as she shifted in her seat. *Okay, what’s going on here*, I wondered, my body on alert. We were moving into the gray area of my proposal—a location of “instability, ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction that delight[s] postmodernists” (Wolf, 1992, p. 88) like me, but ambiguity was not apparently so pleasant for the predominantly quantitative IRB. The bottom-line concern as it was voiced by various board members was confidentiality, although I suspect, along with Lincoln and Tierney (2004), that the real issue was not protecting participants so much as protecting the University from potential lawsuits and bad press.

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\(^3\) It wasn’t until later that I realized what had struck me as so odd about his attire: My institution doesn’t have a medical school. I suppose he could have been a veterinarian?
I realized one mistake I made in writing the application in short order: I gave too much information. In the section describing research subjects, I wrote, “Participants will be high school teachers recruited from among my former students and colleagues, as I have already established the rapport necessary for the sensitive nature of my study.” In disclosing that I knew who my participants might be—even though I had no intention of revealing the nature of my relationship to them in the study—the IRB argued that I had already breached confidentiality because they were now privy to that information. I needed to recruit more subjects, they said—and preferably ones I didn’t know. How many more? A hypothetical figure of 90 was mentioned several times. One board member suggested I conduct an anonymous survey. “But strangers aren’t going to volunteer such personal information,” I said. “My participants need to know that they can trust me. Besides, I’m looking for dialogue here, in-depth experiences of a few participants, not a bunch of Liekert-scale responses.” Did they just not get it? I mutely appealed to the two qualitative board members for support; surely I didn’t need to explain or justify the purposes of qualitative research. They said nothing.

The Board was not ready to cede their quantitative solution to my confidentiality problem. One member—who I gathered later is a psychometrician based on my advisor’s description of his quantitative clinical studies—provided an elaborate scenario to illustrate the potential danger of my research: “Let’s say, ten years down the road, someone’s having a party. One of your colleagues is there and happens to strike up a conversation with one of your research subjects. Your name comes up, and your subject says, ‘Oh, I know her! I was in her dissertation study.’ Your colleague would immediately be able to identify her.”

A number of thoughts chased through my mind. First of all, the likelihood of my professorial colleagues and participants socializing in the same circles is slim. Secondly, in the
unlikely event that such a situation were to arise, I am confident that my participants are savvy enough not to divulge their sexual histories. To what degree is it the researcher’s job to protect participants from themselves? If they know the potential costs and still have agreed to participate, wouldn’t it be patronizing, a violation of the feminist ethical principle to mitigate the researcher-participant hierarchy (Kirsch, 1999), to decide for them that the risk is not worth it? I wondered how any studies could get done if researchers had to guard against every eventuality. But I am not quick to speak even in congenial settings, so I was hesitant to utter the obvious lest I offend these people who controlled my future. My advisor came to the rescue. He posited dryly, “But if that scenario were to occur, wouldn’t it hold true whether she had 5 participants or 90 of them?”

I was too dumbfounded at this point to be upset; of all the problems I thought might arise in this meeting, it never occurred to me that qualitative research itself would be questioned. I shook my head slowly, trying to take it in. “I’m a qualitative researcher. That’s what I’ve been trained to do here; I’m getting certification for it,” I said emphatically, looking meaningfully at the two professors who were in part responsible for that training. “I’m just trying to get my head around how I’m supposed to do qualitative research with 90 participants.”

There was a pregnant pause. Then—from one of the qualitative researchers—“Well, I guess you have to decide whether you want to do a qualitative research project or whether you want to do research on sexual dynamics in the classroom.”

I couldn’t believe it. This woman had been my instructor; she knew my work. Why had she not warned me then that my research would be met with such violence? What was going on here?
They were not done with me yet. The confidentiality issue was merely a segue to the deeper problem: sex. If I learned during the course of my research that one of my teachers had sex with a student who was a minor, under human subjects regulations I would be obligated to report it because it constitutes child abuse. This was precisely why I wanted a Certificate of Confidentiality; having one in effect trumps the reporting requirement. None of my anticipated participants were child abusers, but I didn’t want to play the role of sex police in the event that I came across one. However, the IRB was not interested in what a COC could or could not do. I realized then that a COC, while it may well protect my participants and me and ultimately hold up in a court situation, would not protect the University from the scandal and cost if my work were ever contested. As Nelson (2004) argues,

> There is a tendency to manage all research proposals on the basis of a worst-case scenario, even when actual risk may not be much . . . . The admirable moral imperatives propelling the IRB forward become entangled with legal constructs that compromise fairness and sanity, not to say academic freedom. (p. 211)

“Okay,” I said, backpedaling furiously. “What if I made it a stipulation of my exclusion criteria that teachers who’ve had sex with minors couldn’t participate?”

The psychometrician nodded. “I’d feel a lot better about that.”

But Dr. Lab-Coat wasn’t satisfied. “How would you find out, though? Even if you asked them up front and they admitted they had, that’s already part of the research context, and you’d have to report it.” He smiled at me gently, patronizingly.

Having hit me with the incommensurables, the IRB eased up a bit with two items that were workable. But even these quibbles spoke volumes to the schism in our mutual understanding. The first was a concern that I had not sufficiently addressed the potential
psychological harm to my participants—that there was not just a “slight risk of discomfort” as I had anticipated. I was to come up with a list of counseling referrals in case my participants were traumatized by my research. Mentally I reviewed the profound relief teachers have expressed to me in having someone to talk to about the unspeakable, in realizing they’re not alone; if their wellbeing were affected at all, these interviews were likely to be salubrious rather than detrimental. I also thought about some of my anticipated participants—women who were comfortable with their sexuality and with whom I had already had conversations about my research. One of them was even in the process of becoming a counselor herself. These women don’t need me to refer them to some stranger-confessor. However, because I was hypothetically going to have a multitude of participants who didn’t know me, I conceded the point.

The assumption that talking about sex and sexuality could cause mental distress strikes me as interesting, though. As if the sexual domain were so deeply taboo that a specialist might be required to navigate it, or desiring students so deviant that speaking of it may require psychological intervention. I see shades of Foucault’s (1976/1990) understanding of the work of confession in this assumption:

"Everything had to be told. A twofold evolution tended to make the flesh into the root of all evil, shifting the most important moment of transgression from the act itself to the stirrings—so difficult to perceive and formulate—of desire." (p. 19)

The second quibble returned us to the qual-quant divide: The IRB was dissatisfied with my semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix A for my interview protocol). I provided three overarching questions for the initial interview to get background details and baseline information about how participants felt about embodiment and boundaries in the classroom. I also anticipated seven follow-up questions I might ask in a second interview to dig deeper, to
have them theorize their experiences with me. Knowing how “way leads on to way,” to borrow from Robert Frost, even these questions were too specific for qualitative research; but I assumed the IRB would want to have an idea of the kinds of questions I would be asking. However, they wanted more; or rather, they wanted more control. What exactly was I going to find out? The notion that participants might take the interview in unforeseen directions appeared to be foreign and uncomfortable to them. As one of the qualitative board members summarized the IRB’s contentions with my protocol, I thought back to my coursework where I had learned the phenomenological method of having just one preordained question in an interview situation.

What was going on here?

By this point it was approaching 2:30, and Peter saw rightly that further discussion was futile. The IRB chair concluded by informing me that she would email me a list of the Board’s recommended and required changes and that the full board would review my revised application at the next meeting.

The Aftermath

Caputo (1993) uses the word “happen” in order to describe minimalistically an “event” as “what happens” without all the metaphysical baggage that usually accompanies an understanding of events:

- events cannot be fully fathomed or analyzed, but only inhabited, settled into, coped with.
- An event cannot be saturated by thought, it is too dense for that. Events are the complex settings for action, the impenetrable background in which agents act, in which action happens, in which anything at all happens. (p. 94)

Rajchman (1991) explains that an event is “a moment of erosion, collapse, questioning, or problematization of the very assumptions of the setting within which a drama may take place”
that is “not defined by a fixed beginning and end, but is something that occurs in the midst of a history, causing us to redistribute our sense of what has gone before it and what might come after” (pp. viii-ix). Similarly, Derrida (2001) has said, “Events fall on you.” I was too shell-shocked on the walk back to my office to do much processing of the event that had just befallen me, although I sensed this moment of collapse was very much going to affect “what might come after.” My advisor assured me that it was just going to be a matter of writing what the IRB wanted to hear. However, I felt much maligned, betrayed by the qualitative board members who had been in a position to defend, if not me, then at least the principles of qualitative research. I vowed bitterly that if I were ever in a position to be on an IRB, I would certainly stand up for students doing qualitative work. At the forefront of my mind was the delay: I had wanted to start collecting data over the holidays. At the rate I was going, I would be lucky to get approval after the next meeting in six weeks.

A week after the initial IRB meeting, I received the chair’s email delineating the changes I needed to make: 13 elaborations, justifications, or deletions on the application form itself; “more specific questions” for the interview protocol; and an additional recruitment flyer and debriefing script (“to mitigate the psychological distress”). I set to making the changes with a determined resignation. As I wrote in an email to my undergraduate mentor,

I'm resigned to the fact that I can't do the work I want to do—at least not yet, and not in [the South]. But that's okay. As much as I love it here, I just want to get my degree and get on with my life now.

The sentiment was similar to how I felt my last year of teaching, after I had been disciplined for refusing to proctor pseudo-standardized tests for underclassmen while the juniors were taking the
actual state-mandated test. I just wanted to do my time and get out. Graduate school had lost its romanticism.

The simple solution to assuage many of the IRB’s concerns was to remove the potentially illegal component of the study, as I had suggested in the meeting. I was stymied, though, on how to eliminate teachers who were or had been in sexual relationships with minors without actually confirming (and thus being obligated to report) it. Then, as I was texting my troubles to a former student on Instant Messenger, he came up with an answer brilliant in its simplicity: To list several reasons for teachers not to participate, including sexual misconduct, on the recruitment flyer (see Appendix B). That way, even if I had a conversation with a potential participant, I wouldn’t know which one was the “real” reason for nonparticipation. I planned to post the flyer to multiple listserves of past English education cohorts who had graduated from my institution and were presently middle- and high-school teachers in an effort to attract more participants. In addition to the dire bold-faced warning of my obligation to report child abuse on the consent form (see Appendix C), I felt the University I was covered.

I balked at one of the required changes: “delete the audiotaping, transcription, classroom observation, focus groups, videotaping and the clarifications in writing as they constitute an unacceptable level of risk to the subjects.” I understood and accepted that I couldn’t do classroom observations or focus groups, but how was I supposed to conduct an interview study without audiotapes and transcripts or follow-up email correspondence? It wasn’t possible. In an addendum to the revised application where I listed the changes I had made (rather than highlighting the changes on the original as directed, which would have resulted in more highlights than text in my case), I justified my stance as follows:
Procedures have been changed to reflect that this is now solely an interview study—no classroom visits or focus group discussions anymore. The one change I did not make is to delete audiotaping and transcription or possible clarifications via email. Both audiotaping and transcription are necessary components of an interview study, and as my participants no longer potentially include felony offenders, I do not believe using standard methods of qualitative research poses an unacceptable level of risk to the subjects.

I had intended to suppress my feelings of betrayal long enough to solicit advice from one of the two qualitative board members, but I ran out of time: I had to submit my revised application two weeks prior to the January 30 meeting so the IRB would have time to review it, and people were just getting back from the holidays. As luck would have it, though, both of qualitative members were present at a conference I attended in mid-January. I approached one of them with the intention of garnering her support for my stand on audiotaping. Before I could even broach the subject, she generously offered to look over my revised application—which I just happened to have with me—and suggest changes that would make it more amenable to the IRB. Even though I had already submitted it the day before, she assured me it would be easy to swap out the corrections before the copies were distributed to board members. I felt better than I had in weeks.

*If only I had sought her out before my first meeting, I thought. She would have helped me write a better application in the first place, and I might have saved myself a six-week delay.* But in my heady romance with academic freedom in my department, I had forgotten there was a political game to be played—a game of talking to the right people at the right time in order to smooth the way to my goals.
The next day I approached her again after a luncheon, and she pulled my application from her bag. She praised me for my hard work: “It’s much clearer, now, what you’re intending to do.”

Well, no, I thought. It’s not clearer; it’s a completely different application. “Thanks! I had to tame it down a lot,” I replied pleasantly. On the surface I accepted my reward for being a good girl. I was surprised at how easy it was, how smoothly I could perform the docile-bodied student. Nelson’s (2004) description of the IRB hierarchy comes to mind:

At every level of the system, the persons in power declare, “We are your friends. We want to work with you.” And in every instance, the person hearing the message wholly or partly discounts it. It does not matter whether this anxiety is well founded, because it is a predictable product of the power differential inherent in the system. (p. 216)

Her corrections were minor; an editing change here and there, and a suggestion to keep audiotapes for 3-5 years rather than destroy them after transcription as I had indicated. She apparently hadn’t noticed that my interview protocol wasn’t one bit “more specific” than its original version (I had been at a loss about how to create questions I wasn’t going to ask). I was cautiously euphoric; I felt I would have her support in my next round with the IRB.

Before I left, I asked her if she would be willing to speak to a group of students from my department about IRB issues; I didn’t want others to go through what I had. “Sure, I’d be happy to,” she said, “but we try to do that in our qualitative research courses. For some reason, the students in your department just aren’t getting it.”

What?! I’m taking those qualitative courses. Maybe we’re pushing the boundaries in my department, but isn’t that a good thing? As a relatively self-absorbed introvert, I don’t always pick up on social cues or innuendoes. And even though this one was delivered with a smile,
even I couldn’t miss the message that my department was responsible for my troubles. Was I supposed to deliver that message, disciplining my department in a Foucauldian sense for allowing its students to do research that was out of line? In that moment I felt myself caught (and implicated) in a complex web of power relations among my department, arbiters of qualitative research, and the IRB—some working as agents of normalization and others resisting that process. Foucault (1975/1995) describes the power-relation imbroglio of a disciplinary society:

In this central and centralized humanity, the effect and instrument of complex power relations, bodies and forces subjected by multiple mechanisms of 'incarceration', objects for discourses that are in themselves elements for this strategy, we must hear the distant roar of battle. (p. 308)

The “distant roar of battle” grew nearer as I armed myself for the next IRB meeting. This time I would not have my advisor by my side; he was out of town, so Linda Harklau, one of my dissertation committee members, stepped in. We were first on the docket this time per Peter’s request, so we arrived punctually at 12:15. I couldn’t imagine what the IRB would find objectionable with my docile version; there would be no sex—at least not with minors—and I had given up on the suspicious-sounding, what-are-you-trying-to-hide Certificate of Confidentiality. I didn’t need it anyway, as my anticipated participants hadn’t committed any crimes.

Only a couple of minutes had passed when the human subjects office secretary peeked her head out of the board room. “You can go,” she said. “The Board has voted to send your application through expedited review.”
What?! My adrenalin dissipated in a rush of relief, although I was curiously deflated. I had been ready for a fight.

The following Monday I received my approval notice via email with the official paperwork on its way. After the six-week delay, suddenly everything was moving very fast. I immediately sent out my token recruitment flyer, not expecting to get much of a response but figuring I could at least say I did it. Surprisingly, I did end up adding teachers to my project via this technique. Readers of my work will not know the difference between these participants and the ones I had approached through other channels.

That same day I sent an email to the board member who had assisted me: “I don't know whether you played a role in having my proposal go to expedited review last Friday, but thanks all the same for your help.” I didn’t expect her to take the credit for it, but I had a feeling she had something to do with how smoothly Round Two had gone and I wanted to let her know how grateful I was. She replied, “I think all the changes we did after the last round really helped. I'm pleased it went through on an expedited review!”

Approval in hand, I went about my business in much the same way that I intended prior to the IRB Event that divorced me of my romantic illusions—just on a much simpler, less dramatic scale. Only being able to conduct interviews with teachers, although not providing me with the richness and depth of data that I wanted, was going to save me a lot of time.

The Betrayal Reexamined

Even though I was successfully carrying out my research, what I had perceived as a betrayal by the qualitative board members still weighed heavily upon me as I sat in the conference room for a session on academic freedom at AERA. In retrospect, I know I was fortunate to get a chance to conduct my research at all. As Lincoln (2004) argued in her
presentation, the current climate for educational researchers is one of increased surveillance and institutional control:

The most prominent effects catalogued thus far by increased IRB scrutiny have been in the multiple re-reviews of faculty who wish to engage in qualitative research, and re-reviews and denials of student research (particularly dissertation research) which . . . is predominantly qualitative in nature. (p. 3)

In the post-session discussion, I asked Lincoln how academic status and location were related to the level of scrutiny—whether my being a student in the conservative South was a factor in my experience. She told me research projects far less problematic than mine proposed by tenured faculty were being denied, though she couldn’t speak to how my institution’s IRB compared to others. This dialogue with Lincoln, almost exactly two months after I received IRB approval for my project, had me re-thinking the betrayal narrative to which I had grown so attached. I was reminded of Spivak’s (1993) call to question the things we hold most dear: "It is here that the transgressor must persistently critique that transgressed space, which she cannot not want to inhabit, even if coded another way" (p. 236). I began to code the IRB event that had happened to me differently.

Although I was aware of the concerns Lincoln (2004) was talking about from prior coursework involving discussion of the National Research Council’s (2002) report describing exemplary scientific research in education, the ramifications of the narrow definition of what qualifies as good research hadn’t been made personal to me until I found out for myself what the real effects of such a report on real bodies could be. Listening to Lincoln’s description of the increased levels of surveillance within IRBs across the United States, I was able to nest my betrayal narrative in a larger context than my own experience. I realized that I was not the
oppressed victim of a tyrannical IRB; rather, the power and control IRBs now wield is symptomatic of a much larger conservative movement to limit the kinds of research being done in academia:

Between Federal imperatives for how research projects should be designed, and IRB scrutiny and disapproval of non-conventional forms of inquiry, academic freedom is undergoing radical challenge. The threats to the academy of the stark politicization of research and its methods will no doubt pose the gravest threat to researchers and academic freedom in the past half-century. (p. 10)

Although IRBs have exercised increasing control over and interference in research involving human subjects over the past decade, Lincoln (2004) argues there is “some danger that it will happen with more frequency” with the publication of the National Research Council’s report on educational research:

The NRC Committee report in particular has sent a shock wave through the research community, supporting as it does “evidence-based research” and randomized controlled experiments based on clinical field trial models. While not disallowing qualitative research as a strategy or set of methods which may produce evidence for research purposes, the clear focus on objectivity and causal connections, as well as generalizability, has a distinctly modernist bent which acts to freeze out inquiry models which take account explicitly of alternative epistemologies or the emergent critiques of contemporary science. (p. 6)

Though qualitative research is not disallowed, epistemological stances like critical race theory or queer theory are not even mentioned in the report. This oversight is perhaps because the Committee categorizes and thus dismisses them along with postmodernism, which is described
as “an extreme epistemological perspective that questions the rationality of the scientific
enterprise altogether, and instead believes that all knowledge is based on sociological factors like
power, influence, and economic factors” (NRC, 2002, p. 25).

This “extreme” interrogative stance is contrary to the NRC’s claim that “it is possible to
describe the physical and social world scientifically so that, for example, multiple observers can
agree on what they see”; thus, they “reject the postmodernist school of thought” (p. 25).

However, as St. Pierre (2002) argues, the NRC’s “quite positivist description of research does not
describe most qualitative research” (p. 26; emphasis added); it isn’t just “extreme”
methodologies that are “disciplined right out of the NRC report” (p. 26). St. Pierre posits that the
NRC report’s conflation of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is a “not-so-subtle
Hegelian appropriation, [in which] Difference is assimilated into the Same, and the ‘diversity of
perspectives’ that Feuer et al. [NRC Committee members] claim to champion is denied in a
rather brutal dialectical synthesis” (p. 26). It will be difficult for budding qualitative researchers,
let alone postmodern ones like me, to gain a foothold and claim legitimacy in such an academic
environment.

After reexamining my betrayal narrative, I began to fathom the depth of the issue;
whether or not I—one graduate student in one college of education at one university—was
allowed to do my dissertation project was trivial compared to the greater problem of entire
epistemologies and methodologies being dismissed from what counts as research. The betrayal
felt less like a personal attack, and I became more sympathetic to the two professors’
marginalized position on the Board as qualitative researchers.

Who was I, after all, to presume that I could march through bureaucracy without
constraint, knowing I had a sensitive research topic? Similar to how the IRB presumed my
participants needed protection from themselves, I presumed the qualitative board members would protect me—and maybe they had protected me from myself, what might have been the consequences of my unfettered flouting of authority. What if they had supported an application that was so clearly beyond the bounds of what was safe for the University? They may well have lost credibility among the quantitative majority, and my application might still be gathering dust (or flies) in the human subjects office.

And who knows what work they did for me behind the scenes? Silence or the appearance of cooperation can be a form of resistance (Gallas, 1998); sometimes subversively negotiating around obstacles is more effective than directly confronting them. If the goal was to get my application approved, then their means of doing so—initially going along with their IRB colleagues and then helping me get it right for the next round—may well have been the best strategy. I don’t doubt that if I had approached them prior to submitting my application, they would have steered me clear of the pitfalls. That had been my intent in meeting with the IRB chairperson back in November, but she wasn’t a mentor figure like the two qualitative board members were; she said during our meeting that she couldn’t speak for the Board. I should have read in her ambivalence that perhaps I should speak to the IRB directly through these professors, but my inability to pick up on subtlety left me blithely unaware.

What had at first seemed like a betrayal was in fact much more complex. I had been caught in a you’re-either-with-me-or-against-me binary, which was hypocritical given my supposed poststructural theoretical stance. I revel in shades of gray, but I had unfairly and self-righteously fixed these professors’ locations in black and white. If I ever am in a position like theirs, I cannot now say unequivocally that I will vocally champion qualitative research when it
may well be in my students’ and the discipline’s best interest for me to lay low and practice subversive resistance.

There was a point after the IRB event fell on me that I contemplated giving up my unorthodox research pursuits in lieu of a safe, tidy teacher education study that would earn me my degree and get me on my way. I suspect I will face a similar predicament as I seek employment in a research institution: My work may be interesting, but it’s not likely to win grant monies. Herein lies a greater concern, I think: Because the current restrictive climate for educational research discourages edgework and encourages mediocrity, the discipline is bound to stagnate. Who is going to engage in risky, cutting-edge research when the stakes are so high? And yet, somehow, the work does go on. Qualitative educational researchers may be living in dark times, but I am optimistic that the political climate will change. I am hopeful that the answer to Marcus’s (1994) title question “What comes (just) after ‘post’?” will be a proliferation of alternative methodologies, ontologies, and epistemologies—ways of doing, being, and knowing along with their attendant critiques—that will stimulate the field, support edgework, and open up the possibilities for educational research.

Part II: Doing the Research

My resistance to a conventional accounting of my research process follows a poststructural tradition of questioning grand narratives—in this case, the narratives that structure the production of research. A number of poststructural methodologists have critiqued taken-for-granted tenets of qualitative studies. St.Pierre (1997) argues that data are more than field notes and transcripts and speculates on the possibilities of emotional, dream, sensual, and response data; Scheurich (1995) problematizes the interview’s function as a transparent means of data collection, claiming that “the complex play of the conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings,
fears, power, desires, and needs on the part of both the interviewer and interviewee cannot be captured and categorized” (p. 249); Pillow (2003) troubles how *reflexivity* has been used unproblematically within qualitative research, calling for “an ongoing critique of all of our research attempts” (p. 192); and Lather (1993) deconstructs *validity* as a condition of legitimacy of knowledge in qualitative research, arguing that truth claims are tied to the positivist assumption that a reality is out there to discover and measure.

Although poststructuralists trouble terms such as data, reflexivity, and validity, they do not reject them out of hand. Richardson (2000) explains:

Postmodernism *suspects* all truth claims of masking and serving particular interests in local, cultural, and political struggles. But it does not automatically reject conventional methods of knowing and telling as false or archaic. Rather, it opens those standard methods up to inquiry and introduces new methods, which are also, then, subject to critique. (p. 928; emphasis in original)

Rather than refusing truth claims, poststructural theorists like Bové (1990) ask questions of them such as, “How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist?” (p. 54). And so I trouble how conventional methods chapters exist and the effects of reproducing one of my own. And yet, for the remainder of this chapter, I produce one because I am, after all, accountable for my methodology, and to date, this is the accepted means of communicating one’s research process.

Data Collection

   Limited as I was to an interview study, my research design was relatively simple. Once I had identified four participants—one male and three female high school English teachers—I began the interview process in the spring of 2004. I used my interview protocol (see Appendix
A) as a guide for the initial interview, which lasted from one to two hours with each participant. In all four cases the second half of the protocol spilled into the first interview, so a follow-up interview was not necessary for the two participants who had experienced sexual dynamics in their classrooms but had not crossed the teacher/student boundary with a sexual relationship as the other two, Hannah and Kim, had. I conducted multiple interviews with these two women, who became the focus of this monograph; I will return to the others at some future time. As Richardson (1990) writes, “Because collecting qualitative data is labor intensive and much of what is collected does not fit into one article, it makes sense to write a number of different pieces, from different angles at different stages of the project” (p. 49). Even a book-length piece cannot hope to encompass all that these data contain; thus the case-study approach to the phenomenon of teacher-student relationships that Hannah and Kim exemplify.

In the early stages of data collection, Hannah was still involved with her student-lover, so I was able to capture her feelings in the moment. Kim’s viewpoint, on the other hand, was retrospective during the interviews; several years had passed since the bitter culmination of her affair. However, Kim is a prolific diarist and poet, and the turbulent times of her relationship had provided much writing fodder. She gave me seven full handwritten journals including poetry and prose spanning the nearly-two-year relationship with one student as well as an electronic file of about 50 poems documenting her brief emotional connection with another. I typed up relevant parts of the journals (which turned out to be most of the journals’ content, but I bypassed unrelated incidentals), dividing them into six files—three of prose and three of poetry: pre-relationship “onset” writing, up to the first time she and her student lover had sex; mid-relationship writing; and denouement/post-relationship writing. I typed the journals verbatim,
changing or deleting only proper names or events that could reveal Kim et al.’s identities and location.

Protecting identities was a little more complex for the interviews. By the time I got to Kim—she was the last of the four participants I interviewed—I had the foresight to establish pseudonyms for key figures before I started the audiotape, but there were still occasional slips that I didn’t want to have on record. I took care of this problem when I converted my analog audiotapes to digitized wav files. Before burning the wav files to compact discs for storage, I “silenced” identifying names or phrases by highlighting and muting the implicating segments using Audigy, a software program for manipulating audio files. Then I destroyed the original wav files and the audiotapes from whence they came, leaving only the CDs with silent parts to upload into Transana, a software program for storing and transcribing audio and video files.

I did all the transcribing myself as a further precaution for protecting and disguising the sometimes sensitive information in the interviews, inserting pseudonyms where there was silence. I could have foregone all the silencing described in the previous paragraph by destroying or deleting all the wav files and CDs after I had transcribed them, but I chose not to do that for two reasons. First of all, I need hard-copy evidence that the interviews took place in the event that somebody accuses me of making up my transcripts. Secondly, I may want to revisit nuances of sound and language in the originals that can’t be captured in a transcript as I continue to work with these data. I may, for example, get excited about conversation analysis someday and thus need to re-transcribe segments using CA conventions.

Data Analysis

By early summer I had a beautiful body of data, consisting of 16 single-spaced, 10-15-page documents—interview transcripts, journals, and poetry—which I felt I could be quite smug
about among my colleagues: “I’ve got great data,” I’d say, eyes sparkling. I was in love with it. But what to do with it? The prospect of starting was a bit daunting, although not paralyzingly so because I was confident in my training and my ability. I’d completed a research apprenticeship looking at case studies of teachers making the transition from certification programs to the workplace with Peter; I’d conducted a pilot study on sexual dynamics in the classroom for my qualitative research coursework; and I’d used skills I’d learned from both projects during my fellowship on a research team investigating the National Board Certification phenomenon among secondary teachers in Georgia. I had produced articles from all three projects, so I knew what to do, at least on a small scale.

But when Peter asked me what I was going to do next now that I had all these beautiful data, I looked at him blankly. “Uhhh…write?” I guessed hopefully, the familiar feeling of stupidity and inadequacy that I often experience when I have to produce something for Peter surfacing, eroding the edges of my confidence.

“Aren’t you going to code it?” he asked, his arched-eyebrow look conveying, Haven’t I taught you anything?

“Oh. Yeah. I guess I should do that, huh?”

And so I uploaded my 16 documents into the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti and proceeded to code, applying the grounded-theory, inductive methods of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2000) and open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to the data set. That’s qual-speak for the systematic process of reading the data, attaching descriptive codes to quotations (Atlas.ti’s term for segments of text), and making note of “themes”—repetitions or patterns or inconsistencies—that “emerge” both within and across cases. Of course these themes don’t really emerge, as if they were inherent in the data and just waiting to be revealed by a discerning
researcher-eye. Rather, my feminist and quasi-poststructural theoretical framework already predisposed me to see my data in a particular light because of the interview questions I asked and the research questions from whence they came. I was looking to disrupt commonly-held assumptions about teacher-student relationships and the teacher-predator identity category that fixes women such as Hannah and Kim into a pathologic subject position, and so data that supported or negated my agenda was what came into focus for me. But emergent themes are not a bad way to describe what an inductive process produces as long as it is qualified.

After coding the data from all four participants, my coding system, which I modified and fine-tuned as warranted when I encountered quotations not quite fitting the categories I’d already established, amounted to 94 codes within 9 families of categories. I include a table at the end of this chapter that represents a sampling of these codes and families from Hannah’s and Kim’s data for readers who like that sort of thing (see Table 1). The “importance to the study” column summarizes how each family contributed to my understanding of the phenomenon of teacher-student relationships. Along with the coding, I attached memos to quotations—another function of Atlas.ti—that I found particularly significant and to which I planned to return for closer analysis.

Immersed as I was during the coding and memo-writing process, aspects of the blurry data did come more sharply into focus—what qual-speakers might call “emerged” from the data. I noticed how similar Hannah and Kim are: they’re both white, middle-class women English teachers in their 30s; they’re both single moms with a history of rocky family relations; they’re both unconventional teachers who are guided by souls, not subject matter; and they’re both critical theorists who see their teaching role as champion for the marginalized. Not only are they similar teachers (indeed, perhaps it is because they are—but I can only speculate) but their affairs
with students were similar, too: their love interests were brilliant-but-at-risk students whom they “saved” from academic failure; both women created opportunities for the boys to cross the line, which they (the boys) eventually did; they both enjoyed the flouting fuck-you feeling that their illicit relationships afforded; and both justified their relationships because they were in love.

It’s not that I didn’t have an inkling of these similarities before I started coding; hours upon hours of transcription had given me a clue. Rather, the coding process helped me to chart the similarities—to document and trace them, to notate them physically with justification codes such as “flouting authority/convention” or “savior” or “relationship worth it/in love” and relationship codes such as “line/boundary talk” or “trying to be good/internal switch” or “progression/laying the groundwork.” What coding enabled me to do was to follow a systematic procedure in order both to manage my messy, chaotic data and to read it carefully and consistently. I found value in exercising some modicum of control over data by “tidying up” and sifting through them (LeCompte, 2000, p. 148). Nevertheless, when I think about data analysis, it has less to do with coding and more to do with theorizing the data. Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996) advice comes to mind: “Dialogue between data and theory should be a recurrent, pervasive feature of all qualititative research” (p. 23). I did not tidy up the data without my feminist, quasi-poststructural theoretical sifter. Consciously using theory to think and write about one’s data is what notches data analysis from “this is what happened” up to “this is why it happened”—and ultimately, “this is why it matters that it did.”

Data analysis happens in the sense that events happen (Caputo, 1993); flashes of insight fall on you (Derrida, 2001), sometimes in unexpected ways, throughout the research process. Let me give an example. I was writing my IRB story—Part I of this chapter—during a week-long writing retreat in the mountains of North Georgia. I had produced most of the betrayal narrative...
with my original intent intact: to warn other unsuspecting colleagues of the tyrannical IRB. At that point in my writing I was drawing from my own observation data from the board meeting and subsequent conversations to tell the story; I wasn’t yet theorizing it. As I sometimes do in order to dispel writing blocks, I took a shower. Somewhere between shampooing and shaving the epiphany for reexamining the betrayal fell on me, “causing [me] to redistribute [my] sense of what has gone before it and what might come after” (Rajchman, 1991, p. ix). The import was so great that I didn’t trust my short-term memory to hold it; I ran dripping from the bathroom to where my laptop was set up and frenetically typed the “this is why it happened” of the paper, much to my cabin-mates’ amusement. Sometimes insight happens for me in this way; it creeps up unawares and explodes through my consciousness.

The other way insight happens for me is through writing. There is a fallacy in the supposition that writing is a transparent translation from thought to text that is similar to the qual-speak assumption that themes emerge from data. In both instances, I’ve been taught that preexisting thought/data generate the text/themes with at most a theoretical filter on the author’s part. However, there are times when I sit down in front of my computer with a definite idea of what I want to communicate—as if the idea were in my mind and just waiting to get out on paper—but through writing I end up in a very different place from what I imagined. Richardson’s (2000) discussion of writing as a method of inquiry captures this phenomenon:

writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of “knowing”—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. (p. 923)

Maybe it is because writing is such a painstaking and painful process for me—I am what Wolcott (1990) terms a “bleeder” (p. 26), a writer who slowly sentence-level sweats through a project—
that I literally have the time to open up and pursue new lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2000) in my thinking about data. However, I know prolific page-producers who use free-writing as means to knowing, so if time is the critical factor, it must not matter whether it’s spent staring at a screen while obsessing over the perfect phrase or producing volumes of largely unusable material.

Perhaps systematic coding of data helps to foster an environment where insights can happen. But for me the primary function of coding was to make it easier to “prove” my insights once I had them because Atlas.ti enabled me to locate efficiently instances within the data that related to the epiphany at hand. Data analysis was just as much a back-tracking from insight to supporting data as an inductive movement from data to resulting insight. I’m not sure direction matters between data and insight, though, much like it doesn’t matter in the proverbial chicken and egg debate. They exist simultaneously, and each is necessary for the other.

The next methodological question I faced was how to represent teacher-student relationships with Hannah and Kim’s data. My decisions regarding issues of representation are why I call my work quasi-poststructural because, on the one hand, I am very much aware that I cannot speak for my participants, nor can I provide a transparent and straightforward account of what happened to them. Using clear, accessible language, which Lather (1996) critiques as “a sort of cheat tied to the anti-intellectualism rife in U.S. society that deskills readers” (p. 528), does not do justice to the complexity of Hannah’s and Kim’s stories. On the other hand, I recognize that “many of us do engage in research where there is real work to be done even in the face of the impossibility of such a task,” and thus see the necessity of “challeng[ing] the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning” (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). Pillow’s both/and conception of representation echoes
the mantra that has pervaded my poststructural training: “Do it and trouble it.” I try to hold this paradox together in my head all the time. However, because my intended audience is not comprised solely of full-fledged or even quasi-poststructuralists—I want teachers to be able to read and benefit from this work—and because the topic itself is troubling enough without adding posty language fuel to inflame resistant readers, this representation “does it” in a fairly straightforward manner.

The next four chapters trace Hannah’s and Kim’s relationships chronologically—from the life events and personality traits that contributed to their engagement in them (Chapter 3) to the relationships’ onset (Chapter 4) and their justifications for it (Chapter 5) to the relationships’ eventual denouement (Chapter 6). My intent is to create an anatomy of a teacher-student love affair through this story-like representation.

I realize the contradiction of claiming a poststructural stance for myself and yet producing a linear dissertation that mimics the standard plot structure of any Western story: It contains a setting, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, just like I used to teach my ninth graders. Even my troubling of a standard qualitative methods chapter through foregrounding the IRB event resulted in a linear story, so I really just replaced one convention with another. Therefore, this representation can only be called poststructural in the sense that Reinharz (1992) defines feminist research in her study of feminist methodologies. Her chief criterion was that “A person did not have to identify her research methods as ‘feminist research methods’ but rather had to identify herself as a feminist doing research” (p. 7).

I use principles of narrative theory in this representation because I believe, along with Riessman (1993), that people make sense of their lives through story. As Cortazzi (2001) writes, “Through life stories individuals . . . tell what they are or what they wish to be, as they tell so
they become, they are their stories” (p. 388; emphasis in original). However, I cannot stop at story-telling; I must ask what conditions made it possible for Hannah’s and Kim’s stories to happen—in Bové’s (1990) terms, “How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist?” (p. 54). In the following chapters I weave the theory I introduced in Chapter 1 into and among the threads of story because neither makes sense without the other. In producing this blend I am striving for the balance between the personal and scientific that Denzin (1997) argues is necessary for academic work to be both emotively convincing and theoretically sound.

Table 1

Summary of Coding System Families and Categories for Hannah and Kim’s Data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name &amp; description of family (number of sub-codes)</th>
<th>Frequently-appearing codes within family (instances of appearances within H &amp; K’s data)</th>
<th>Importance to the study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BACKGROUND (2): Relevant parts of the warm-up interview questions about what life experiences had led to the participant’s present.</td>
<td>Family background (19): also used to code references to students’ family backgrounds. Psychology (8)</td>
<td>It’s noteworthy that both H &amp; K have family histories of psych disorders as well as a good working knowledge of psychology from undergraduate backgrounds in the discipline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOB (10): Description of job setting, including community atmosphere and degree of administrative support</td>
<td>Environment: surveillance (10) Administrators: discipline/lack of support (10) Community: conservative/fishbowl (10) Environment: control/prescripted (8) Community: parental support (7)</td>
<td>I see Foucauldian disciplinary power and processes of normalization all over these data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLEAGUES (4): Interaction, both friendly and hostile, with fellow teachers</td>
<td>Disapproving (19) Confidantes/supporters (10) Conflict over student (6)</td>
<td>Disciplinary power again in how colleagues view H &amp; K—but also confession phenomenon in their need to have someone know and not judge their story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEACHING PERSONA (14): Teaching philosophies as well as physical appearance and manner in the classroom</td>
<td>Being real/authentic (14) Close to students (12) Counseling/advocate role (11) Nontraditional (7) Social justice orientation (6)</td>
<td>H &amp; K both see themselves as different from their colleagues and marginalized on staff because of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DYNAMIC (5): Classroom dynamic (closely related to</td>
<td>Hugging/comfort level (15) Sexualized classroom/encounter (7)</td>
<td>H &amp; K’s comfort with physical closeness and displays of affection work against their schools’ norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STUDENTS (6): References to students in general—not just the lover</td>
<td>Flirting/attraction (17) Alternative/marginalized (12) Gendered difference (11)</td>
<td>Here the attraction to alternative students with whom they connected and identified with really “emerged.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELATIONSHIP (33): The onset, nature of, and effects of sexual relationships with students</td>
<td>Maturity/experience differential (41) Role tension (35) Trying to be good/internal switch (33) Feeling foolish /like a whore (30) Who initiated/controlled (28) Lessons learned (27) Acknowledgement/consideration of wrongdoing (26) His lying/stealing/betrayal (25) Line/boundary talk (24) Backing off/breaking it off (23) Personal/emotional/monetary investment (22) Ruined/could ruin career (21) Confessing/baring soul/being vulnerable (21) Uncertain of returned attraction (20) Others’ attitude toward/knowledge about (20) Hiding it/lying about it (19) Risk (19) Doubts/signs that all is not well (18) Reciprocity (17) Progression/laying the groundwork (16) Future orientation (16)</td>
<td>I should have broken down this largest and most important of families into the 3 areas of the description, but it didn’t get unwieldy until it was too late (it’d have taken more time than was useful to re-categorize and code). Onset categories like “boundary talk,” “trying to be good,” and “who initiated” are critical to understanding how H &amp; K crossed the line and are the focus of Chapter 4. Effects categories like “lessons learned,” “his lying/stealing” and “ruined/could ruin career” are useful for Chapter 6’s focus on the fallout from H &amp; K’s relationships. The nature of such a taboo relationship is apparent in categories like “feeling foolish,” “hiding it/lying about it,” and “risk” as well as the two most frequently-appearing codes in the data set. That H &amp; K talked about age difference and role tension between teacher and lover the most suggests the relative importance of these issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUSTIFICATION (12): Explanations for why they engaged in sexual relationships</td>
<td>Savior (33) Lonely/unhappy/filling void (28) Sexual being/sexual challenge (24) Worth it/in love (20) Flouting authority/conventions (16) Drama/excitement (12)</td>
<td>H &amp; K’s justifications for engaging in and continuing the relationships is the focus of Chapter 5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FALLOUT (4): The aftermath of the relationship’s coming to light</td>
<td>Rage (8) Choosing not to fight (5)</td>
<td>I didn’t come up with this category until coding Kim’s data, so I had to go back to Hannah’s interviews when writing the last chapter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“There were all those dynamics—being in a loveless marriage for, you know, it was a 10-year marriage, but the last four or five were just horrid; being completely ostracized by colleagues; and this zeal I had to HELP. They all just combined into a mess.” – Kim.

Researchers’ tendency to seek patterns in their data notwithstanding, the similarities that “emerged” between Hannah and Kim as I got to know them were at times disconcerting if not downright eerie. I even hesitated over the possessive punctuation of this chapter’s title because their life stories have so many commonalities that they almost could be considered as one. Both women, currently in their 30s, come from white, upper-middle-class families; both are single mothers; both resisted the “teacher” call initially, not seeking certification until their late 20s; both have a background in psychology, although their teaching degree is in English; and both are strongly committed to issues of social justice in the classroom. The only relevant difference in their backgrounds as far as this study is concerned is that one taught in a state with unionized faculties and one did not—a difference that didn’t affect their choice to enter into a sexual relationship with a student but did determine the degree to which they could recover from that choice. I elaborate upon this difference in chapter 6 when I discuss the fallout from the affairs.

My descriptions of Hannah and Kim as women and as teachers are of a necessity brief in order to protect their identities. However, I outline a few key characteristics that they share not only with each other but with Heather Ingram and Mary Kay Letourneau, the two teachers whose cases of educator sexual misconduct (ESM) I illustrated in Chapter 1. They are as follows:

4 Hannah and Kim, like all people and place names associated with them, are pseudonyms. That’s not the case with Letourneau and Ingram, whom I’ll continue to refer to by their last names in order to differentiate them from my
- Troubled family history, resulting in good girl/bad girl struggle
- Void from unhappy relationship or recent breakup
- “Savior” role as teacher

I am not suggesting these shared characteristics are either a recipe or an explanation for ESM by women. If they are, the recipe is several ingredients short and the explanation only partial. As Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963) warn, “The investigator should be wary of accepting a correlation as a cause” (p. 24). However, I think the recurrence of these three themes warrants exploration, as I’ve observed variations of them not only among these four women but in many other headline-grabbing cases as well. But before I begin, Table 2 below might be helpful for readers to keep the principal characters straight.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Fallout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Mary Kay Letourneau,</em></td>
<td>13-year-old</td>
<td>Began summer after his sixth grade</td>
<td>She was immediately fired and ended up serving a 7-year prison sentence after a relative of her husband’s told school authorities about the affair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sixth-grade Seattle teacher.</td>
<td>Vili Fualau.</td>
<td>grade year and is apparently</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34-year-old married mother</td>
<td></td>
<td>ongoing; they have plans to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of four.</td>
<td></td>
<td>marry and raise their two children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Heather Ingram,</em></td>
<td>17-year-old</td>
<td>Began while he was her student;</td>
<td>She turned herself in to her principal after a colleague threatened to do so; her teaching license was revoked and she was under house arrest for a year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver math and</td>
<td>Dusty Dickson.</td>
<td>continued sporadically for a couple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accounting teacher.</td>
<td></td>
<td>of years. They now have a child but</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late 20’s, in a steady 10-year</td>
<td></td>
<td>are just friends.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationship.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kim,</em></td>
<td>18-year-old</td>
<td>Began the summer after his junior</td>
<td>2 years after the relationship was over, her district gave her the option of resigning or being investigated. She chose the former.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tenured high school</td>
<td>Damian.</td>
<td>year; continued for about two years, somewhat openly once he graduated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English teacher.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid 30’s, divorced single</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hannah,</em></td>
<td>17-year-old</td>
<td>Began while he was a junior in her</td>
<td>An in-school investigation based on rumors didn’t yield any results, but her teaching contract was not renewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early-career high school</td>
<td>Eric.</td>
<td>class; continued about a year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English teacher.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 30’s, single mother.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Family History

The feminist in me hesitates to mention mothers in a discussion of my participants’ family history because historically mothers have been blamed unfairly for a lot of society’s ills. If culpability must be placed, I prefer to attach it to sex role socialization: It is not so much that Hannah, Kim, Ingram, and Letourneau had bad mothers as it is how these four then-girls were groomed to make up for it, to fill the void that their emotionally or physically absent mothers left behind in their family’s lives by becoming perfect, by being good girls.

Ingram and Kim

The good girl phenomenon was especially evident in Ingram’s and Kim’s history. Take Ingram, for example: Her manic-depressive mother, frequently in and out of mental institutions during Ingram’s childhood, left the family for good when Ingram was 11. Ingram then became homemaker for her father and surrogate mother of her 8-year-old sister (Ingram, 2003). She performed “good girl” flawlessy: An excellent student, she always put her family first; she didn’t have a boyfriend until college. As she said on Primetime Live (2004), “I felt like I had a job to do, which was to help our family survive. There was no room for rebellion. There was no room for fun” (p. 14). In an interview on Oprah (2004), Ingram attributed her affair with her student, Dusty Dickeson, in part to a desire to capture her lost adolescence: “I was a good girl my whole life. Straight-A student. Studying while other kids were partying in high school. . . . [This was] the life I wish I had experienced when I was 16 and didn’t” (p. 10).

Like Ingram, Kim’s mother’s bipolar bouts contributed to her parents’ divorce when she was an adolescent. Excerpts from a poem Kim wrote after her own divorce—but prior to her affair—illustrate how the good girl phenomenon was manifest in her life. The poem is titled “a good girl all her life”: 
she had always been a good girl—in school, she got all As,
that good girl
was the perfect girl, all the teachers said so
even the kids knew—when they called her brain
she thought they hated her for it, so she tried even harder,
that good girl . . .

she emptied the bottles her father had,
that good girl
she moved in with him to save him,
but she found herself alone a lot, so she tried even harder,
that good girl,
to get his attention, but even after the break-in
he didn’t see her, so she left, went back to live with
her mother under foreign rule
but at least her brother was there, and compared to him,
she was a good girl
after graduation, her mom moved, her boyfriend left,
her dad was still gone,
the good girl was alone,
without hopes, without goals, too tired to try harder,
so she drove to Kmart,
swallowed Sominex in front of a dingy mirror,
that good girl watched
the bad one in the mirror finally emerge . . .

when she awoke in the hospital and saw all the flowers,

she smiled—she must be a
good girl again—look how they loved her!

so why was her dad so angry?

why did her mom leave again?

didn’t they see how hard she had tried,

their good girl?

years later, she was on top

a good teacher

a good mother

a good wife

her years of effort had finally paid off

she had sacrificed so much to be this good . . .

two days later, he left, although if truth be told,

he had been gone for years

amid the fragments of her world, fighting the current of reality,

she knew one thing: she would try harder,

that good girl

she would be nice for her daughter’s sake

then he would see all he had lost

so she read books,

that good girl
she conversed with god (three times)
meditated on how not to do so much,
danced with intimacy and anger
reflected on the simple abundance of her authentic self
learned how to be a goddess
that good girl became a veritable well of spirituality
she lit candles, bought a fountain, plants
surrounded herself with beauty
but he would not come back,
still, she just kept trying harder
    her friends were amazed that she stood so calm,
    they asked her, how can you be such a
good girl?
    they could not be so brave, nor so strong nor so
good . . .
then she heard a voice,
from her past, it was familiar, for it had never left her
move over sister, I’m comin’ out!
the bad girl surfaced
    . . . and finally,
the good girl felt her rage
The rage Kim finally allowed herself to feel toward her ex-husband extended to the
workplace, where she was feeling increasingly isolated because her student-centered approach to
teaching did not fit with the transmission model she felt was lauded by the school. Kim explained during an interview how the rage at her ex-husband was transferred to her colleagues, who had taken to calling her a feminazi:

> It [the rage] started out—it was kind of a gradual thing. . . . I think I was a lot more traditional when I was married, but I was also a lot more idealistic about what I could accomplish in the classroom, so the ostracism started out as ridicule from my colleagues, for me trying to help kids. It was a district that very much the teachers had a blue-collar mentality, you know, punch in, punch out. And the teachers' role was that of transmission of content. That was the accepted role there, so my idea of what a good teacher was was completely foreign to them. And then that got compounded because after my divorce I got very outspoken, very feminist. . . . Then it just became a vicious cycle—the more ostracized I felt, the more I felt the need to rebel. . . . If I admit it, what was behind all my anger and rage was HURT\(^6\) that they couldn't see that what I was doing was valid. And I often said I didn't ever try to tell THEM how to teach; I didn't ever try to tell the history teacher to become more touchy-feely with students, but at the same time why couldn't they just acknowledge the good I was doing in a different way, and acknowledge we need all kinds of teachers? . . . also what was happening, every replacement they hired was like the good ol' boys. When I started, the staff was still fairly balanced, I mean it was definitely stacked to the conservative end, but I wasn't the only liberal. By the end of my time there, I was absolutely the only liberal teacher that would SAY anything. There were closet liberal teachers, but they'd learned from experience not to say anything. So it just increased my sense of isolation.

\(^5\) Stanzas in Kim’s poetry are offset by indentations to conserve space.

\(^6\) Capitalized words in transcript excerpts indicate the speaker’s emphasis.
Kim, who had been “a good girl all her life,” had a post-divorce epiphany that being good wasn’t getting her anywhere; her good girl persona had failed to save her family, keep her husband, or earn her colleagues’ respect. She attributes her student affair with Damian in part to a reaction formation against social elements that had constrained her to goodness: “[One] thing I think that appealed to me, once the ball started rolling, was that it was the ultimate rebel statement. Although I wouldn't have admitted that at the time, that had a lot to do with it.” When Kim was reading Estés (1992)—a Jungian feminist—for a class, she sent me passages from the text that resonated with her. She identifies in particular with the feral wolf archetype, a construct that helps to explain her rebellion:

Feral women of all ages, and especially the young, have a tremendous drive to compensate for long famines and exile. . . . The feral woman is usually extremely hungry for something soulful, and often will take any poison disguised on a pointed stick, believing it to be the thing for which her soul hungers. . . . It is a famine of the soul that makes a woman choose things that will cause her to dance madly out of control. (pp. 215, 220)

The other family dynamic that Kim shares with Ingram is the caregiving role they both assumed over their younger siblings when their parents got divorced. For Kim, that role extends to the classroom when she encounters students like her brother—alcoholic, damaged, often in trouble: “I think I project some of my own personal baggage, in that I need to save troubled men, or troubled boys.” One sibling duo in particular mirrored her family situation; children of an alcoholic family, the older sister was an overachiever and the younger brother—a student Kim dubbed “Alcoholic Boy,” whom she had saved on multiple occasions from academic failure—
was on the path of self-destruction through drugs and alcohol. Kim explained further how her savior pattern developed:

The need to save damaged boys, I can remember it goes back to when I was in high school; there was a boy I was just in LOVE with all the way through high school, constantly intervening, going to the vice-principal . . . . So that pattern, those seeds were planted pretty deeply.

Kim went from saving her brother to saving her boyfriend to saving her students—all of them troubled boys. I develop the teacher-as-savior phenomenon more thoroughly in the next section; I include it here because in Ingram’s and Kim’s cases their predilection for saving troubled students is rooted in their family background in a way that isn’t evident for Letourneau and Hannah.

Letourneau and Hannah

Letourneau and Hannah do share Ingram’s and Kim’s mother issues, though to a lesser degree. Letourneau grew up in an ultra-conservative Catholic home where appearance was everything—to the extent that the upstairs living space, where the seven kids were, had no furniture because maintaining the appearance of luxury on the main floor, where guests were received, took precedence when money was tight (Olsen, 1999). By all accounts Letourneau’s mother was cold and distant; Letourneau was closer to her father. When Letourneau got pregnant in college, she submitted to family pressure to marry the baby’s father (because that is what good girls do when they get in trouble), thus repeating the pattern of a family that appeared perfect but was in fact quite unhappy. As one of the Letourneaus’ babysitters said, "I thought they were the perfect family. That's what was so shocking about it. We knew there were arguments and disagreements, but they were beautiful, all-American people" (p. 83). A friend of
Letourneau’s speculated her turning to Fualaau was attributable to "a lack of love. Mary didn't get any love. Not from her parents. Not from her husband" (p. 75).

Hannah’s family’s values were similar to Letourneau’s, although she resisted the pressure to marry the father of her baby when she became pregnant in college. However, she continues to chafe against her parents’ desire for “normalcy”: “My parents' being so into the normal, and being so critical of me to begin with; I've had more trouble recently than when I was 16. . . . My parents asked me recently, ‘Why can’t you just be NORMAL?’” Like Ingram, part of the attraction of a relationship with her student, Eric, was the opportunity to relive her lost youth:

He made me feel that I was starting over again, that I was a teenager again. That I'm gonna go back and recapture my youth that had been taken away because of the desire for normalcy within my family. . . . That ability to not know normal attracts me to him because I've never wanted the normal. I've always desired to step outside the normal. And in so many ways, especially having to do with the family and the culture of the neighborhood where I grew up—the nonacceptance of anything different, and my ability to mold and meld into this person that I'm not really.

Hannah’s recapturing her youth meant resisting the normalized identity of her white, upper-middle-class upbringing—to be different in a way that hadn’t been permitted in her home environment. As Kim said of her affair, “It was the ultimate rebel statement.”

As a teacher, Hannah identified more with her male students because of “the bad experiences I'd had with the girls in my life, my bad relationship with my mother.” Although she said it somewhat facetiously—she is familiar with Freudian psychology’s tendency to see the mother-child relationship as the source of adult behavior—she claims to be more comfortable
with male students because she “hung out with the boys” as a teenager. Interestingly, Kim says much the same thing:

When I started teaching, I much more identified with my male students. But again that's consistent with my pattern outside the classroom; I didn't have a lot of close female friends. I tended to be one that hung out with the guys, so that was comfortable.

Both Kim and Hannah preferred the company of their male students—although not exclusively; they had female favorites as well—but their understanding of that attraction was different. Hannah spoke disparagingly of some female students as “bitchy and catty,” saying, “It took me four weeks to figure out which girl was which . . . . The end-all, be-all on deciding was whose tan was darker and whose hair was blonder.” On the other hand, Hannah enjoyed the straightforward and playfully flirtatious attitude of many of her male students. That straight women teachers on some level are drawn to male students and see their female students as competition is in keeping with the point Richardson (1988) makes about the omnipresent heterosexual dynamic in any setting where both genders are represented. It doesn’t necessarily follow that straight women teachers are unfairly biased toward boys, but they do tend to be more aware of them.

Perhaps because of her relationship with her brother, Kim understands her response to male students as more psychological than physical; girls, whom she perceives as more capable emotionally, don’t need her help like boys do:

I sorta feel like women are stronger, so I feel like they should be able to deal, where I expect men or boys to be flawed and need help. . . . I also think girls, to a certain extent, girls usually have some close friend they can go to. Boys often don't have that
They just stumble around being damaged and turn into idiot men. Unless somebody intervenes.

Researchers demonstrating that teachers attend more to their male students usually explain their findings in terms of gender role socialization; boys tend to be more assertive in demanding attention from their teachers, and teachers—predominantly women—have been socialized to serve them (Scott & McCollum, 1993). I am not debating these feminist interpretations, but Hannah and Kim do offer a nuanced understanding of them. Hannah paid more attention to boys because she was attracted to them, and Kim served males not because dominating boys demanded it of her but because she perceived them to be emotionally weak and in need of her help.

Summary: Family History

A characteristic that Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah and Kim share is that they were good girls who somewhere along the way rebelled against the relentless social pressure to be good daughters, good teachers, and good mothers. Whether the rebellion was precipitated by a mental breakdown (Letourneau), a desire to experience adolescence (Ingram and Hannah), or a feminist awakening (Kim) is debatable and perhaps unimportant. I reduce their respective rebellions only to illustrate how common they are; most women can identify with the good-girl/bad-girl struggle between maintaining and resisting a mien of ideal femininity. I am not suggesting that women teachers who are overwhelmed by their multiple adult roles will turn to students for solace, that women who don’t get to perform wild child as teenagers will necessarily reclaim their lost youth in later years, or that feminists who realize what damage the good girl has wreaked on their psyches will fully embrace the bad girl in all her naughtiness. Such generalizations would be facile and misleading; I don’t doubt that there are women teachers from dysfunctional homes.
who never step out of line as well as women with idyllic childhoods who do. I categorize my observation that these four women do share a common background as one of those “things that make you go hmm,” to borrow from pop culture.7

Unhappy Relationships

Another characteristic that Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim had in common was the unhappy love relationships that prefaces their affairs. Ingram, though unmarried, had lived with her boyfriend for most of their 11-year relationship, which had turned stale and unsatisfying. Kim was recovering from a divorce; Hannah’s relationship with a coworker had ended quite bitterly. Letourneau claimed in an interview with Barbara Walters (20/20, 2004) that her marriage was over when her affair with Fualaaau began, although she and her husband still lived together with their four children for financial reasons.

Rather than seeking professional help for her struggling marriage, which Letourneau claimed in retrospect she should have done, she turned to her students to fill the void: "The kids could see the stress [from her failing marriage], and at times, members of the Round Table group8 were sought for comfort" (Olsen, 1999, p. 118). In fact, she “had given herself so completely to her role as teacher that she had excluded close relationships with adults who might have seen how devastated she was” (p. 287). Among her students Letourneau felt loved and appreciated in a way that she no longer felt at home. As a friend said, “Their lives were a routine. A marriage more like a business deal than an affair of the heart” (p. 69). And it had never been an affair of the heart; Letourneau got married in a good-girl response to pregnancy.

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7 Who knew that C & C Music Factory could contribute to academia? An example of Bakhtinian intertextuality, perhaps.
8 The Round Table was a group of Letourneau’s favorite students, including Fualaaau, who sat at a round table near her desk.
Her husband, later trying to make sense of the affair, "believed his wife was starving for attention and Vili was providing what she needed to feel good about herself" (p. 192).

Like Fualaaau for Letourneau, Dickeson provided the attention and excitement that was lacking in Ingram’s relationship. As she said on *Oprah* (2004), “I had a long-term relationship with my live-in boyfriend, and it was stagnant. It was stagnant to the point where we were like two machines going through our lives together” (p. 6). Ingram explained further: “A lot of the feelings that we had for each other were dead and we ended up fighting a lot. I think I was just drying up inside from—from lack of emotional connection” (p. 1). At the flirtation stage of her relationship with Dickeson, she wrote in her journal about how good his attention made her feel:

I feel special, selected, happy. . . . It feels harmless to enjoy these attentions; I feel I deserve this tiny break of flattery in my day. . . . I do not get this kind of attention at home. It has been a long time since Mark looked at me with desire in his eyes. . . . I feel mildly guilty for enjoying Troy’s [her pseudonym for Dusty] attention, but my heart lifts a little each day when he walks by. (Ingram, 2003, pp. 37-38)

In Ingram’s apologetic preface to her book, she claimed, “If I had left Mark when I started to feel as if my heart was being crushed in a trash compactor, none of this would have happened” (p. 6). She placed the blame on her stagnant relationship.

But Winfrey was not impressed with Ingram’s justification. In the following exchange Winfrey gets Ingram to admit, much as Letourneau did in her 20/20 interview, that she should have sought help:

W: Lots of people who are watching us and even those sitting in this audience right now, they are emotionally disconnected from their spouses. . . . They are living in, you know, dull, boring marriages, but they’re not having an affair with their
student. . . . So when you keep saying that, I think that you’re kind of using that as an excuse.

I: It is an excuse. . . . the real thing that could have taken the most courage is that I could have . . . announced that and said I’m not happy and maybe done something to change it. . . . That’s one of the regrets.

W: The regret is that you were miserable and then you used this.

I: That’s right. (pp. 6-7)

Hannah uses an excuse similar to Ingram’s for the progression of her affair. Eric, as one of a circle of students with whom she was quite close, was aware that his teacher’s ex-boyfriend/coworker had treated her badly. In some semblance of defending his beloved teacher’s honor, Eric was disrespectful and threatening toward her ex one day in school. That didn’t go over well with the school authorities, whose response was to scrutinize Hannah and Eric’s relationship—then innocent—more closely. Hannah claimed in a mid-relationship interview, “If it hadn't been for that situation [with the ex], I honestly think the situation would not have escalated.” In her final interview, after the relationship with Eric was over, she again made reference to the ex:

I was in an abusive relationship with someone else. If that hadn’t opened the door—if I had not [been his colleague], none of this would’ve happened. This was his fault. It was his opening. Well, it was MY opening, but I see the progression now.

Hannah’s “This was his fault” parallels Ingram’s “none of this would have happened.” Had it not been for the void created by unhappy relationships, the door would not have been opened for an affair. They don’t claim to be blameless for walking through that door—as Kim said at one
point, “not that that's an excuse, I own my choices”—but nonetheless, it is a partial explanation for why the door looked so inviting.

Kim spoke frequently of the void left by her divorce. She speculated in her journal about the nature of her close connections with students when she first became aware of her attraction to Damian:

I know what I feel for these kids is intense, and most of them like me, but not as intensely, probably. I think that’s why I try to help them so much—it makes the bond stronger. But when school ends, they go home to their lives and I go home to nothing—½ a life. As precious as my daughter is to me, she cannot fill the void within me. I don’t know how to change this—maybe that’s what my fantasy for Damian was all about—filling the void. . . . I’m sure my loneliness has something to do with my feelings.

During an interview she continued to reflect on the effect this void had on her relationships with students:

It would've been interesting to see how my relationships with students would've been different had I stayed married. Because my divorce really turned my world upside down, and I had to kinda rebirth myself. For a while I used students to fill that void left when the family disintegrated.

With regard to Damian specifically, Kim theorized that turning to him had a lot to do with filling a hole that my ex-husband had left. This boy, even though he was young—he was 18—he said all the right things, he was very mature emotionally, or appeared to be. . . . He knew what to say and when to say it, and what buttons of mine to push.
Kim’s journal description of what Damian’s regard did for her in the flirtation stage of their relationship sounds much like Ingram’s journal:

He makes me feel attractive, intelligent, and ALIVE!! He has been the one to help me get over Rick [her ex-husband]—one day I will share that with him. So whatever the future holds, I have that to thank him for, along w/ his unconditional support for me as a teacher.

However, the painful culmination of Kim’s two-year affair with Damian replaced the void created by her divorce with another. Again, she turned to students to fill it. This time, her interest focused upon Goth Boy (Kim’s own pseudonym for a troubled student she saved from academic failure):

Looking back, it was probably more prompted by my loneliness—I still hadn't learned how to fill my own voids. It was about a year—exactly a year after the relationship with Damian had ended, so it probably had something to do with the anniversary effect too. But in any event, the same pattern—just a lot of poetry, he very clearly adored me and worshipped me . . . . But I also knew better than to cross that line with a student again. Even though emotionally I had crossed it, I didn't physically cross it.

Excerpts from the poetry she wrote about her increasing attraction to Goth Boy show that their connection helped to alleviate her sadness, although the language is much more tempered than her journals about Damian:

today

when you walked in

and I was not expecting you,
and I was not expecting the thrill
my loneliness evaporated with a look . . .
if I allow you to rest with me a while, I will have
some sweet memories to hang upon the dark smooth walls
of this vacancy inside me that I never seem to fill

Although Kim had learned from her relationship with Damian not to confuse her love for a
student with the possibility of a romantic relationship, she acknowledged that forming a deep
emotional attachment with a damaged boy was still a problematic solution for her loneliness. In
effect, she had repeated “the same pattern” of relying on a student’s worshipful adoration to fill
the void—just minus the physical component.

Summary: Unhappy Relationships

In the case of all four women, the void created by an unhappy relationship, whether they
were still in it or not, left them emotionally vulnerable in a way that opened the door for their transgressions. As all four now acknowledge to some degree, the wise thing to do would have been to seek help from professionals or solace from peers rather than turn to students to fill the void. However, in the moment they seized upon the affirmation their respective boys provided as one of the few, if not only, pleasures in their lives.

Teaching Persona

A third characteristic that Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim have in common is their teaching personas. All four of them were well-liked (at least by their students if not their colleagues), and all but Hannah had received professional accolades for their teaching—which is not to say that Hannah wasn’t a good teacher, but with only two years’ experience, she didn’t qualify for most awards. The four women had a knack for connecting with marginalized kids
and keeping them in school as well. I divide this section in two parts: First I illustrate what I characterize as their holistic teaching approach, reminiscent of hooks’ (1993) engaged pedagogy whereby teachers are responsible for teaching the whole student—mind, body, and soul—not just their minds. Then I expand on the teacher-as-savior role that they all embraced.

**Holistic Teaching**

Although I don’t have enough information about Ingram’s pedagogy to extend this generalization to her, the other three had student-centered classrooms that their colleagues sometimes criticized as too noisy or uncontrolled. One of Letourneau’s friends from school described her teaching style as

> being able to tolerate more volume than some teachers can. . . . There was not a lot of structure. They [students] got to do a whole lot of things in a different way than they did in a more structured classroom. They were given a lot of different choices. (Olsen, 1999, p. 80)

Olsen claims Letourneau “was admired and loved by nearly everyone in those early years. Her energy was unequaled; her ability to reach into a child's soul to pull out the dreams that she could foster was a gift” (p. 95; emphasis added).

Like Letourneau’s, Hannah’s and Kim’s classrooms didn’t look like their colleagues’; they too emphasized teaching souls as much as, if not more than, teaching subject matter. One of my interview questions asked what participants felt were the most important things they wanted students to take from the classroom; Hannah responded as follows:

> I think the general consensus as far as all parts of me as a teacher would be just an appreciation, number one, for other people via literature. And how reading and writing can in fact bring you to a better understanding of who you are and who other
people are. I have a hard time separating literature from philosophy and psychology and history and health. I don't see that there's a separation between all that. So I think just an embracing of the self and what you can do, and your ability to achieve in the writing and reading arena. And the ability to read and write your world. Just a wiser, higher order thinking as far as society goes . . . Basically, making you a better human being. And I know that's so NOT what the county wants, so NOT curricular. . . . I think that's the problem. Because I'm supposed to be teaching facts. I'm supposed to be teaching the basics, the core curriculum, . . . not students and souls.

Kim’s response to the same question was similar to Hannah’s:

I really don't care about content very much. I want them to take away a sense of who they are. I want them to feel like somebody valued them. Definitely I want them to take away a love of learning of some kind, but not necessarily the content that I'm teaching. I try to turn kids on to reading; that's very important to me, and poetry. And I'm fairly successful with that because I do take the time to get to know my kids, so I know what book maybe to suggest, or what poem to put in front of them. But I think the most important thing is that they have some knowledge that, a part of their school anyway, was a safe place. And I've actually had students come back to me and say, "Your class got me through school," or, "Your class saved my life," in an extreme case. I had a student that came back and said, "If it weren't for your class every day," you know, "I don't think I would have made it through." So—empowering students and making them feel comfortable is most important to me.

Both Hannah and Kim paid a price for prioritizing students’ wellbeing over the core curriculum. Rather than receiving encouragement or at least noninterference for their style of
teaching, they were watched with skepticism by their colleagues and sometimes disciplined by
their administrators. Both recalled instances when their teaching practices were questioned, the
result of “not being a traditional teacher in a [district] where traditional teachers were prized,”
according to Hannah. When Hannah’s school purchased and implemented a regimented
curriculum in order to improve low test scores, her response was “Of course I didn't conform to
that. . . . And so, I came under a lot of scrutiny.”

Kim’s journal from the year prior to her affair conveyed the general aura of surveillance
that she experienced:

Well, today at school was more of the same bullshit. “Amazingly,” I saw [the principal]
more today than I have in three months—coincidence? I hope so, but I find it hard to
believe. . . . I talked to Damian about what happened—as usual, he was very insightful.
He seems to think that people are threatened because I have such a visible rapport with
my MALE students. I think that’s part of it. I’m also single, rock the boat, and care
about the kids nobody else does.

Kim’s response to this panoptic environment was to turn to her students for the support and
validation she wasn’t receiving from her peers:

The district where I taught for seven years I was pretty much ostracized by my
colleagues, and so the students were my only avenue of support. . . . All my students—
males and females—they knew who I was much more so than my colleagues did, because I
didn't show my colleagues my whole self. I had to be guarded with my colleagues
because they attacked who I was. And yet my students, year after year, the support just
snowballed until it became about my only means of support there. . . . It seemed like the
more my kids affirmed me, the more my colleagues shunned me.
The school’s business-as-usual response to a student’s tragic death exemplified how antithetical Kim’s holistic approach was to her district’s community of practice. No grief teams were made available to the students and none of her colleagues—including the school’s guidance counselors—attended the visitations at the funeral home, so Kim in effect became the sole support for dozens of grieving students who turned to her for comfort. However, Kim’s principal reprimanded her for usurping the counselors’ roles rather than appreciated her for the effort she made to help students come to terms with their loss.

Well-versed as Kim was in psychology, she was not equipped to deal with her own and her students’ grief alone. In the absence of collegial or professional support, once again she turned to her students for support and validation, much as Letourneau had when she was having marriage problems. Reflecting on the incident, Kim said,

I needed to be debriefed to help deal with all of that, and that didn't happen. With that, and my genetic tendency toward depression, that spiraled me into a really dark place that whole winter. And I did turn to Goth Boy and his classmates a lot for support. Again, not that that's an excuse, I own my choices, but that was a pretty traumatic event. And had the school had some things in place or even a more supportive staff, I wouldn't have had to shoulder that by myself, which is essentially what I ended up doing. Which, as my psychologist friend pointed out, there was no way I should've been dealing with that quantity of grieving kids without some kind of support, let alone, not only was I not supported, I was—once again—reprimanded, and made to feel like I was doing something wrong! . . . That was a really hard thing for me to bounce back from, and I didn't bounce back very effectively from that. That was a long depression, and I felt very lonely and isolated, which I think fueled my attraction for Goth Boy and the need maybe
to save him, and cling to that because it was such an intense emotional bond and it was
meeting a lot of my needs. That somebody was justifying and affirming my need to help.

Kim said the event, which took place a year after her student affair had concluded, “just
solidified my position and my rage. . . . I think that probably was the turning point, when they
realized they probably couldn't control me anymore.” After her school’s soulless response to the
tragedy, Kim stopped the pretense of reconciling her holistic approach to teaching with the
school’s practices. What had been a subversion of the school’s ideology became outright
rejection; she set to helping students with a zeal and an almost reckless disregard for her
colleagues’ disapproval. Kim believed it was this rebellion—her refusal to stop helping
students—and not her affair that led to her dismissal from the school the following year. I
elaborate on this point in Chapter 6.

Hannah, too, was appreciated by her students but not her colleagues. She felt her
colleagues’ censure for being too close with her students: “I was the favorite teacher in the 11th
grade. . . . The other teachers didn't like that. They thought I was too friendly with the students.”
When I asked her why they cared whether she was close to them or not, her response was
twofold:

The other teachers were afraid number one because they thought I wasn't teaching and
number two because the kids liked me, and that's a threat to them. . . . They saw the kids
loved me, and I say that without being conceited. But they saw the kids coming up and
hugging me in the hall. And instead of saying, "Wow, that teacher is an effective
teacher," or, "Wow, that kid's still in school, and we thought he would've dropped out by
the fourth week of school," they . . . attacked it. . . . there were a lot [of teachers] who
didn't like me and were trying to find a focus, to find something that would get me out of here because they didn't like me.

Hannah acknowledged that one of the two camps of colleagues who disapproved of her teaching style was only concerned that she wasn’t doing her job; these teachers for the most part were outside her department, so she didn’t consider their skepticism a personal attack because they were unfamiliar with language arts methods. Hannah believed the English classroom was more conducive to establishing close connections to students, and teachers in other disciplines just didn’t understand that. However, she felt the other camp zeroed in on her closeness to students as an excuse to ostracize her because they didn’t like her personally, in part because they were threatened by her popularity.

Considering what happened, one could claim that Hannah’s and Kim’s disapproving colleagues were right to be suspicious of their close relationships to students. As Shakeshaft (2004) warns, “Educator sexual predators are often well liked and considered excellent teachers” (p. 49). However, a holistic teacher does not a sexual predator make. Nor does a teacher who prefers the company of her students to her backbiting peers. But it stands to reason that a teacher who is loved and affirmed only by her students and who spends the majority of her days with them might begin to view students as friends. Bullough’s (1989) case study of first-year teacher Kerrie Baughman illustrates how isolation—both literal and figurative, in that the school’s compartmentalized structure encouraged autonomy over collaboration and teamwork among teachers—and a lack of collegial support force teachers to seek other outlets for validation. In a follow-up report eight years later, Bullough and Baughman (1997) attribute Kerrie’s leaving the profession in part to the unsupportive school structure: “Kerrie felt no collegiality. What ‘strokes’ she received, for instance, came from students, not from other teachers” (p. 160). Like
Kerrie, Hannah and Kim felt isolated in their teaching contexts; they received “strokes” from kids, not colleagues. From there, it wasn’t such a stretch to feel more than friendship for a student with whom they had a particular connection, who seemed more mature than his classmates. And from there, the leap was made from an emotional connection to a physical one. Hannah claimed that her sense of isolation contributed to the ease of her affair: “The school’s very isolated. Which I think is kinda funny, because in that isolation, you know, that’s why some of this easy.” Had she had collegial support and friendships among the faculty, she may not have entertained a relationship with Eric—or even if she had, the difficulty of hiding it from friends with discerning eyes might have given her pause.

Teacher as Savior

The teacher-as-savior role that Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim embraced helped to foster the emotional connection that laid the groundwork for their affairs. The desire to save students, whether it be from academic failure or unhealthy home environments, is a noble one, but one that can go awry when teachers focus their attention on a select few needy students. Because holistic teachers typically know their students better than colleagues whose primary focus is delivering content—as Kim said, “I do take the time to get to know my kids”—they are more likely to be aware of students they perceive to be in need of saving. However, when a teacher takes it upon herself to be the sole savior of a troubled student, it becomes problematic. The more time, energy, and love the four women invested in one student, the more consuming the relationship became, taking away not only from their teaching of other students but sometimes their families as well.

Letourneau exemplified this pattern of saving a select few. Katie, a classmate and friend of Fualaau’s, said, "She went out of her way to help kids when she saw something that interested
them when it seemed like they didn't have a lot of joy in other parts of their lives. There were a lot of troubled kids in my class” (Olsen, 1999, p. 108). However, a parent had a different perspective: "Mary had her special kids and she focused in on them. I think a lot of the other kids were just there" (p. 108). Katie’s mother claimed, "She felt closer to her students than her own children. God knows, she spent more time with them" (p. 118).

During the year Fualauu was in her sixth-grade classroom, saving him from his troubled home and bleak future became the focus of her attention. She recognized his artistic talent and thought “her help could be his ticket out of poverty” (p. 126). She arranged for him to take some art classes with her that summer, securing funding through his “child at risk” status. Katie saw Letourneau’s motives as benevolent—that she was only “a teacher trying to save a boy from his family, his past, and a future that was dark and without room for all that he could be” (p. 220). But somewhere along the way, saving Fualauu turned into falling in love with him.

Similar to Letourneau, saving marginalized or at-risk kids was the most rewarding part of Ingram’s teaching. She narrates a conversation she had with Mark, her long-term boyfriend, about a group of students (including Dickeson) she was giving extra help to during her prep period:

“I want them to believe in themselves more, not be so afraid. Everyone thinks they’re real badass kids, but they have so many good qualities too.”

“So you’re trying to save them?” Mark asks.

“Maybe,” I say. “Maybe I think I can show them that they can succeed at something, or maybe I just want them to know that they can be part of the society that they think has rejected them. They’re underdogs, you know?” (Ingram, 2003, p. 43)
Ingram also sounds much like Hannah and Kim here—she’s more concerned that this group of students “believe in themselves” than whether they complete their accounting lessons, and she has provided a space in her classroom for them to feel safe and experience success. But she acknowledges her desire to save these kids—and Dickeson in particular—is not entirely altruistic when she examines her motives for visiting Dickeson at his home during a suspension in order to catch him up on school work:

I don’t know if I can help, but I do know that he will do school work for me as for no other teacher. Maybe I can use this flirtation to give him something of value—or at least someone to talk to. And yet my intentions are not pure. I feel myself falling into the seductive illusion of being needed, of being important enough to make a difference in someone’s life. (Ingram, 2003, p. 56)

At this point in Ingram and Dickeson’s relationship, she had been warding off his playfully flirtatious behavior, but she decided to take advantage of his apparent crush on her in order to motivate him to stay in school. Her intent was not to seduce but to save—but like Letourneau, somewhere in the process of helping him she fell in love.

The savior-turned-lover pattern was the same for Hannah and Kim. When I asked Hannah what attracted her to Eric—why he was the one—she said,

Why him. The underprivileged kid who comes from nowhere close to the background of a person that I'd want to spend the rest of my life with, or that I would appreciate their family. I guess in the beginning it was a desire to save the kid. I really do think that, and I guess that was subconscious though, because on the outside it felt to me more like the desire to get to know the kid . . . . I definitely at the beginning was just very into him
as a student, as an interesting person, as the two of us had big commonalities from everything from music to lifestyle. I think a lot of it was the intent to save the student from a bad situation.

In the process of getting to know Eric, she started to appreciate him as an interesting and intelligent person with whom she had a connection. Thus the groundwork was laid for Hannah’s teacher-savior role to become something more.

Kim’s journals, poetry, and interview transcripts are peppered with examples of students with whom she formed close attachments while attempting to save them. Goth Boy was a prime example:

The one that most closely fits the pattern—we can call him Goth Boy. . . . Again, a very, very needy male student, abused at home. Very bright. In this case, very poetic, and really bonded with me very strongly. Very much at risk of not graduating. So, the emotional involvement as I tried to keep him in school and keep him functioning was very close.

The “pattern” Kim speaks of is her self-acknowledged tendency to become too emotionally involved while trying to save troubled students. She explains how, after her divorce, she started identifying with “rebel” students, and I was always trying to get people to see them like I did, or get Alcoholic Boy [the student who reminded her strongly of her brother] out of trouble, which didn’t sit well with anyone else on staff. . . . this [Alcoholic Boy] was a boy I felt VERY emotionally connected to. I tried to save him a lot in school, and help him.

Although emotionally draining, saving students was not completely altruistic for Kim; much like Ingram, it made her feel needed. Focusing on needy students also distracted her from the
depression following her divorce and, later, the school’s mishandling of a student’s death.

Excerpts from two poems about Goth Boy illustrate how helping students helped her:

you say I have carried you too long
I say you do not weigh that much
you say you have drained me lifeless
I say you would make a beautiful vampire,

but my neck is still unbitten

I will love you always, but you can’t linger long,

for you will never find yourself in my shadow

I’m not sure if I should ask at all

is it your confidence I am trying to build

or my void I am trying to fill? I question

the supposed purity of my own intentions

The last line parallels Ingram’s questioning of her motivation for helping Dickeson that I noted earlier: “And yet my intentions are not pure. I feel myself falling into the seductive illusion of being needed” (p. 56). But Kim had learned her lesson by the time Goth Boy was her student; she did not confuse the love she felt for him as a foundation for a romantic relationship as she had done with Damian two years before. However, her connection with Damian, too, had begun as a rescue mission: “Looking back, I really think . . . that started because he needed help.”

Much like Letourneau, Hannah’s and Kim’s attention to a select few shortchanged other students in their classes. Hannah describes what happened to Eric’s American literature class once their relationship began:
I lost control of him and the classroom—I lost complete control. There was even a conversation at one point where I took the kids outside and said, "I've had enough with you. I'm sick of it. What is the problem?" . . . and one of the girls said, "You spend so much time with him. You never address us." . . . that particular class I didn't teach anything. . . . My emotions were cracked out.

Although Hannah “didn’t teach anything” to Eric’s class, she was able to save him from academic failure: “Once I saw that he decided to pass all his classes—he'd never done that before, so my original ‘I wanna save this kid,’ I feel like subconsciously I can.” Note Hannah used the present tense here, perhaps because she was still in the relationship (although not still teaching) at the time of the interview. This present tense orientation suggests she still sees herself as a savior, which bore out in a later interview that took place after the relationship was over. In retrospect, she realizes she went from saving Eric from academic failure to saving him from his home life. Once she left teaching, she morphed from teacher-savior to mother-savior:

I became his reason for being. Without me, he was afraid he’d never eat. They didn’t clothe—there were days—he became this thing I was protective over. It was almost like he was my child. I was so protective of him, and he was so protective of me that it was this common nurturing trust for each other but distrust of the world. And, you know, then at some point I became the old lady. I became the complete caregiver. I realized I was taking care of HIM, I was taking care of his brother. I was feeding—sometimes the whole family.

Unlike Hannah, Kim did not have a relationship with a student currently in her class; like Letourneau, the affair began in the summer following his student status. In fact, Kim helped Damian arrange his senior schedule to ensure they wouldn’t have any formal contact, knowing
how awkward it would be to revert to their former teacher-student roles. Nonetheless, Kim wrote in her journal that the stress of the relationship still had a negative effect on her classes: “This drama has been a poison that has infected all areas of my life—even my teaching, which is sacred. I cannot help others from the selfish plane I have lived in.”

**Summary: Teaching Persona**

Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim were acknowledged to be excellent teachers, both informally through the regard of their students and formally via various teaching awards. Therefore, Shakeshaft’s (2004) warning to be wary of excellent teachers appears to hold true in their cases. However, I would like to look deeper than this shared characteristic to why well-liked teachers might be more likely to engage in an affair. Based on what I know of these women, they were well-liked because they cared first and foremost about their students’ wellbeing, which was apparent in their holistic approach to teaching and in the close attachments they formed with students—particularly students who were disenfranchised from school. Shakeshaft’s (2004) claim that sexual predators target marginalized students “not only because they might be responsive but also because they are more likely to maintain silence” (p. 32) does not ring true for these women. They did not select a student from the needy pool to be their lover; there was no sexual premeditation in their desire to save these boys from failure. However, the emotional bond that formed as a result of the time and love they invested developed into a physical one; the emotional intensity associated with saving a soul was conflated with romantic love. I examine how this development happened for these women in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4
THE ONSET: CROSSING THE LINE

whoever said not the idea
but the thing itself
knew what it was
to be alone with words
strung too tightly
around an unquiet heart    - Kim.

In this chapter I explore how Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim progressed from an emotional connection with their respective student lovers—Fualau, Dickeon, Eric, and Damian—to a sexual one. Although all four women could identify the episode or moment that the relationship became physical, making that turn was a process. This process had the initial characteristics of a typical romantic entanglement: a mutual attraction followed by flirting. But then the teacher-student power dynamic shifted the courtship routine. An adult male might typically take the initiative in advancing a physical relationship, but a male student isn’t likely to do so; it is socially acceptable and expected that he be sexually assertive with his peers but not with an older woman, particularly one in a position of authority over him. But neither is a female teacher able to make the first physical move, not only because students are “absolutely, unequivocally OFF LIMITS” (Kim’s pre-affair words) but because women are acculturated to entice rather than pursue. However, because of their holistic teaching philosophy, these four women had mitigated the teacher-student power differential by encouraging relationships that were more equitable than authoritarian. What happened, then, was that these teachers allowed (and sometimes created) increasingly intimate scenarios in which it dawned on the boys to whom they were attracted that an overture might not be rejected. The “good girl” in these women
prevented them from initiating a sexual relationship, but it did allow them to set up situations in which they could passively give in to temptation. The women didn’t *de facto* cross the line; they just set the stage whereby it *could* be crossed.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first four tell the onset story for each teacher, although Letourneau’s and Ingram’s are less developed not only because I’m working from fewer materials with them but also because the focus continues to be on my research participants, Hannah and Kim. My purpose in including Letourneau and Ingram at all is to show that Hannah’s and Kim’s stories aren’t singular; not only do the four women have backgrounds in common as Chapter 3 demonstrates but their affairs, too, followed a similar sequence. The final section returns to a distinction I discussed in Chapter 1 between pedagogical eroticism and pedagogical abuse (McWilliam, 1996), posing the question to the reader when one became the other for these four women.

Letourneau

In her *20/20* (2004) interview, Letourneau explained to Barbara Walters how her emotional bond with Fualaaau led to assertive behavior on his part:

Well, there was an emotional attraction late in the year, toward the end actually. And that was—we just had bonded. We have similar interests and I also knew that he had girl interests and I did suspect—I knew definitely it was extending in my direction. And I just really—I just really ignored it. . . . [But] one time he just came straight out and said, "Would you ever have an affair?" (p. 4)

Because she “didn't want to disrespect his feelings” (p. 5), her response to this question was to deflect it, first through avoidance and then by postponement:
I thought to myself, do not look him in the eyes. Stay very busy. And it was very uncomfortable for me. . . . He knew that I was avoiding all of his comments and insinuations. And he was very assertive and wanted a response. . . . Basically he said that he was in love with me. . . . I said, “Can you hold that for a long, long time?” (pp. 4-5)

Letourneau claimed that at that point she already felt “a very deep love for him” (p. 5) but it was only an emotional attachment—one that she had no intention of consummating “for a long, long time.” Interestingly, her rationale for waiting wasn’t because Fualaau was a 12-year-old student but because she was in the midst of a divorce whereby no relationship was tenable; she didn’t have the time or emotional energy to invest in a partner no matter how old he was.

When Walters pressed Letourneau for the information that this chapter seeks to illustrate—how an emotional bond becomes a physical one—she hedged at first but then answered vaguely:

L: There was a kiss and I thought, that's okay but it's not gonna go any further.
And—and you might be wondering the "that's okay" part of that.

W: But I'm trying very hard to find out what happened next. One day he kisses you on the lips, right?

L: Uh-huh.

W: And then it goes from that to this very intimate, sexual relationship. What was the incident that turned it into that?

L: The incident was a late night that it didn't stop with a kiss. And I thought that it would and it didn't. (20/20, 2004, pp. 6-7)

Fualaau’s version, taken from his statement to the prosecuting attorney of Letourneau’s case, provides a little more detail:
He said he spent the night at her house and it just happened...Mary's husband was working...the kids were asleep. He said they were in the den watching shows, he thinks *Braveheart*. He said she started talking to him about psychics and stuff like that; that a psychic she supposedly talked to said she was going to meet someone with dark skin and be with him...then they just did it.” (Olsen, 1999, p. 158; ellipses in original)

Letourneau’s affirmative answer to Walters’ “One day he kisses you on the lips, right?” notwithstanding, it’s unclear who initiated either the first kiss or the one that “didn’t stop with a kiss” that *Braveheart*-watching night. However, Fualaau’s assertiveness prior to the affair as well as the nature of their ensuing relationship suggest that he was in control. In Olsen’s (1999) face-to-face interview with Letourneau while she was in jail, she said of Fualaau, “He dominated me in the most masculine way that any man, any leader could do” (p. 369). Olsen elaborates: “He was the leader; she followed him. He was the master. He was the adoring object of her affections. That's how she saw it. The roles they embodied, she said, were from another era” (p. 369). “Embodied” is an instructive word choice here, because I know of no era where it was normal for 12-year-old boys to have relationships with their teachers—well, ancient Greece, perhaps, but those teachers weren’t women. Neither has it been common historically for women to be financially superior in a relationship; Letourneau and Fualaau were at her house, they had sex in her car, she was “his ticket out of poverty” (p. 126). The traditional “roles they embodied,” then, were in their physical relationship to each other; Fualaau dominated, Letourneau submitted.

Fualaau’s lawyer’s perspective indicates that Fualaau was not the passive recipient of his teacher’s sexual advances, either:
Vili’s details of conquests with his teacher grew more and more outrageous. . . . While she wrote of her undying and spiritual love for Vili, the teen wrote of waiting to have sex with her and betting a friend $20 bucks that he could nail his teacher. (Olsen, 1999, p. 354)

But regardless of who actually took the first step, it is clear that Letourneau set the stage for it to happen—first in her equivocal response to his declaration of love, when she asked him to “hold it for a long, long time” rather than stating in no uncertain terms that an affair was not possible; then in allowing him to kiss her and thinking “that’s okay but it’s not gonna go any further”; and finally by bringing him into her house when her husband wasn’t home. I call this neither-yes-nor-no vacillation a pushmipullyu response, named after Lofting’s (1988) horselike creature with a head at both ends in Dr. Dolittle’s menagerie (See Figure 1 below). In a sort of Freudian battle between id and superego, the one head pushes Fualaaau away but the other pulls him in. To create a situation where she was alone on a couch with Fualaaau, knowing of their mutual attraction, was an open invitation for something to happen. She was giving the pullyu end free rein.

![Teacher-headed pushmipullyu](image)

*Figure 1. Teacher-headed pushmipullyu.*
Ingram

Ingram’s attraction to Dickeson developed over the course of his junior year while he was in her accounting class. He flirted with her quite openly:

It began very innocently. It began with a little bit of a flirtation that made my heart feel something in my day. It began as just a high point in my day. . . . He would rub my shoulder in the hallway, something really innocent, give me a wink or whistle at me as I was walking down the hallway. (Oprah, 2004, p. 3)

Like Letourneau, Ingram’s response to this level of flirtation was to deflect it by neither encouraging nor discouraging his behavior. She performed pushmipullyu:

We had talked loosely. It was more of a casual, “Oh,” you know, he would ask me out. He would ask me, you know, one day, “Let’s—let’s go skating. Let’s go watch a movie,” and I would . . . . [say], “I can’t. I’m your teacher. . . . Maybe when you graduate but I can’t.” (p. 5)

Ingram’s “Maybe when you graduate” is akin to Letourneau’s “Can you hold that for a long, long time?”—a subtle encouragement. As Winfrey said, “Sometimes women say no and they mean maybe” (p. 6). Ingram realized Dickeson had gone too far one day when he blew her a kiss through the door of her classroom, but her half-hearted attempts to squelch his increasingly assertive flirting were ineffectual.

The point of no return for Ingram came one night when Dickeson and a couple of his friends stopped by her house while her boyfriend was out of town. She invited them in for movies and pizza—harmless enough, she thought—although she knew that “even by watching TV with these boys, eighteen years old, I am crossing a line” (Ingram, 2003, p. 61). In the moment, however, she was able to rationalize it:
I justified it, every step of the way. I was like, but it's just a movie. We can sit here and watch a movie. And I'm not doing anything too bad. And later on that evening, oh, it's just pizza. We're just eating pizza together. (*Primetime Live*, 2004, p. 15)

When eating pizza turned into smoking marijuana, hanging out with her students was a little harder for Ingram to justify. However, when the boys offered to teach her how to smoke a joint—something good-girl Ingram had never done—she accepted:

I have already crossed the line, and like a dieter out for a special dinner, I have apparently given myself permission to ignore the usual boundaries. I know that I am doing something wrong, certainly against the rules, yet I lie to myself that I deserve it after years of following every rule there is. I feel safe with these boys. (Ingram, 2003, p. 64)

In one fell swoop Ingram’s inner bad girl went on a rampage. Even though she knew it was wrong, she was able to justify her behavior up to that point because she wasn’t hurting anybody. And she felt “safe with these boys”; she trusted that they weren’t going to talk. That’s another common error that teachers such as Ingram make—believing that the anti-establishment code of silence among disenfranchised, Dickeson-like students will keep them safe when in reality the transgression is too titillating for even the most loyal of students to keep contained. Rumors start to leak—the kind Shakeshaft (2004) and Ross and Marlowe (1985) believe should be vigorously investigated. But I digress.

The largest boundary of the evening was yet to be crossed. Unbeknownst to Ingram, Dickeson and his friends had prearranged to leave Dickeson alone with his teacher. Ingram described to McFadden in her *Primetime Live* (2004) interview what happened next:

I: The two other boys, the friends of Dusty's arranged to leave him stranded at my house. They left and he was there. And I said, well, you know, “I'll give you a
ride home.” And that was when he grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me towards him and kissed me.

M: And you kissed him back?

I: I pushed him away. And I said, “I'm your teacher. We can't do this.” And he said, “yep.” And he kissed me again. And then I kissed him back.

M: You didn't put up much of a fight here, teacher. (p. 15)

Ingram did indeed surrender without “much of a fight.” How could she not, after setting the stage for her own downfall? First of all, she’d allowed him to flirt with her. Then she’d gone to his house on the pretext of delivering homework while he was suspended, during which time he asked her out and she laughingly said, “You have to graduate first” (Ingram, 2003, p. 58). Finally, she’d ended up alone with him in her house after a night of breaking rules. Although she told McFadden, “I'm—at war with myself. Really, I was at war” (p. 15), it was a war the good girl had no chance of winning; pullyu had been given the advantage. Ingram may not have consciously realized it when she invited the boys in that evening, but sex was a foregone conclusion.

Surrendering to Dickeson not only felt deliciously naughty but liberating as well, as Ingram (2003) describes at the end of a chapter entitled “Crossing the Line”:

This does not feel like a crisis but like the beginning of a recovery. Yet my body and my brain are at odds. It is so wrong; it goes against everything I have been taught. . . . What is happening, what are we doing? I ask, but Troy [her pseudonym for Dusty] is steady. I can breathe for the first time in years. . . . Recovery. Madness. I feel like me again. (p. 66)
What I find most compelling in this passage is the mind/body struggle Ingram experienced, a duality she referred to again when Winfrey asked why she didn’t wait for Dickeson to graduate. Ingram responded, “I was thinking with my heart and not my head” (Oprah, 2004, p. 11). When the mind and body are at odds, it’s like the pushmipullyu—an animal at war with itself. Ingram called it a “recovery” when she surrendered to emotion, feeling, the body; she recovered herself, feeling “like me again.” Her “madness” is reminiscent of the feral woman archetype that Kim identified with: “It is a famine of the soul that makes a woman choose things that will cause her to dance madly out of control” (Estés, 1992, p. 220). Perhaps if Ingram had not suppressed her body within its good-girl casing for so long, she wouldn’t have responded so radically and readily to the opportunity to be set free.

Hannah

Whereas Letourneau and Ingram were not consciously aware of sexual dynamics in the classroom—their desire for Fualau and Dickeson were isolated feelings that seemed to take them by surprise—Hannah was very much mindful of her and her students’ embodiment. That her students sometimes sexualized her was neither unexpected nor offensive to her. She understood that forming close relationships with students encompassed both mind and body, as the following exchange during an interview indicates:

H: Just because I am a very sexual being, there wasn't really much of a dividing line most of the time with closeness, whether it be emotionally, physically, psychologically, whatever.

T: So it didn't really matter to you whether they were sexualizing that closeness or not?
H: No. The only time it mattered was when I felt like somebody was watching me. . . . I am a touchy-feely person, and this child feels comfortable enough to touch me. So it wasn't necessarily a negative thing . . . . Unfortunately, I guess, and just because of who I am, a lot of times it was a sexual thing. When it came from girls it didn't bother me, just because I'm a pretty free-thinking person, but there were times I had to push away, just because I thought they were getting, maybe, I don't want to say confused because I don't think it's a confusion, but I think maybe—

T: Too attached, or something?

H: Too attached, or even perceiving it as a relationship . . . . But as far as the guys, guys point-blank are horny. They know. When they walk up behind you and put their hands around your face and you can feel them up against you, then it becomes a sexual thing.

Hannah brought up an interesting point about the gendering of attraction. It wasn’t just her male students who flirted with her, although boys tended to be more physical and overtly sexual in their attention whereas girls were more prone to develop an emotionally intimate relationship with her. Regardless of a student’s motive for getting “touchy-feely,” Hannah understood it as an indication of the closeness and comfort level she sought to establish with her students as a holistic teacher. However, she recognized that this closeness was problematic for two reasons. First of all, Hannah was aware of her colleagues’ disapproval of her level of intimacy with students—hence her concern when “somebody was watching.” Secondly, she “had to push away” when a student became too possessive of her, jealously treating their relationship as if they were a couple—a development that happened more frequently, though not exclusively, with girls. Although Hannah may be a relatively “free-thinking person,” there is
something sexist if not homophobic about her permissiveness of masculine physical attention but discomfort with feminine emotional attachment. I suspect heteronormativity (Sumara & Davis, 1999) is at work here. Although Hannah wasn’t consciously repulsed by girls flirting with her—it “didn’t bother” her—that she pushed them away when they started behaving like jealous girlfriends suggests Hannah wasn’t so comfortable with heteronormative disruptions after all.

As a “self-proclaimed sexual being” in tune with her body, Hannah was not surprised or horrified to realize that sometimes the attraction students felt for her was mutual. Eric was not the first student who appealed to her on a visceral level:

One particular kid in my third period class, really, I think, and to this day, with my significant other [who was Eric at the time of the interview] knowing about this, that he would have been the one if I had let myself go that far. He would have been the one. . . .

There were times that I was so close to pushing it.

When I asked Hannah what stopped her in this case, she speculated that “if he didn’t know the limits”—if he had instigated a sexual episode—something might have happened. As it was, he never made a move beyond playful flirtation, and he was a sweet and emotionally healthy boy, not a damaged one. As attractive as he was, he did not trigger Hannah’s savior instinct.

Eric, however, was not so innocent, and as a “tough kid [who] had seen the world,” he was adept at pushing the limits. Hannah had made her phone number available to her students, and one night he called her. Although she had set the stage—she’d told him to call, on the innocent pretext of discussing a school matter—it was Eric who turned the conversation to sex:

I think the origin was just a little spark of something sexual in there, and then the next thing you know, 1-800 phone sex. There was no physical before that, it was a conversation on the phone that started it. . . . Although I was a sexual being, I never
pushed that limit before. . . . I just had never experienced somebody talking to me sexually on the phone.

Hannah was no stranger to sexual experiences, but phone sex was new for her. Never one to back down from a sexual challenge, she embraced it: “Here was something different, and it was a challenge. It intrigued me, and I didn't want to back down.” Several long phone conversations ensued. But they hadn’t yet crossed the physical barrier, although the sexual tension was palpable between them one day when he stayed after school:

I can't remember what it was, but he had to stay after school for something. I can't remember if I gave him detention or if he had to make something up. But he had never stayed after at this point, this was a first. And we talked, and we sat there. It was more of a frustration, no physical—nothing. It was more of a, "Yeah, I'm really horny, so are you, we're gonna talk to each other but we're not gonna touch each other" type of thing.

Talking did eventually lead to touching one day at the movies. He had asked her to go and she agreed, (rather obtusely) not seeing any harm in hanging out as friends. But a movie theatre can be an intimate setting—not so much as Letourneau’s couch where she and Fualaau watched Braveheart, but suggestive all the same. They did kiss, which happened after he put his arm around her. This increased level of physical intimacy led to sexual boundary-breaking later: “That progressed right into, he stayed after school one day, and I didn't want him to leave, so I proceeded to make sure he didn't leave.” At this point the relationship became a full-blown affair. So to speak.

In reflecting on the progression of events leading to the affair, Hannah was clear about what happened—the phone call, the tense after-school moment, the first kiss at the movies, the oral sex. What she wasn’t so clear about was when the point of no return was:
I don't know where the line happened. I mean I know where definite lines were crossed, but . . . it jumped right over that line into a . . . personal investment into the kid. And then more than a personal investment into the kid—more of a personal investment into my sexuality. Opening up a door and letting him in, even though it was his idea.

Like the other women, Hannah set the stage—she opened the door for Eric, “even though it was his idea” to walk through it. However, Hannah was a little different from the others in that she was more assertive in her stage-setting, which was in keeping with her personality; she was “a sexual being” who claimed to have never backed down from a sexual challenge. She was also very comfortable with sexuality—not just hers, but sexuality⁹ in general—which allowed her to see students as sexual beings, too. She called this awareness “the desensitization of the teacher-student sexuality concept.” This lack of affront at the notion that both teachers and students are sexual beings who might occasionally be attracted to each other helped blur “the line” for Hannah; in her relationship with Eric, she conflated crossing it with a personal investment into her own sexuality. This “personal investment” can be compared to Richardson’ (1985) observations about single women involved in extramarital affairs:

By having sex with an "inappropriate" man, by tasting the "forbidden fruit," she can experience her own sexuality. Because the forbidden is supposed to arouse us sexually, indeed, that is a good part of why it is forbidden, tabooed encounters are experienced as sexually exciting. (p. 45)

Although Hannah’s telling of her onset story certainly suggests she was more assertive than Letourneau or Ingram had been in escalating the relationship to a physical level, once the

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⁹ I have to qualify this a little bit, given Hannah’s response to female flirtation: Hannah is very comfortable with heterosexual.
affair began she felt as if Eric had all the power. Their dynamic was very much like Letourneau and Fualaau’s—Hannah submissive, Eric dominant:

He initiated—once it moved beyond the classroom, he pushed it. And I went "Okay." I became very submissive to him, not only in my teaching, but in my everyday life with him. So even though we did about 50/50 going into it, he became the strong one. He became the dominating one. He still is.

Hannah went on to say, “I don't have any control . . . for the first time I've LET something take control of me. . . . I wanna be a housewife, and it’s really scary!” Hannah was typically the strong one in her romantic relationships, but this time the roles were reversed. Their gender relations were traditional, reminiscent of Letourneau’s claim that “The roles they embodied . . . were from another era” (Olsen, 1999, p. 369).

I suspect there may be something to this role reversal. It’s as if the boys have to assume a manly role in order to make the relationship legitimate and equitable. I don’t doubt Hannah could have chosen to take control of the relationship; she was certainly more experienced than Eric and was accustomed to dominating men. But that would have exacerbated the power differential between them. In order for a relationship between a female teacher and a male student to be a real one, the boy has to have some power; otherwise, it seems too predatory, a seductress-victim dynamic. Also, it is easier for the teacher to justify, to feel okay about, the relationship when she performs a passive role. He is the one pushing and controlling and she is merely succumbing to him, which absolves her of some of the guilt for continuing the affair.

Kim

Kim’s prolific journal- and poetry-writing for the duration of her affair with Damian provided rich data from which to capture in detail the progression of events. She became aware
of her physical attraction to Damian, who had become one of her favorite students over the
course of his high school career, toward the end of his junior year. She had “saved” him from
the lower language arts academic track he’d been misplaced in as a freshman and had helped him
with his schoolwork in the college-preparatory track in the interim, so she was personally
invested in his success. Damian was different from the other damaged boys she nurtured (such
as Alcoholic Boy and Goth Boy), though, in that he was unabashedly flirtatious toward her:

There was one student who really started talking to me and flirting with me a lot. Every
day he would post marriage proposals all over the room, and ask me to go on dates, etc.
It sounds stupid now, but at the time, I just soaked up the attention, even though it was
coming from a 17-year-old. [Damian had a birthday before the affair began]

Damian’s behavior as well as Kim’s response to it was much like the dynamic in the other three
cases: the boys playfully pursued; and the teachers, enjoying the attention, didn’t put a stop to it.

When Kim realized she was starting to have other-than-teacherly feelings for Damian,
his initial reaction was to squelch them. Her first journal mentioning him was dated in early
May:

I’m having some pretty intense feelings for Damian—he has so many qualities that
appeal to me. He has a great sense of humor, wonderfully diverse taste in music, likes
sports, and is extremely intelligent. Unfortunately, he is also 17 and absolutely,
unequivocally OFF LIMITS!!

The context of this journal entry suggests that Damian’s student status is what makes Damian
“off limits,” although the age difference was also a factor. In Kim’s first poem about Damian,
she describes an incident at school when she saw that he was upset about something but was
afraid to engage with him lest he “see the truth” about her growing attraction:
I see a boy against a wall, too lonely to be true.

I walk a little closer and see that boy is you.

   Drawn up tight into yourself; still I have to stay.

   I need some kind of connection, but I don’t know what to say.

Without our roles, I’m so unsure of what to say or do.

You look up—I step back, afraid you’ll see the truth.

   The boy in you draws me in—the man scares me away…

   The teacher in me wants to help—the woman wants to play.

So I make a little small talk, pretend that all is well.

Then I force myself to walk away, so you cannot tell.

   Still, I can’t help but turn around another time or two

   to see if you are watching me to see me watching you.

But all I see is darkness—there’s no light upon your face.

I know that I have to go—I must stay in my place.

   I hope that time is kind to me; it’s not easy to resist

   and I feel silly playing teacher, but I can’t take the risk.10

Damian was clearly troubled, but Kim’s instinct to help was at war with her instinct for self-preservation; she couldn’t “take the risk” of allowing the “woman [who] wants to play” to become visible. At this point Kim had the bad girl who wanted to play, who wanted to break free of the teacher role, firmly in check. Damian was “absolutely, unequivocally OFF LIMITS.”

Note the dramatic irony in the following journal excerpt dated a few weeks later:

“Everyone needs a transitional person—at least mine is fairly ‘safe.’ After all, it is highly

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10 Kim doesn’t typically use rhyme in her poetry but said she tries her hand at it once in a while—thus the stylistic difference of this poem. Also, I offset the couplets with indentation in order to conserve space.
unlikely any of my fantasies will become reality, no matter how much I want them to.” Damian was “safe” because he was off limits; he could be the “transitional person” to satiate her loneliness temporarily, bridging her divorce and an eventual fulfilling relationship:

Maybe I have latched onto him because at least if I have something to obsess over, then I won’t have to face my reality—I am alone. Nobody loves me as deeply as I love them. I am searching for the person who is not afraid to feel as intensely as I do. Damian has that potential, but his immaturity gets in the way.

Alas, Kim couldn’t resist the allure of the pushmipullyu response, which allowed her to indulge a bit in the temptation surrounding her attraction to Damian without fully succumbing to it. Kim began to set the stage for increased contact between them, planning her daily walks around the times she knew he would be at his after-school job so that she could casually drop by. The following poem excerpt about one such day when he was working in the supply room at his place of employment illustrates the role tension Kim was experiencing:

in the closed back room, possibility roars open
you eye me cautiously, but hold your position,
I approach, chatter on about nothing,
trying on masks that no longer suit me
teacher is too pompous,
wise adult a lie
big sister quite incestuous
lover? not this time
I stand amidst my echoing chatter
my words ricochet among the torn off masks
littering the floor like shot-up confetti

Kim didn’t know how or who to be around Damian anymore; the teacher/mentor/nurturer role she had assumed in her interactions with him—as she did with all her students—no longer seemed to fit. But as she cast about for an appropriate mask to wear—how does a teacher who is really more like a friend act toward a student to whom she is attracted?—none of them were comfortable, either. She was able to cover up her maskless state with “echoing chatter,” but the episode left her torn.

Another poem excerpt from about the same time indicates her inner struggle to keep silent about her feelings:

my peace is shattered, my soul tied up in NOTS

I can NOT touch you

I must NOT tell you the truth that eats away at my existence

we should NOT be together,

for they will NOT accept that

Kim knew that society—the nebulous “they”—would not accept a relationship between her and Damian. At least “they” would not tolerate it while he was a student, and probably not once he graduated because of their 15-year age difference; but Kim was at a point in her life when she didn’t care so much about having society’s approval anymore. One year out of her divorce, her rage and rebellion against “them”—her ex-husband, her disapproving colleagues, patriarchy in general—was at an all-time high. An unconventional but legal relationship would be just the thing to thumb her nose at her community’s conservative values.
A journal entry dated a few weeks prior to the end of the school year reveals more pushmipullyu activity:

Well, I pushed too hard—asked Damian to stop by after school. I wanted to see if everything was ok with him, and to make sure he had a way to and from summer school. He was very guarded—and very uncomfortable. So I backed off and he left. I just feel bad—I should have left well enough alone. . . . I need to back off, or he is likely to notice I am different.11

Although Kim’s intentions were pure—she knew Damian was having some problems at home and was concerned that his parents wouldn’t provide him with transportation to summer school—it was hardly necessary to have a conversation with him to make sure “everything was ok” at her house, which proved to be uncomfortable for both of them. However, she reported in her journal later that he’d said his discomfort wasn’t about being in her space but rather his reluctance to talk about family problems. This assurance allowed the pushmipullyu in Kim to push some more, thereby pulling him in.

On one of the last days of school, Damian stopped by her classroom after school. Family problems temporarily abated, he was back to his usual flirtatious self, and Kim responded in kind:

I, of course, pushed things quite a bit, and I think he was as well. Playful flirting, I guess you could call it—I loved every second of it! Last night, I had mentioned to Samantha [a sympathetic colleague] that age was irrelevant—well, today Damian reminded me that those words came out of my mouth, not his—and that in a year he would be graduating—

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11 Kim used ellipses in her journals to indicate pauses, but in order not to confuse them with my ellipses indicating deleted text, I converted them to dashes.
he also laughed when I said “you can’t always get what you want” is the story of my life, and he responded that “eventually you get some things.”

At this flirtful stage of the relationship, Kim was unsure of the extent of Damian’s feelings—whether he was just playing around with his teacher-friend or if he was seriously thinking about her as a potential partner. In any event, she wanted to continue in her helpful mentoring role:

He asked my advice about [a former girlfriend]—she’s having lots of problems at home. It was very comfortable, really—he is SO aware of boundaries. I couldn’t get a read on his feelings for me—but does it matter, really? . . . Regardless of what happens between him & me, I WILL see that boy graduate from college. ☺ Really, I think my lesson in this is patience and the fact that I am not in control of this. Damian is going to make sure the boundaries stay in place—whether I like it or not!

Entrusting Damian to “make sure the boundaries stay in place” was problematic on many levels. First of all, setting the uncrossable boundary at physical touch didn’t mean they hadn’t already crossed other boundaries: “He brings such joy into my life—so what if I’ve crossed some emotional and subject\textsuperscript{12} lines? At this point, it’s harmless flirtation, and he needs this as much as I do.” Although Kim justified crossing these lines as harmless and mutually beneficial, the same could be said for kissing or holding hands; physical touch was an arbitrary and therefore potentially moveable line. Secondly, Kim really wanted that boundary to be crossed. Expecting an 18-year-old boy to keep his libido in check in effect allowed her to avoid responsibility for staying in control while almost ensuring control would be lost; she could continue to tempt and tease within the apparent safety of an established boundary. The stage was set for pushmipullyu to escalate.

\textsuperscript{12} I’m pretty sure “subject” means “topic” here; during their long conversations a lot of subjects came up that teachers and students don’t normally discuss.
Kim couldn’t resist pushing the physical boundary. A journal entry dated a week after school let out reveals how she “got daring” at a public event they both attended:

I got daring. Touched his curls twice (told him it was almost long enough to braid again), and his face when he was worried about me driving home. I hope I didn’t push things too far—but I don’t think I did—he didn’t pull back, and it was good eye contact!

We also flirted a little . . . . I laughed and reminded him of the 1 year waiting period. The no-touch rule was fast becoming a no-sex rule for Kim and Damian—at least until he graduated in a year. A later journal entry shows the blurring touch boundary: “I have no idea how we are going to last a year w/o touching—sex, maybe—touching, no.” The pushmipullyu language is evident in Kim’s description of their public exchange, although here the struggle is external, between Kim and Damian, rather than an internal good-girl/bad-girl war. The terminology and positions are also reversed; Kim pushed a boundary and Damian didn’t pull away, rather than, say, Ingram’s case where Dickeson “pulled me towards him” and she halfheartedly “pushed him away” (Primetime Live, 2004, p. 15; emphasis added). Regardless of the direction (push or pull) or instigator (teacher or student), the back-and-forth escalation is notable in these as well as Letourneau’s and Hannah’s cases.

A lengthy journal entry from the following week shows the increasing pushmipullyu tension between desire and control for Kim and Damian. Mutual feelings were confessed, but they still hadn’t kissed:

Okay—my head is spinning. Damian came by around 8:30 last night and stayed until 2 a.m.! I can safely say he doesn’t feel pity for me¹³ and I am very confident now that he shares my feelings. We talked about so many things last night . . . . Sex came up a lot,

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¹³ Kim had registered a concern earlier in her journal that Damian was attentive only because he felt sorry for her lonely divorcée status.
and there were some definite moments where the tension and desire (mutual 😘) were palpable. . . .

We were talking about self-control, and he said why did it have to come down to his control? I said, “Oh, you mean you want ME to be the adult?” We laughed . . . .

I still find myself thinking about him constantly—but the thinking has shifted from “what if” to when—I still think my lesson is patience here—but I don’t know how I’m supposed to keep my hands off him. After he left last night, I went to bed and realized I was shaking all over—I had been working that hard at control. . . .

He is not ready for anything sexual yet—I need to let him set the pace for things.

Kim was continuing to trust Damian “to be the adult” in the relationship. As she wrote in a later journal, “He promised he wouldn’t let anything happen between us—he would have enough control for both of us.” Although Damian never dominated her to the extent that Letourneau and Hannah were dominated in their affairs, there is a parallel here in how power and control were given to the boys in order to equalize the relationship—Letourneau and Hannah through performing passivity and Kim through requiring Damian to be the responsible adult. Damian was in control, so he would have to be the one to lose it. Although Kim claimed not to have much self-control, she had to exert a lot of it by patiently waiting for him to “set the pace for things” and to cross the line “from ‘what if’ to when.” The effort of maintaining that dynamic for more than five hours was emotionally and physically exhausting.

Five days later Damian stopped by her house again in the evening, and they watched a movie together. The stage was set for their first kiss:

When [the movie] was over, this intense storm started. I turned the light off so I could see the lightning. We were side by side on the couch, legs touching. I could feel the
tension between us, thicker than the storm. After an internal dialogue, I decided to lean my head against his arm. The sparks were jumping—we kept having this intense eye contact—the silence was roaring—but it wasn’t awkward at all—just completely right. . . . He held me and told me how perfect this all was and how he had been wanting to hold me forever. Then he started stroking my shoulder, my arm—telling me how soft my skin was. He ran his fingers over my face. When he touched my lips I almost died. . . . We spent 5 hours like this—and in spite of the visible effort it took—things stayed fairly controlled. . . . Later, I turned my face to his and he kissed me and all I could think was the trust he has in me and how meaningful that was.

Kim “almost died” with the effort of allowing Damian to set the pace for their first kiss (another five hours of waiting!), but her patience was richly rewarded. Not that she didn’t orchestrate it—she turned the lights off and lay her head against his arm after an internal debate determined that would be acceptable—but according to Kim, Damian was the one who started actively touching her; he kissed her, not the other way around.

The kiss that “didn’t stop with a kiss” (to use Letourneau’s words) happened less than a week later:

Well—so much for waiting a year ☹️. Ironically, we made it until 4 a.m.—he stayed the night and we went to sleep—only to “slip” in the (broad daylight) morning. But it was quite intense—very intimate. I’ve never been so intimate—physically or emotionally—w/ anyone else before. I love him so deeply; although we haven’t used the L word, I am sure he feels the same. I don’t feel any guilt at all about having sex—it was hardly a jump in intimacy, after all. . . . may the next year pass quickly!
That sex “was hardly a jump in intimacy” was an indication of how blurred the teacher-student boundary had become. The arbitrary no-touch line had moved to kissing and then to sex in the space of two weeks. Now there were no physical boundaries between them—just a temporal one, in that they had to hide their relationship until he graduated.

Kim’s journal entries indicate that she set the stage for Damian to cross the line in a pattern similar to Ingram’s: permitting him to flirt, crossing “emotional and subject lines,” and spending time alone with him. In an interview Kim talked about the “internal switch” that she thought would help her maintain control: “I didn't ever think I would cross that line. I guess I thought there'd be some internal switch that would make me pull back or prevent me from crossing it, so I was quite daring.” However, in reflecting on the relationship’s onset, she felt that her faulty internal switch had very little to do with its escalation. She suspected Damian had been in control of more than setting the pace for their physical intimacy:

He kinda pushed things. Looking back now, and based on his own reports, emails to other people that I unfortunately had to read, he never really looked at me as anything but a free ride... I just think he engineered things.

According to Kim, Damian’s flirtation with her and subsequent seduction had all been calculated, the flattery and intimacy a ploy to make her fall in love with him so he could use her. And, because her life had been so devoid of the attention he provided (“I am SO happy—it’s as if the previous unhappiness and loneliness was never there at all. I feel understood, cherished, respected, and desired—something I’ve never had before”), she fell for it. She was fooled by the “poison disguised on a pointed stick, believing it to be the thing for which her soul hunger[ed]” (Estés, 1992, p. 215).
Part of the reason Kim fell so completely in love with Damian was that she wrote herself into it:

I think also to a certain extent, my poetry—I vented and did a lot of processing through poetry, and to a certain extent I think that is a healthy tendency, but in my case it allowed me to create a projection of him that wasn't really there. In a sense I kinda wrote myself in love.

In addition to the three shared characteristics discussed in Chapter 3 that may have predisposed the four women to be more likely to have a relationship with a student, Hannah and Kim each had a unique quality that contributed to their vulnerability to this disposition. For Hannah, it was her sexual self-awareness—her “desensitization of the teacher-student sexuality concept”; for Kim, it was her ability to word her way into an emotional state. Kim has written several poems about this phenomenon, not necessarily about Damian. The following excerpts from three different poems illustrate how Kim used words to “write [her]self happy,” to “twist reality,” and to “freeze the impossible”:

1. for as long as I can remember
   words have been my oasis
   sheltering me with walls of metaphors
   and well-turned phrases
   during times of sadness I could always
   write myself happy

2. my words tumble over each other
   in an attempt to contain
   the chaos of my experience
they cross themselves,
a genuflecting rhythm over which
I have no control
    they take new directions
    I would not have chosen,
chisel away at impossible
until it is maybe-shaped,
twist reality until I do not recognize it

3. loneliness leaks from line to line,
stanzas link in anguish, form chains of weighted words
to write a poem is my only escape
I cannot swallow pills
as it is, this forbidden desire sticks in my throat,
protests as I divide it into clumps of words
in a feeble attempt at diffusion . . .
    to write a poem is dangerous
    for actions follow words
    they lurk in the shadows
    and the thoughts find their shape
    and the words whisper of you . . .
to write a poem is my only hope for sleep tonight
it will not come until I have
fought to fit these words together
it will not come until I have
wrestled a few more rounds with the forbidden
and if I do not manage to freeze the impossible
here on this page, there will be no way to numb the heat of my longing
I will scorch in this solitary inferno
my words will spontaneously combust
into action if I do not take the time
to write a poem
to end the pain . . .
the closest I can get
to the real thing

Initially unable to act on her attraction to Damian, Kim wrote about it. Writing was a way for her to “freeze the impossible” so her words wouldn’t “spontaneously combust into action.” However, her poems had a tendency to take on a life of their own, “chiseling away at impossible until it [became] maybe-shaped.” She grew to resent that poems were “the closest [she could] get to the real thing.” At first a cathartic release of her feelings, the poems became a concrete and painful reminder of “the forbidden” that she could not have. Poetry (or any writing, for that matter) is not just a reflection and release of one’s feelings; it is a construction. Through her poetry, Kim was able “to create a projection of him that wasn’t really there.” The poems became “dangerous,” because “actions follow words.” And so they did with Kim.

The Line Between Eroticism and Abuse

Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim without a doubt all crossed a line somewhere between what McWilliam (1996) calls pedagogical eroticism and pedagogical abuse. I’m not so
sure I would characterize what happened as “abuse” in these cases, particularly for Hannah and Kim because they didn’t commit a crime according to their states’ statutes, but Shakeshaft’s (2004) term educator sexual misconduct certainly applies in an ethical if not legal sense. Teachers should not have sex with students. Period.

But when did they cross the line? For all four women, making the turn from an emotional connection to a physical one was a continuum, not a single moment. Like these female teachers’ backgrounds, the process had notable similarities: the boys flirted, the teachers performed pushmipullyu in response, the teachers set the stage for the boys to make the first sexual move, and the boys did so. Perhaps not coincidentally, a movie served as the backdrop for a significant step in the process: Letourneau and Ingram had sex after watching movies; Hannah and Kim had their first kiss. So where did they go wrong? What was the point of no return?

Some might say they went wrong in allowing the flirtation to occur. Had Letourneau said an unequivocal no to Fualaau’s question, “Would you ever have an affair?”, had Ingram and Kim squelched Dickeson’s and Damian’s invitations to date and marry them, and had Hannah snuffed the “little spark of something sexual” during her phone conversation with Eric, an appropriate teacher-student relationship in all four cases might have remained intact. But given that secondary classrooms are rife with sexual dynamics, crushes on teachers are bound to occur, and squashing them may not always be the optimal response for a couple of reasons. First of all, feelings could get hurt if a student’s hopeful overtures are met with ego-crushing disgust. Secondly, if a student is flirting as a means to push a teacher’s boundaries, perhaps to assert her or his power in an otherwise inequitable teacher-student playing field, then a negative reaction (or any kind of reaction) would only encourage the student to continue to engage the teacher in a power play.
I think the problem with crushes occurs when they’re perceived as more than a crush—by either the student or teacher. The following exchange between Letourneau and Walters during her 20/20 (2004) interview indicates that Letourneau thought Fualaa’u’s feelings ran deeper than puppy love:

L: I started to realize that he’s very serious about his feelings and this is not a crush that he's dealing with.

W: Why not? Kids get crushes on their teachers.

L: Well, and I had—I had seen that before and this was different. (p. 6)

It is debatable whether Fualaa’u indeed felt more than a crush or “this was different” because Letourneau returned the sentiment in a way she hadn’t before. Surely both were factors in the relationship’s physical fruition, and neither can be discounted. As Sandra, one of my pilot study participants, said, “We’re fooling ourselves to pretend that it only happens on the student end of things” (Johnson, 2004a, p. 89). The reverse—experiencing an occasional attraction to a student—is also likely to happen in a secondary classroom. It’s a feeling that can be pleasurable and enjoyable—what McWilliam (1996) would call pedagogical eroticism—if it’s taken for what it is: fun, fleeting, futureless. I think where these women went wrong is in mistaking their crushes for something more.

At a conference where I presented my pilot study research, a lively discussion ensued in which one woman said she fell in love with at least one student every semester (she taught college freshmen). Happy in her marriage and her work, she wasn’t interested in pursuing these crushes—she just felt them, took a secret pleasure in them, and then they went away. Sandra’s understanding of her attraction to Dave, a student in her senior English class, was similar. I constructed the following poem excerpt from a journal entry in which she analyzed her crush:
I would never act on any of these feelings
I am nine and a half years older than Dave
(I know because I looked up his birthday! Aggh!)
I have no fantasies about the future
It simply adds a bit of fun to my day
The positive feelings I have
Help me to develop a better relationship with him
I think of it as harmless (Johnson, 2004a, p. 88)

Sandra never did “act on any of these feelings”; she realized the “positive feelings” she had for Dave were simply a futureless “bit of fun.” But neither did the four women discussed in this chapter intend to act on their feelings—both Ingram and Kim called their attractions “harmless” too—so what was different?

Like the woman at the conference, Sandra was in a stable relationship; presumably these two didn’t have a relationship void that vacuumed student attention as the four women did. But I don’t think it’s that simple. If Dave had been aware of Sandra’s interest and had actively pursued her, she might have had more difficulty in keeping her “internal switch” off, to use Kim’s term. I think the Sandra-Dave connection is more equivalent to Hannah’s attraction to the pre-Eric boy who “would have been the one” had he taken the initiative. Both were relationships in the making, truncated because the conditions weren’t exactly right. Imagine a relationship-producing recipe: Take one teacher, unhappy in love and tired of the “good girl” routine; add one sexually assertive student, preferably a “bad boy” who triggers the teacher’s savior instinct; mix in mutual attraction; and there you have it, a dangerous brew.
How, then, does a teacher keep her internal switch off when such a brew is in the making? To acknowledge that there is an erotic element to teaching, that there is a sexual dynamic in the classroom that must be reckoned with, is an important step. I agree with O’Brien (2000) that

What is needed is a way in which to better understand the myriad sexual and nonsexual desires which are an integral aspect of the pedagogical exchange. Such desires should not be cataloged and clearly defined, but should instead be accepted as shifting and uncertain, productive and repressive, pleasurable and oppressive. At the very least, the sexualized body in pedagogy must no longer be simply dismissed as deviant. (p. 51)

However, merely acknowledging that desires are not deviant is not enough; Hannah was fully aware of the “sexualized body in pedagogy,” and yet she crossed the line. Recognizing the sexual dynamic did not prevent Hannah from indulging in it. What I find problematic in O’Brien’s argument is that desires should “be accepted as shifting and uncertain.” For a teacher to possess an attitude of uncertainty when confronted with a compelling physical and emotional connection to a student makes it too easy to blur boundaries that need to stay firmly in place. In the next chapter I explore how Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim justified blurring this teacher-student boundary.
CHAPTER 5
JUSTIFICATIONS AND ROLE TENSIONS

The justifications Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim used for engaging in their respective affairs have already been discussed to some degree in the previous chapters. As the reader can see in Table 3 on the next page, I used several of the justification categories I attached to Hannah’s and Kim’s data during the coding phase of data analysis to illustrate how they crossed the line as well as how they came to be emotionally attached to their students in the first place. Justification codes such as “crystallization/relief through writing,” “sexual being/sexual challenge,” and “teacher as savior” were more like explanations than rationalizations, however. Kim’s ability to write herself into an emotional space helps to explain how she fell in love with Damian, and Hannah’s relative inability to back down from a sexual challenge helps to explain why her relationship with Eric escalated so quickly. The frequency of savior coding for both women was an indication of how their “zeal . . . to HELP” (Kim’s words) was a factor in their relationships’ development. However, neither Hannah nor Kim articulated any of these explanations as excuses for their affairs per se. Rather, it was the collective accumulation of this array of justifications that served to explain and in part rationalize their choices.

This chapter is divided into two sections. First, I examine more closely justification codes not previously discussed, beginning with some of the less significant factors in Hannah’s and Kim’s decisions to enter into and maintain their relationships: “drama/excitement,” “keeping him in school,” “no longer her student,” and “confidante’s role.” I end the first section with the most significant (in terms of frequency of coding for both women) justification code not yet discussed: “relationship worth it/in love.” The second section of this chapter addresses
relationship issues that were closely tied to these justification codes. Chief among these was the teacher/lover role tension. As both of these sections are driven by data I collected, I attend to Letourneau and Ingram less than in the previous chapters, although I do refer to them when pertinent.

Table 3

*Incidence of Justification Codes for Hannah and Kim*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justification Code</th>
<th>Incidence for Hannah</th>
<th>Incidence for Kim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as savior</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonely/unhappy/filling void</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual being/sexual challenge</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Relationship worth it/in love</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>Flouting authority/conventions</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>Drama/excitement</td>
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<td>Confidantes’ role</td>
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<td>Crystallization/relief through writing</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keeping him in school</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>No longer her student</td>
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<td>Reliving youth</td>
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Justifications

Drama/Excitement

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, part of the reason Hannah was so drawn to Eric was that he wasn’t “normal,” and as such a relationship with him was completely oppositional to her parents’ hope that she find a nice, stable, white-picket-fence-owning man to support her and her daughter. But Hannah was much more interested in defying “normalcy” than she was interested in nice men. I asked her about her preference for “bad boy” Eric types in an interview:

T: I wonder if you would even be the kind of person to want a good relationship. I mean in the generally accepted sense of what defines "good." I don't think you'd be attracted to that.

H: No.

T: It'd bore you—

H: Boring. I have to have drama! No challenge, no drama. I'm a theatre kid from way back—it just fits with my lifestyle, I'm a very expressive person. Boring, usual—I had a fiancé who was like that. . . . I'd rather be with a guy who we have to scrape change off the floor to go to Taco Bell. You know? It makes life more exciting. The less I have, the more I enjoy LIVING.

An illicit relationship with a student certainly provided Hannah with plenty of norm-defying drama and excitement. In fact, it was enough for a lifetime; she is currently engaged to Eric’s polar opposite: A nice, stable, white-picket-fence-owning man of whom her parents heartily approve.

14 The number of quotations assigned to any particular code cannot be directly compared between Hannah and Kim because I have more data on Kim: ten documents compared to Hannah’s four.
Kim, too, felt more *alive* with the Damian drama in her life than she’d felt in years. Particularly during the onset of the relationship, her journal radiated with excitement. The following excerpts are dated before their first kiss:

- I have two completely opposite wishes. Part of me wants this torment to be over and I just want to relate to him like I used to. The other part of me likes the chaos he brings to my life—it feels good to feel again—even if there is a good chance it is all in my head.
- What is wrong w/me anyway—I know how pointless this infatuation is, but I welcome it, even with all the misery and chaos it brings, there is joy as well. In a weird way, it has given me a purpose.
- I don’t know how to stop these feelings. I do know I don’t want to stop them—even the bad ones—I like the intensity.
- My senses are so enhanced lately.
- Alive—Dr. Pierce [her therapist] said I seemed so alive—lately, that’s exactly how I feel—alive.

Feeling so intensely alive was intoxicating for Kim, and she didn’t “want to stop . . . even the bad” feelings. The intensity didn’t stop once the relationship began, but the quality of it did; once she and Damian started having sex, her joy turned to fear—of losing him. Excitement turned to obsession, as the language of addiction in the following journal excerpts from the end of summer indicate. The plan was to stop the relationship once the new school year started:

As our summer draws to a close, I find myself more and more obsessed w/how to push pause. I am buried underneath questions that simply won’t quit: Is this transitional? For
him? For me? How will I ever be able to quit him cold turkey? Is there a way to still see him occasionally? w/ sex? w/o sex? Am I strong enough to follow this through? . . .

He’s like a drug—I feel good while he’s around, but the lows are getting worse and worse. (emphasis added)

Kim was afraid that pushing pause would mean the end of their relationship, as the following poem, also dated the end of summer, illustrates:

Postseason Ratings
you are so sure
that we will restart
in full stride
but we have had
our season finale
in 10 months,
will anyone really
care who shot JR?
perhaps we will have
lost our luster,
listless reruns
on a Monday night
maybe we won’t
be able to live up
to the hype
of this summer’s preview
maybe the commercials
will be too much
interruption to our flow
perhaps we just
need to pull the plug

Similar to the relationship’s onset in the summer, a pushmipullyu battle ensued at the start of the new school year. On the one hand (head), Kim knew it would be best to “pull the plug” on the Damian drama after the summer’s season finale. On the other hand (head), she feared that putting the relationship on hold for 10 months would “be too much interruption”—there would be no second season.

After much back-and-forth debate—both internal within Kim and external between her and Damian—the pushmipullyu attempted a compromise, as the following journal entry from about six weeks into the school year attests:

So here’s the compromise: he will date, but continue our relationship at some level “more than friends.” So I will feel validated, and he will have the freedom he needs to be “normal.” It will still be hard for me, but . . . it is the healthy choice for both of us.

Damian wanted a “normal” senior year of dating and partying with his friends—something Kim knew was a “healthy choice” not only for Damian but for her. It was one thing to have a summer fling, but keeping their relationship a secret during the school year was proving to be difficult and stressful. Kim knew “normal” was the best option, and she tried to write her way into an acceptance of this “healthy choice” in the following poem:

I know this is no game

for you, fighting
for the first measure
of normalcy in your life
and I, who have awakened
so slowly to this truth,
will remain beside you
in whatever role you most
need me—teacher, lover, friend
together we will draw
the boundaries you need
to outline the normal life
you deserve
But what Kim knew in her head was at war with what she felt in her heart, a mind/body duality evident in the following journal excerpt from two days after “the compromise”:

Well, so much for compromise lasting! My life is in shambles. All I want is him, all he wants is “normal.” He wants to be “best friends.” . . . I feel like I’ve lost him.

Intellectually what he’s offering makes sense, but in my heart I feel like he’s offering me the consolation prize. . . . Damian has asked me to take another leap of faith. I am refusing, not because I don’t believe, but because my refusal keeps the drama alive, because it is a way to punish him.

Kim admitted that she wanted to keep “the drama alive.” One way to do so was to resist “the healthy choice” of continuing their friendship on a platonic level with the possibility—and Damian assured her it was more like a probability—of reconnecting as a couple once he graduated in the spring. Refusing “to take another leap of faith”—to trust that his feelings for
her would not abate during the school year—not only kept the drama alive; it also punished Damian for offering her “the consolation prize” of friendship.

After another two days rational Kim had returned:

Damian is NOT being selfish in changing the form of the relationship—he is taking responsibility for his own happiness. It is not about him ending the relationship—he loves me, I know that. It is about finding a form that will work in these rather odd circumstances. The thought of becoming platonic still causes me great sadness, but not the devastating paralysis it did last week. . . . My fear was making me rigidly cling to only one form of relationship. Now I see that . . . this relationship is fluid. By trying to force it to fit a form it isn’t ready for yet, I will ruin it.

Kim acknowledged her fear of losing Damian was behind her attempt to force the relationship “to fit a form it [wa]sn’t ready for yet.” Unfortunately, knowing this “intellectually” did not necessarily translate into acceptance. The pushmipullyu drama continued well into the school year.

An interesting parallel between Hannah’s and Kim’s “drama/excitement” codes is the intersection of drama with a notion of “normal.” Hannah’s relationship with Eric was an act of resistance against her parents’ (and society’s) conception of “normal,” one that provided her with the drama and excitement that made her feel alive. Kim’s resistance to Damian’s desire to be “normal” helped to keep “the drama alive” in their relationship. For both women, feeling alive was more important than being normal; “chaos” was preferable to “boring, usual.”

Keeping Him in School/No Longer Her Student

Although these two codes appear to be oppositional at first glance, they are two sides of the same issue: graduation. I am pairing them here because the former applies to Hannah and the
latter applies to Kim; Hannah was preoccupied with keeping Eric in school so that he would graduate, and Kim longed for the day that Damian did graduate. Although I attached three instances of “keeping him in school” codes to Kim’s data, only one was about Damian, and it was pre-relationship. After Kim and Damian’s affair began, she no longer justified their connection as a means to keeping him in school. Hannah, on the other hand, did. In an interview she speculated how she would have justified her relationship to a sympathetic colleague:

He might have asked, "How do you think this is going to affect—", you know, and my first inclination with that situation was, "I'm keeping him in school." You know, keeping him here was my justification. That's how I justified it to myself. "Well, he's still here."

Hannah believed that Eric would have dropped out of school if it weren’t for her; their relationship gave him a reason to come to school. She may have been right; Eric did in fact drop out the following year after Hannah’s teaching contract wasn’t renewed. But perhaps he would have anyway.

A key difference between the two situations was that Eric was still a student in Hannah’s class when their affair began whereas Damian was no longer Kim’s student. Kim used this fact as a justification: “The relationship started, and he was not a student in my class. And I knew he would never be again. So in my mind I rationalized that that was okay.” Although initially Damian’s presence in the school albeit not her classroom was awkward at times (a point I return to in the “tensions” section of this chapter), this tension was alleviated about mid-year when Damian transferred to adult education, a decision Kim supported, although she claimed it “had nothing to do with our relationship.” Because Damian had failed required classes, he would not...

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15 The other two were related to Goth Boy, who was in danger of not graduating. For example, Kim said, “the emotional involvement as I tried to keep him in school and keep him functioning was very close” (emphasis added).
have been able to graduate on time without the transfer; adult education’s requirements were less stringent.

Once Damian was in a different school setting, Kim was able to relax her guard over the relationship’s secrecy:

At that point, we were a little bit more relaxed. I actually told my principal that I would be dating a former student, and he said, "Be careful." No names were given or anything, but that was my way of, because of my loyalty to my principal, letting him know what was going on.

Even though Damian was no longer in her school, he was still a student in a program related to her school district. Therefore, it behooved them to continue to “be careful,” as Kim’s principal had recommended, for a few more months. Damian’s graduation was a happy and hopeful occasion for Kim:

after weeks of insecurity, I feel firmly in your corner

which role to choose seems insignificant tonight

I do not need to choose lover, friend, teacher, mentor

I can sit at a distance, admiring you, loving you

tonight I can be…

anything…

can happen from here on out

I feel my hope cascading down,

tickling like the tassel on your cheek

my pride overflows, I want to scream

that you are mine, but for once, it is enough
to smile at you, to feel our connection,
to quietly hope—it is enough just to be here…

Even though the “weeks of insecurity” leading up to his graduation suggests there was still pushmipullyu tension between Kim and Damian, the largest obstacle to the viability of their relationship had been removed. After Damian was officially no longer a student, Kim stopped hiding the relationship:

    When Damian graduated from adult ed, at that point I wasn't comfortable with the secrecy of everything. And I didn't flaunt it in a small town, but I also didn't—you know, we didn't have any reason to hide it either. . . . I did take some steps . . . because at that point I knew what I was doing was frowned upon, but I really didn't think there was anything wrong with it.

Although “it was a small town, and . . . there was some talk” about their unconventional relationship, there wasn’t “anything wrong with it.” Kim “might have been the first FEMALE teacher . . . to have crossed that line” in her district, but her behavior wasn’t unprecedented; male colleagues were rumored to have dated and, in at least one case that she knew of, married former students without reprisal. The conservative community and the sexist “good ol’ boys” with whom Kim worked may have “frowned upon” a May-December relationship with a woman in the elder position. However, there was nothing they could do about it other than ostracize her—which many of her colleagues already had done prior to her affair because they disapproved of her holistic teaching and flagrant feminazi-hood. From Kim’s perspective, she had nothing to lose by proclaiming the relationship.
Confidante’s Role

Both Hannah and Kim had adult confidantes who were privy to their relationships, unlike Letourneau and Ingram, who had no safe adult repository for their secrets. Having a sympathetic confessor helped Hannah and Kim to justify and maintain their relationships. Hannah’s and Kim’s confidantes normalized and affirmed their behavior through their acceptance of their relationships as legitimate. Had Ingram had a similar nonjudgmental outlet for her guilty conscience, she may not have been compelled to confess to her principal. Kim, too, had confessed to her principal—but not until the relationship was technically legitimate because Damian was no longer in the same school where Kim taught. Foucault’s (1976/1990) discussion of the role of confession in creating categories for sexual deviance is useful here. He claims the compulsion to confess one’s sexual sins is a Western phenomenon rooted in a Christian renunciation of the body. The confession functions to normalize “the legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality” (p. 38): "When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat . . . Western man [sic] has become a confessing animal" (p. 59). All four women were “confessing animals,” but Ingram and Letourneau, who had “confessed” she was in love to a friend but did not reveal Fualaau’s age (Olsen, 1999), did not have sympathetic confessors. Kim’s and Hannah’s confidantes, on the other hand, supported them as “legitimate couple[s].”

Kim had several colleagues who were supportive of her relationship with Damian, although one of them, Samantha, proved to be more influential than the others. Samantha, who was Kim’s age and also recently divorced, was in a relationship with a college student. Kim explained how her friendship with Samantha affected her post-divorce lifestyle:
The loneliness was kicking in, and Samantha was there to help me through it. She and I were pretty crazy in those days, but I was living according to her values, not mine, and so I felt even worse about myself. . . . Samantha of course, was promoting it [the relationship with Damian] like crazy, because she was having a relationship with a 19-year-old—they saw each other for like a year or so—and so she wanted company I think. It was one thing to have confidantes who didn’t denounce her choices, although Dr. Pierce, her therapist, did counsel her to “put the brakes on” the relationship—but another thing to have someone encourage them as Samantha did for Kim. I wonder whether Kim would have pursued a relationship with Damian without Samantha’s encouragement. In a journal entry dated just prior to their first kiss, Kim wrote, “I’m mostly confiding in Samantha—she understands probably because she’s been there. I don’t know how I’d get through this w/o her.”

Unlike Kim, Hannah didn’t have any colleagues in her school who were aware of her relationship with Eric, although she had confessed to a fellow teacher and friend from her certification program. She claimed talking to him had a desensitizing effect:

Finding people that I can talk to about it, . . . knowing that even one of my classmates from the program knows about a lot of this stuff and I’ve discussed it with him. Being able to let that out, no matter what the risk, is a desensitization in itself. I’ve put myself in a compromising situation every once in a while discussing things, but then again, maybe five people seriously know about it from my end.

Although Hannah knew it was a risk to tell people about her relationship, “being able to let that out” to nonjudgmental listeners was an important component of Hannah’s justification process. For adults to know and not criticize dulled the wrongness of it. In addition to legitimizing their relationships, having sympathetic confidantes helped Kim and Hannah stay sane during the
turmoil of their illicit affairs. Confessing their secret to another adult diffused the burden of maintaining secrecy and palliated their guilt.

**Relationship Worth It/in Love**

The focus of this segment of the justifications section is the circular thinking implied or directly stated in data coded as “relationship worth it/in love.” The circular thinking went something like this: The teacher used love as a justification for the relationship; she reasoned she *must* be in love because she wouldn’t have taken such risks otherwise; and true love was worth the possible repercussions, so she persisted in taking risks. Said syllogistically, *true love is worth taking risks; I am taking risks; therefore, I must be in love.* I return to Letourneau and Ingram in this segment because this circular thinking is evident in their justification processes as well.

Letourneau. It is evident from Olsen’s (1999) biography and her *20/20* (2004) interview that Letourneau believed she was (and still is) in love with Fualaaau, and she used that love to rationalize her choices. Early in the relationship, Letourneau had called her friend-confessor "to tell her that she had fallen in love. . . . He was the person that she had been searching for her entire life. She was not going to settle for a life without love anymore" (Olsen, 1999, p. 126).

Letourneau did not elaborate on who this love of her life was, no doubt anticipating her friend’s disapproval. After her arrest, Letourneau used love to justify her crime: She “told the detective that she . . . knew the relationship was wrong, but there was a reason for it. They were in love" (p. 159). Her lawyer was "alarmed by Mary Kay's insistence that she was still in love with Fualaaau. She appeared to be using love as a defense" (p. 220). Letourneau continued to use love as a defense in her interview with Barbara Walters (*20/20*, 2004) after she was released from prison: “I didn't know that getting into a relationship—a sexually intimate relationship, I didn't
know that was a felony or a crime. I knew it wasn't right. But Vili and I loved each other and still do” (p. 8). All of these comments share an “it was wrong, but” quality of justification—as if love made a sexual relationship with a 13-year-old all right.

Letourneau reasoned that the intense physicality of her feelings had to be love, as the following exchange with Walters indicates:

W: I don't want to put you through this but Vili has said that you made love in every room in your house, that you made love in the school. It sounds like the most intense physical passion.

L: I can't see how it wouldn't be that type of intensity with anyone that is truly in love. (20/20, p. 9)

Another indicator of true love for Letourneau was that she had sacrificed so much—her job and her children’s wellbeing as well as her own—to be with Fualaau. A phone interview with Oprah while Letourneau was in prison revealed this circular thinking: "I can say with all certainty that this young man is the love of my life. Otherwise I would not have put my children through this" (qtd. in Olsen, 1999, p. 315). Letourneau was not the only person to arrive at such an assumption through circular thinking. A friend of the Fualaau family said, "She truly loved him for her to risk a whole lot of her heart, her life. She lost a lot more than he did. It is a sad price to pay if there was true love" (p. 320).

Ingram. Like Letourneau, Ingram knew having an affair with a student was wrong but claimed not to be aware it was illegal (Ingram, 2003). She felt the wrongness of it after their first kiss: “It is so wrong; it goes against everything I have been taught. . . . I do not understand why I am risking so much for so little. Maybe I think I can find love. But I know this is crazy” (p. 66).
As she elucidated to Cynthia McFadden in her *Primetime Live* (2004) interview, she tried to stop after the first night they had sex:

M: Are you swearing off at this point? Are you saying, okay, once, it wasn't right, it wasn't good, but we're not going to do it again?

I: Yes. Yes, yes, yes. Get right back on track, as fast as you can. That's what I thought. I thought that was actually possible.

M: (Voiceover) But when Dusty called her the next day, she agreed to see him. And thus began a clandestine ten-month affair. (p. 16)

Ingram (2003) detailed in her book how this phone call went; when Dickeson asked if he could come over, she responded à la pushmipullyu:

“It’s not a good idea.” There is a small window in my voice, an opening, which as an alternate student he is expert at pushing wider.

“Just for an hour,” he says.

I feel the bottom drop out of my resolve. “OK,” I say. I tell myself, I will just get one final dose of this feeling, enough to sustain me through the rest of my life with Mark, before I send him away for good. (p. 70)

“One final dose” was not enough, however. Ingram continued to struggle with the tension between succumbing to and resisting temptation while she was still teaching:

My day book at school, the planner that I used, I used to have an "X" for every day that I didn't see him. Because I felt virtuous, like I was dieting. Like, every day that I don't have a piece of chocolate cake, and I give myself a little "X.” It got to the point where I was no longer really functioning as a sane person. (*Primetime Live*, 2004, p. 16)
Like Kim, Ingram tried (and failed) to make “the healthy choice” by dieting—by resisting the “piece of chocolate cake” that was Dickeson. I find it noteworthy, too, that Dickeson was the pursuer, which Ingram attributed to his boundary-pushing skills as an “alternate\(^\text{16}\) student.” This dynamic belies Shakeshaft’s (2004) claim that “often teachers target vulnerable or marginal students who are grateful for the attention . . . [and whom] they can control” (pp. 31-32). Dickeson himself admitted he was the instigator (\textit{Oprah}, 2004); he was the one in control of the relationship, and Ingram was the one grateful for the attention (Ingram, 2003).

That Ingram said she “was no longer really functioning as a sane person” and admitted “this is crazy” is indicative of the medicalization of educator sexual misconduct I discussed in the first chapter. The recent case of Debra Lafave, the 23-year-old Florida teacher who is pleading insanity for having sex with her 14-year-old student, comes to mind. Lafave’s lawyer plans to use her depression caused by a family tragedy—her pregnant sister was killed in a drunk driving accident—as the cornerstone of her defense. When an act is culturally incomprehensible, society tends to pathologize it (Glavin, 1997). Having an affair with a student in a culture where such a relationship is considered unethical if not unlawful is irrational, to be sure. But where is the line of insanity to be drawn in cases like these? Were Lafave, Ingram, and Letourneau “more” insane than Hannah and Kim because their affairs with legal minors resulted in criminal prosecution? Or is insanity a cogent excuse only for Letourneau, Lafave, and Kim because they had been diagnosed with mental illnesses? Although the insanity line may be blurred, it is evident from the way Lafave’s and Letourneau’s cases have been portrayed in the media that “Mental illness is . . . available as an explanation, and may seem compelling in the context of ‘novelty’ sex crimes involving women and boys” (McWilliam, 1999, p. 33).

\(^{16}\) The way Ingram uses this descriptor suggests it is the Canadian term for at-risk or marginalized students.
About six weeks into Ingram and Dickeson’s affair, he proclaimed his love for her. It was what she wanted to hear; she understood Dickeson to mean, “I want you, I want us to be together, I want a future with you” (Ingram, 2003, p. 88). Her earlier question—why she “was risking so much for so little” (p. 66)—was answered: She was taking risks for love. However, stories were already circulating; a colleague had confronted her with the rumor of their relationship, which she denied. Ingram’s response to Dickeson’s declaration was, “I love you. But for now at least, we have to stop” (p. 88).

Ingram and Dickeson did stop their sexual relationship, much like Kim and Damian stopped when the new school year began: unsuccessfully. For both Ingram and Kim, the relationship was too powerful, too significant for them to give it up. Love superseded risk, as Ingram’s (2003) book title suggests: “Risking It All: My Student, My Lover, My Story.” Ingram summed up her affair in a phrase: “What I feel like I did was make a huge mistake for love” (Primetime Live, 2004, p. 16).

Hannah. Hannah’s circular thinking is more implied than directly stated. In my early interviews with her while she was still seeing Eric but was no longer teaching, Hannah talked as if the relationship was worth losing her job:

I totally overlooked the part that he ruined my career. Or that I, in conjunction with him, could possibly have ruined my career. But hindsight's 20/20, and fourteen months later we're still together. . . . I'm very careful, I mean, we've made it fourteen months. That they “made it fourteen months” suggests two points. First of all, “I’m very careful” alluded to the fact that an in-school investigation hadn’t proven their relationship—they “made it” without official discovery. However, that was a moot point considering the school didn’t need proof in order not to renew Hannah’s teaching contract; without tenure or union support, Hannah
could be dismissed without justification. Secondly, fourteen months was a record for Hannah; her love relationships were typically more short-lived. For this one to have lasted so long indicated it was more than a passing fling.

Given that “hindsight’s 20/20,” I asked Hannah if she would have started the relationship if she had known what the consequences would be. She replied in the affirmative, elaborating that

I think it's because I've enjoyed being around him so much. I think I even enjoy the struggles he goes through. I enjoy watching him grow, physically [laughs], mentally, psychologically, spiritually. We've been through so much, I just couldn't imagine not going there. I can't remember anything from before him.

Hannah talked about a future with Eric, again referring to the longevity of their relationship:

T:   Do you want to do anything crazy like have babies with him or anything like that?
H:  Hm. Yeah. Down the line. . . . I definitely would want to give him that. I think that's a validation of our relationship, but at the same time it's a validation of his manhood. As far as I'm concerned, if this works out—considering I've never stayed with anybody for even a year before, if we become the family that I want us to be, then oh yeah. As soon as possible.

Hannah’s validation language is interesting here. She believed having a child would validate not only the relationship but Eric’s manhood—a two-tiered justification similar to the effect of the role reversal discussed in the previous chapter. When the boys assumed a role of dominance over their passive teachers, the relationship dynamic became more traditional—“from another era” (Olsen, 1999, p. 369)—which functioned to increase the boys’ power (“manhood”) and thus legitimize the relationship. A child would also cement Hannah and Eric’s relationship similar to
how the children from Letourneau’s and Ingram’s affairs bonded them to their boys: A child would be a permanent and undeniable connection to make Hannah and Eric “the family that I want us to be.”

But Hannah didn’t really have 20/20 hindsight vision at the time of the early interviews; she was still in her relationship. At that time she described Eric quite glowingly: “There’s not a thing about him I don’t like. . . . The sex is wonderful.” It wasn’t until after the relationship was over several months later that she saw more clearly:

T: I mean, the way you used to talk about him, you were in love.

H: Yeah, I thought I was. . . . for a while, I was SO clouded.

The four women’s relationships were like any relationship in that their vision was “clouded” while they were in it; the expression “love is blind” comes to mind. Love apparently affected Hannah’s memory, too, as she couldn’t “remember anything from before” Eric. That Letourneau is the only woman of the four who still claims to be in love is logical, considering her relationship is the only one that is still viable. For the other three teachers, the end of their love corresponded with the return to their senses, which makes me wonder whether the women were crazy or if love is. I’m being facetious here—my cynical subjectivity toward “true love” is coming out—but I do find it interesting how love and clouded judgment are intertwined in these cases.

Kim. Much like Letourneau, who already “felt a very deep love” (20/20, 2004, p. 5) for Fualaaau before their sexual relationship commenced, Kim had strong feelings for Damian. A day prior to their first kiss, Kim wrote, “He keeps talking as if things will be rather long-term with us—I want that SO much—in spite of all the consequences.” The following post-first-kiss,
pre-sex journal entry elaborated upon both the intensity and the future orientation of Kim’s feelings; she wanted this love to last:

He reassures me constantly that he’s not going anywhere—that there is nowhere he’d rather be—that he can hardly wait for graduation. I want to believe him—I really do—that this could last. The part that scares me is that more and more, I DO believe him—my words of caution are remote and habitual—just like the fear for my job that should be there—so distant. This is not about the risk or rebellion—it is about the way I feel in his arms: safe, sexy, beautiful, perfect—loved.

Before their sexual relationship even began, Kim’s “words of caution” and “fear for [her] job” were remote and distant, superseded by the way she felt in Damian’s arms: loved. Shades of circular thinking were apparent here: The risks Kim was taking by entertaining this feeling were pushed into the background; love was worth “all the consequences.”

Sex intensified Kim’s feelings, and her journal showed an increasing preoccupation with whether the relationship would be long-term: “I’m reading [a book Dr. Pierce recommended], and it gives me hope that Damian and I COULD last—I want that so much! . . . NEVER have I been so completely loved.” Damian’s actual declaration of love happened about mid-summer. Kim reflected that “in 10 months I’ll be truly free to receive it—if it’s meant to happen. And if [not]—well, it has been a healing, love-filled summer.” Kim was already preparing herself for the cessation of their physical relationship during the school year and the possibility that they wouldn’t last.

Kim’s “remote and habitual” fear for her job was supplanted by her concern over whether the relationship would survive. She was certain she had found true love: “I want Damian in my life, totally and permanently. I do believe that he and I are meant to be together. I believe the
universe sent him to me because he is my soulmate.” Kim’s circular thinking wasn’t evident again until the summer after Damian graduated, when she wrote, “He must be my soulmate if I was risking so much, right?”

After Kim was able to look retrospectively at the relationship, she could recognize that her circular thinking had been flawed:

He said all the right things, acted incredibly mature, and told me he loved me. . . . And, fool that I was, I believed him. . . . I had myself convinced I had found my soulmate—God I hate myself for my stupidity—and that we were destined to beat the odds and show the idiots in [our town] what true love was all about.

Like Hannah’s “hindsight’s 20/20,” Kim couldn’t see clearly until the relationship was over. But the error in Kim’s as well as the other three women’s reasoning wasn’t so much whether or not they were experiencing “true love,” or whether their risk-taking was an indication that it was. The problem was in the first premise of the syllogism that reflects their circular thinking:

*True love is worth taking risks;*

*I am taking risks;*

*Therefore, I must be in love.*

True love was in fact *not* worth taking risks, as Ingram, Hannah, and Kim all came to believe. I find it ironic that Letourneau, the woman who risked the most—she lost not only her job and her family but 7 ½ years of freedom—is the only one of the four who still feels her relationship with Fualaau was worth the price. Perhaps she has to cling to the notion of true love in order to stay sane, or blithely *insane*, as the case may be. Imagine how debilitating it would be to come to the realization you’ve risked so much for a love that wasn’t real.
Role Tensions

The women didn’t necessarily have an easy time justifying their relationships. Kim’s journals in particular are fraught with “role tension,” “feeling foolish/like a whore,” and concerns with the “maturity/experience differential,” three of the four most frequently-appearing relationship codes in Hannah and Kim’s data set. The latter two characteristics are not unique to Hannah’s and Kim’s relationships; they have more to do with their age difference and the vagaries of love in general than the teacher-student dimension of their relationships in particular. Although age issues and feeling like a fool were often juxtaposed with role tensions in the data, my focus in this section is on the struggles inherent in a teacher-student relationship.

Of the four women, an ethical struggle between performing “teacher” and performing “lover” is most evident in Kim’s and Ingram’s writings. Hannah alluded to this tension when talking about the difficulty of maintaining control of her classroom when Eric was in it. She also mentioned it in retrospect when talking about her desire “to be a real teacher [who] makes stupid teacher mistakes, like calling a kid the wrong name,” as opposed to a pseudo teacher who has sex with her students. Letourneau didn’t mention any tension between her teacher and lover roles, much less her lover and mother roles, which I would think would be an issue given that Fualaau was so close in age to her eldest son. However, just because Letourneau didn’t voice any concerns about these conflicting roles doesn’t mean she didn’t experience them. She may have her reasons for downplaying problems that would detract from her ability to justify her ongoing relationship with Fualaau. It might be tempting for the reader to argue that Hannah and Letourneau were less ethical than the other women because they appeared to struggle less with ethical dilemmas, but that would be an unfair assessment. Their reticence might mean something else—resistance, for example (Gallas, 1998). Their relative silence surrounding what most
might assume to be a conflict of interest in their teacher/lover roles could be interpreted as opposition to their social construction as teacher predators or rejection of the cultural assumption that teachers cannot engage in consensual sex with students.

Ingram

At the flirtation stage of the relationship, Ingram was able to maintain her teacher role in the classroom: “In class, we were pretty much teacher/student. It was more in the hallways and then gradually the relationship developed outside of class time” (Oprah, 2004, p. 3). The guilt didn’t set in for her until the affair began. Then Ingram had to suppress her ethics on two levels—as a teacher and as a partner:

I feel excited and happy . . . yet guilty for my deception (I am bad to feel this way, think of what I am doing to my partner, my career). I think of Mark out in the garage and then shove the thought from my mind. I hate myself for feeling good, but I hate the possibility of not feeling anything even more. (Ingram, 2003, p. 74)

Two months into the relationship, Ingram’s guilty conscience prevailed and she admitted her affair to Mark. However, the timing of this confession coincided with Ingram and Dickeson’s first breakup (necessitated by the growing rumors at school), and so Mark forgave her, believing, as Ingram did, that it was really over.

Ingram’s resolve to end the relationship did last for a while:

Days go by when I do not see Troy [her pseudonym for Dusty] at all, except in class, where we behave formally to each other. A wall forms between us, as I fall comfortably back into being a teacher and he continues to be simply Troy. (Ingram, 2003, p. 103)
These were the days that Ingram took to marking an “x” in her planner for each sex-free day, which, akin to Kim’s language of addiction surrounding her attempt to break up with Damian, she described as “The path to recovery—I am on the program” (p. 103).

But of course, the relationship wasn’t really over. Ingram and Dickeson left school during her conference period one day:

We kiss, and I think my heart will break with longing. I want this boy so badly. . . . My teacher-self dissolves and I am just Heather again. . . . We sit like this for a long time, until the clock on the truck stereo reads two o’clock, and it’s time to go back and teach my last class. (p. 105)

When Ingram was with Dickeson, her “teacher-self dissolve[d]”; she could forget her professional identity and become “just Heather again.” But performing two such conflicting identities is problematic, just as it is difficult for women to juggle a career and motherhood simultaneously. The categories get blurred as they bump up against each other, such as when her child’s illness prevents a mother from attending an important business function. I could provide myriad examples of the uneasiness and inner turmoil people experience when their multiple identities are not in sync—when there is polarity between their public and private personas. It was like that for Ingram; to be “teacher,” “lover,” and then back to “teacher” again in the space of 90 minutes was stressful. Ingram didn’t fully recognize the repercussions of this role tension until much later, a point I develop in the denouement chapter.

Kim

Kim’s journals and poetry were rife with role tensions. I organize them here as they developed chronologically: pre-sex, summertime, and the start of the new school year.
Pre-sex. Initially, the role tension Kim experienced with Damian was just a heightened example of the tension she felt with all her students. She resented the limitations and boundaries of her teacher role, which prevented her from wholly knowing her students and vice versa:

I am still just teacher to these kids—even though they like me, I am only teacher—and I want more, especially from him [Damian]. I don’t like the power imbalance…for it is like a divide separating me from them. It is a barrier that prevents me from knowing how they really feel. It is a glass wall that puts me on a pedestal so they can never know me as a person.

But, as the attraction between Kim and Damian escalated, her role tension focused on him. She reflected in a pre-kiss journal,

He has this interesting way of calling “me” a teacher—as if he’s reminding himself that I am teacher, and thus off-limits. At one point, I told him I wasn’t his teacher anymore—I wouldn’t have him in class next year, and he told me I was his “life-teacher.” If he only knew what I wanted to “teach” him!

Expanding the notion of “teacher” to include extramural learning was an enticing prospect for Kim, one that proved to strip away the barriers and blur the dividing lines between teacher and student.

Right around the time of their first kiss, Kim shared her feelings with her mother (there’s that compulsion to confess again). Her mother did not react positively:

Needless to say she lost it, and started screaming that I was going to lose control & the whole town would find out and I would be fired and people would talk about me and my daughter would be traumatized. It was horrible, hearing my worst fears screamed at me by someone who was supposed to support me. . . . I had been pretty good at staying in
Oz, but Mom brought Kansas rushing in. Suddenly I felt how the world would react—
label me whore, bad mother, call me pathetic, question my teaching ability. I hope I’m
strong enough to handle all that!

Kim’s concern at this point did not seem to be whether her mother’s predictions would come true
but whether she would be “strong enough to handle all that” if they did. Combining the
conflicting “teacher” and “lover” roles would also affect her “mother” role—she would be
labeled “bad mother” and, according to her own mother, traumatize her daughter. Hearing her
“worst fears” screamed at her served as a reality check for Kim but not a deterrent. The
relationship moved forward.

Summertime. As the summer progressed, Kim’s role tensions increased. The following
journal entries attest to not only the teacher/lover tension but a strength/neediness struggle:

Which me is the real one—the strong teacher woman who has it together or the needy
neurotic nighttime chick? I can’t answer that anymore. I want to be strong, together—so
why can’t I be?

What if I’m not strong enough this time? My fear over the job situation was masking this
one, I think. I don’t want to cool things down because I am a pathetic, needy person right
now. . . . I thought I would be stronger this time. This whole situation is fucked up,
crazy. I am acting like a stupid neurotic teenager—even now, I thought I heard him and
my heart stopped.

I feel like a mistress—I get “scraps” of his time—he says I’m his first choice, but I don’t
feel that way. I get him late at night, a few minutes here or there—like I’m the
commercial breaks in his life. I can’t call his house—so I’m at his mercy. Meanwhile,
he commits to [his friends] way ahead of time. I really don’t feel like I am a priority in his life.

The “this time” Kim referred to was her relationship with Damian. She thought she had dealt with the loneliness and abandonment issues brought about by her divorce, but Damian’s desire to be “normal” was bringing it all back. Feeling “like a mistress” and “at his mercy” was intensely unsatisfying—antithetical to her “strong teacher woman” role. Richardson’s (1985) study of women involved with married men comes to mind: When an affair begins, the secrecy excites and binds the lovers; but over time the pleasure palls as the woman comes to resent that she is confined to the “commercial breaks” of her married lover’s life. Damian’s social life was the equivalent to a married life, leaving only “a few minutes here or there” for Kim.

Several times throughout the summer, Kim reminded herself of the necessity of ending the relationship in the fall in order to protect her “identity as a teacher”:

After some soul searching, I decided that we need to cool things off for a while. . . . I can’t risk my job—I just can’t, not even for him.

The teacher-student thing is a risk I should avoid this year. I need my job—I need my identity as a teacher.

As much as I love him, our relationship wouldn’t survive if I got fired. I would not be the same person if I couldn’t teach. Which is why when school starts, our sexual relationship has to end until he graduates.

That Kim used the teaching-free days of summer to engage in her affair was not unique; Letourneau did it, too. As she told Walters, “I expected at the end of summer that he was going to continue in school and that a few years down the line, [we’d get together again]” (20/20, 2004, p. 9). It’s as if summertime is a sans-teacher-identity zone, but when fall arrives, the “teacher”
performance must be resumed. I’m not so sure “teacher” is a mask that can be donned and discarded with the change of the seasons, though. And, as these women discovered, neither is “lover.”

As the new school year drew near, Kim began to anticipate the role changes she would have to make as she returned to performing a platonic version of “teacher”:

There are bound to be some awkward, intense moments. I can’t (outside of school) go back to my teacher persona or even my adult friend persona. . . . Maybe I’m being naïve, but I still don’t think there will be any problems at school—I’m just too busy and too much in my teacher role. And if I find I can’t maintain that around him, then I’ll just ask him not to come around.

Kim’s concern was with what would happen “outside of school”; she felt she could keep her in-school and out-of-school personas separate. But keeping that boundary distinct proved to be difficult, much as it had for Ingram.

The new school year. At the opening assembly on the first day of school, Kim’s teacher/lover role tension was already in play:

I kept staring at Damian—he kept staring at me—painful for both of us. The good thing is, I can put this out of my mind temporarily when I teach—of course, the minute I stop it falls on me like a lead curtain. What sucks is this wound has to stay open if we are to resume in the spring. Hopefully in time I can accept his diminished role in my life. Throwing herself into her teaching role helped ease the pain, but she couldn’t really escape it because his presence at the school was an open wound—a reminder of the “diminished role” with which she was unsatisfied.
Pain at Damian’s presence turned to anger at his ability to ignore her. Kim questioned her fortitude to handle their new dynamic in school:

Tonight at the game proved that I can’t handle this during school anymore than he can. I saw him at the game and I felt like an unprofessional whore. To make matters worse, he didn’t even talk to me—barely acknowledged me, in fact. My mood shattered—if this is how the year will be, I don’t know how I’ll do it. It was awkward, anxious, terrible. I felt alone, and isolated and rather like a pedophile or something. I wonder if I have the trust and strength to do this.

Kim admitted in a later journal that feeling “like an unprofessional whore” and “rather like a pedophile” was a direct result of “these fucked up circumstances that I had NO business creating.” But Kim’s self-flagellation didn’t ease her conscience. The following poem captures the role tensions Kim experienced at the beginning of the school year:

Pendulum

who am I

with you

I no longer know

if I am a woman

in love or

a whore

in need

a woman

in love or

a teacher
The pendulum swing between Kim’s conflicting roles continued well into the fall. She did have moments when she came to terms with her guilty conscience, as the following poem excerpt indicates:

even here, surrounded by your peers,
I feel no shame when thoughts of you
crowd my mind
I have expanded, built a bridge
between lover and teacher
so when I smile at you
in these halls
know it is as pure as our love,
know my conscience is clear
Kim had “built a bridge between lover and teacher,” or at least she was able to write her way into thinking so. And it was a flexible bridge, one that allowed for occasional “mistakes” to happen when the pendulum swung a little too far to the lover side. Kim added a third metaphor illustrating the teacher/lover role tension in the following poem, written after she succumbed to sex one night when Damian stopped by her house:

Conscience Soothed

I have taken
my conscience
through her paces
worked her to
a frothy sweat
pushed her nearly
beyond her limits
now, rubbed down
and stabled
she is oddly quiet,
content with the
mistakes of the evening past
she has been
curried and fed
and sleeps, assured
that even future mistakes
will not be sin,
but honest errors
made in the name of love

That conscience equaled horse is particularly appropriate for this research; just add a pate and it’s a pushmipullyu, with “teacher” and “lover” representing the two heads.

Sin was a recurring theme in Kim’s poetry at the beginning of the new school year. In “Pendulum,” Kim swung between “innocence and sin.” In “Conscience Soothed” Kim wrote that “even future mistakes will not be sin” because they were “made in the name of love,” but she struggled with that justification. She developed the Eden metaphor in the following two poem excerpts, which I cobbled together. They were entitled “Original Sin” and “Sin Revealed”:

we are half naked
shameless, laughing
on my blue carpet
when she comes knocking\(^\text{17}\) . . .
I can feel your guilt
I can feel my shame
she is the hand of God
in our garden of Eden
this is our moment of truth
suddenly
I am wracked
with waves
of original sin

\(^{17}\) “She comes knocking” is literal here; a friend of Damian’s had stopped by. Even though this girl knew about the relationship, Kim felt guilty because she knew the girl had feelings for him.
our roles have changed
we were once innocent
frolicking naked with abandon
through our garden
last night I hid my body for the first time
from your view, but I cannot
hide my sin from myself
alone in this dying field
I wonder which of us
ate first from the forbidden tree
is it you, my beloved serpent,\textsuperscript{18}
who lures me into a game,
hiding behind your innocent mask of youth?
or am I your fruit,
the one you cannot resist,
yet the one who will destroy us both?

Considering how conflicted Kim was about the occasional “mistakes” that disrupted their platonic relationship, it’s a wonder that she didn’t recognize her mental anguish as a sign that she should stop “sinning” altogether. She had anticipated such “warning signals” earlier in the summer when she was making the decision to put the relationship on hold: “I am on full alert for

\textsuperscript{18} It’s somewhat prophetic that Kim called Damian her “beloved serpent.” During our interviews we dubbed him “Satan,” a spur-of-the-moment name we came up with along with “Alcoholic Boy” and “Goth Boy” in order to spare me time deleting identifying names when I digitized the data. I kept these pseudonyms while I typed her journals but knew “Satan” was too obviously biased an appellation for a main character. It wasn’t until I started writing Chapter 3 that I settled upon Damian, chosen for its subtle suggestion of evil.
warning signals. So I’m sure I will take steps at the first sign of trouble to protect myself.” Kim knew, regardless of who was the serpent- tempter and who was the fruit- temptation, that she was “the one who will destroy us both.” But that knowledge did not stop the destruction of Eden.

Despite the clarity of Kim’s summer plans to end the relationship because she couldn’t risk her job—“not even for him”—Kim’s resolve did not last into the fall. As the occasional “mistake” turned into a relationship again, Kim felt trapped between teacher and lover: “Although things with Damian are going wonderfully, circumstances are closing in. I feel trapped—how can I choose between the man I love and the job that is my passion?” Kim wanted both, but a flexible semi-platonic relationship with Damian was not a happy medium: “We had sex last night . . . so my guilt kicked in completely—I felt like a whore, a completely immoral sinner.”

A further complication adding to Kim’s feelings of guilt and sinfulness was the necessity of lying to her principal, a man whose good opinion mattered to her. One day Damian attended a school improvement meeting as a student representative, and sitting with the two in a sort of teacher-student- principal hierarchical sandwich was disturbing:

Juxtaposition

the boy I love
sits next to the man
whose respect I crave
guilt colors these library walls,
shakes the fans off balance,
bleeds through me
my name on your chest
This poem indicated how guilty Kim felt when faced with her role tensions; at that meeting she was simultaneously “teacher” in relation to her principal and “lover” in relation to Damian. Juxtaposing these two identities felt wrong. Kim’s name on Damian’s chest (on a pendant) was scarlet-letteresque, “winking at [her] sin.”

Sharing the same space with the boy she loved and the man she respected was unpleasant enough, but she also had to lie directly to her principal when he confronted her with the rumors:

Regret
in your office today
I was brilliant,
my lies blending easily
with my laughter
until I almost believed them
myself
only now do I admit my guilt
I wonder if you will understand
the purity of my betrayal

Maintaining a semi-platonic relationship was proving to be a strain for both Kim and Damian. In a journal entry dated just over a week after her office visit with the principal, Kim wrote, “We have decided—AGAIN—to try to cut out the sex, at least for a while. It will help us both—me because of the growing rumors, him because he won’t have to lie.”
In the past two chapters I’ve taken the reader through the onset and the justification process of the four women’s affairs. What I hope I’ve conveyed by this point is that these women, while they may be guilty of what Shakeshaft (2004) terms educator sexual misconduct, do not fall neatly into the category of sexual predator. These women were unethical, yes; irrational, probably; mentally ill, maybe; but predatory, no. If they must be labeled, I find Matthews, Matthews, and Spelz’s (1989) “Teacher/Lover” category for female sexual offenders most fitting. Delusional or not, these women were in love relationships—however they defined them—with the boys. In the final chapter I explore the denouement of these relationships.
CHAPTER 6

DENOUEMENT

This chapter does double-duty denouement: I discuss the downfall of my participants’ careers and relationships, and then I conclude this study of teacher-student attractions gone awry. I abandon Letourneau in the first section, in part because her 7½-year sentence for child rape is old news, but mostly because she and Fualaau are still together; their wedding date is set for April 16, 2005. I suspect a denouement will not occur for Letourneau and Fualaau until they have maximized the benefits of full media attention that their unorthodox relationship has afforded. But I’m just a cynic. Perhaps their “true” love will last forever; some (e.g. Blanchard, 2004) claim their having survived such a long separation is an indication that their commitment to each other will endure. I imagine they have as much a chance as anyone of making their marriage work. Regardless, Letourneau’s happily-ever-after story is not instructive here. Most teacher-student relationships don’t end with the couple walking off into the sunset.

Although Ingram, Hannah, and Kim have unique denouement stories, they do have a commonality in their references to lying, betrayal, and loss. They also share the wisdom of lessons learned. I develop each of the three women’s reflections on their affairs separately in Part I of this chapter. Finally, I reunite them and return Letourneau to the fold for my conclusions in Part II.

Part I: The End of the Relationships

I have a caveat before beginning this section: The women’s reflections are unidimensional. Although I can derive some sense of Dickeson’s point of view from his talk show appearances, I cannot know Eric’s and Damian’s sides of the story. I would like to hear the
students’ perspectives—and perhaps one day I will work with an IRB that will approve such a study. However, involving students as participants would have posed too great a risk to confidentiality for this investigation.

**Ingram**

I and colleagues of mine with a similar poststructural bent have developed a shorthand communication for when we hear grand-narrative language that sets off our poststructural radar. We say “beep-beep-beep,” or, if the setting is such that a vocalization is inappropriate, we hold up rabbit ears to symbolize our post-sensitive “antennae.” Ingram’s (2003) accounting of her relationship with Dickeson activated my Foucauldian antenna (the shorthand became textualized: I wrote “beep-beep-beep” marginalia). She prefaced her book with docile-bodied regret: “I hope that this account will make clear how much remorse I feel and how hard it was to learn the things I needed to learn” (p. ix). Unlike Letourneau, who refused to be sorry, Ingram admitted her mistakes. The book was her penance; in it she confessed and sought absolution for her sexual sins. She was “a confessing animal” (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 59).

Ingram (2003) accepted responsibility for her choice to engage in a sexual relationship with Dickeson, although she tempered her confession with “if only” language:

> I am sorry; I didn’t know the law or the consequences. . . . If I’d known Troy would drop out of school ten months after our relationship started, thereby making it legal, I would have waited. If I’d realized that the Crown can lay a charge even if the “victim” denies any crime took place, or if I’d known how much I was going to hurt people, how much I would miss teaching, or what this would feel like. (p. 6)

Ingram did not regret having the relationship with Dickeson but rather the timing of it: “If I had waited until he left school, much of the damage I caused to myself and the school would not
have happened” (p. 225). But even with the wisdom that came with retrospect, Ingram couldn’t say for sure that she would have acted differently:

I would *like* to say that I would not do it all again if I could relive the past, but given my emotional state at the time I can’t be sure. What I do know is that I would not make the same mistake now. (p. 225; emphasis in original)

However, Ingram will not get the opportunity to “not make the same mistake” again. Although she does currently tutor students on the side, her criminal record prevents her from classroom teaching or working with minors in an official capacity.

What Ingram most regretted was taking advantage of her position of influence as a teacher:

Did I abuse my power as a teacher? In the strictest sense, yes. I ignored that power and chose to believe that I could simply be a person in love with someone eleven years my junior, that somehow things would work out. (p. 224)

Ingram admitted she “expected far too much adult decision-making from someone who had not yet turned eighteen” (p. 223) and that she “deprived him of a part of his youth” (p. 224).

However, she did not feel she exploited Dickeson:

After much soul searching, I have concluded that . . . I did not in any way coerce him into our relationship. I believe that he knew what he was doing when he pursued me, that he did love me, and that for a short while we had a relationship that was sweet and wonderful. (p. 223)

Dickeson did not feel he was exploited, either. He supported Ingram through her trial and year-long house arrest, and they now share a child, Phoenix, the product of their “sweet and wonderful” relationship. But they are no longer a couple. After the initial heady romance faded,
Ingram realized their age difference and life philosophies were too divergent to make the relationship work. There was also too much hurt from Dickeson’s “infidelity and lies” (Ingram, 2003, p. 227) for Ingram to forgive. Despite their denouement, Dickeson has benefited from the affair. He successfully petitioned the court to remove his anonymity (after Ingram’s book was published; that is why he has a pseudonym in it) and has made somewhat of a name for himself as a rapper whose subject matter is seducing his teacher.

My latest Google search revealed that Dickeson has been busy being a bad boy. He has a history of relatively minor assault charges, but most recently he was arrested for trafficking cocaine and firing a sawed-off shotgun in two separate incidents. Dickeson’s pattern of crime may already have been established when he met Ingram; his bad-boy demeanor was part of the attraction. Although Ingram crossed a line by having sex with a student, Dickeson’s questionable character and instigation of the affair makes me question whether his minor status necessarily means he was a victim, particularly when “minor” is arbitrary. Eric, the same age as Dickeson, was not a minor merely by virtue of his geographic location.

Hannah

During the early phases of data collection, Hannah was unemployed and still involved with Eric. Even though her school’s investigation hadn’t proven anything, her contract wasn’t renewed after Eric’s junior year. Their pre-planned avoidance of detection, which she described in the following interview excerpt, was irrelevant:

We even sat in the principal's office, and there was a full investigation—although for that county, "full investigation" meant, "Did you do it?" "No." "Okay." But we both had figured out very quickly our stories and stuck to it. He's a strongly manipulative person, so whenever faced with a situation like that he'll end up coming out on top. He
was like, "I don't see what your point is. You think I would want to be with a teacher?

Come on, I hate school. I don't wanna be here."

Suspicion surrounding the circumstances of her departure was making it difficult for Hannah to find work in another school system. At the time she accepted this hardship as a worthwhile consequence of being in love. It wasn’t until months later, as the relationship began to deteriorate, that regret set in. I conducted a final interview with Hannah after I had coded all the data and begun writing, which gave me a picture of the relationship in its entirety.

I asked Hannah in that last interview what led to the breakdown of the relationship. As was the case with Ingram—and Kim, too, as the reader will see—it started with his lies: “A little bit at a time I realized he was LYING on a lot of things. Stupid me, I believed it all.” She chalked up Eric’s inconsequential story-telling to immaturity, assuming it was his adolescent way of self-promoting or impressing her. Because their affair was still shrouded in secrecy—Hannah was living with her parents at the time and was afraid of what they would do if they found out—she had no way of checking up on her growing concern over the extent of his lies. So she chose to believe them.

In addition to the lies, Eric’s behavior started to change once Hannah had expended all her savings:

H: I was still spending way too much money; my bills were coming in and I didn’t have any money. He was promising me he was gonna pay this bill, he was gonna take care of this for me. . . . He ruined my—every bit of money I’d made was gone. When the money ran out, he started becoming—really flighty, more abusive.

19 A reminder: Capitalization in interview transcripts indicate the speaker’s emphasis.
T: Oh, when you had nothing more to give.

H: When I had nothing more to give him. Except for, you know, “Come over, my parents aren’t home” type of thing. . . . I let—this kid—ruin what might have been my teaching career at the time. . . . I let him beat me and batter me. Emotionally. Physically just about, you know, it got to that point too. . . . He took whatever he wanted. . . . I let him take control.

Hannah summed up their relationship’s dynamic in a telling phrase: “He was a leech, and I was a host organism.” Once Eric had sucked her dry, he had no more use for her—except for sex at his convenience, when his parents weren’t around. But even though Hannah could no longer buy him food or clothes or pay for entertainment, Eric was not ready to release his control over her.

I asked Hannah how she, a strong and independent woman, had allowed Eric to control her so completely—how the relationship had deteriorated to this point. In addition to believing she was in love with him, she attributed his power over her to fear:

Looking in hindsight, I was afraid. It was all fear. It started the minute I made that decision . . . to even touch him. Then it became, “I’m going to have to get used to this. There’s no turning back, unless he goes for somebody else.” . . . The fear alone in me—I could see every negative aspect of that situation. I could see how I could lose my career, lose my child, everything. . . . But then it was too late.

Hannah believed there was “no turning back” from engaging in a sexual relationship with a student once that choice had been made. She felt she couldn’t extricate herself from the situation without causing Eric to retaliate. She had to trust that Eric wouldn’t tell; if he did, she would lose her job and perhaps her daughter if her parents disowned her. Eric used the threat of

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20 She speculated that “it would be an immediate custody battle” over her daughter after her parents kicked her out of their home.
discovery, however tacitly, to control Hannah. The only way out of the relationship would be if Eric wanted to leave.

Hannah had alluded to this fear in one of her earlier interviews when she talked about the onset of the relationship:

I was really scared. . . . at that point I had scared myself into, "This is temporary. This is not something that's gonna last; how am I gonna back down from this?" . . . I've got myself in a situation, I know how crazy this kid is. . . . I was so scared if I called it off, he would go ballistic and hate me. . . . Of course my job is at stake, and my life. His reputation was NOT at stake.

When Hannah first became involved with Eric, the relationship was principally about the sexual challenge that she couldn’t “back down from”; she didn’t expect it to last. But as their relationship developed into love, she began to see the possibility of a future with him. The fear of discovery was still there, but she trusted that the betrayal would not come from Eric: “He would completely support me, no matter what. . . . He would do whatever he could possibly do. That's one thing that I haven't felt like was a risk between us.”

As Eric’s lies became increasingly transparent and his behavior abusive, the promise of a future dimmed. No longer satisfied with her role as host organism, Hannah began salting the leech, slowly detaching herself from Eric and trying to make a fresh start with her life sans parasite. However, Hannah should have trusted her earlier fear that Eric might “go ballistic” if she “called it off.” As he felt his control over her slipping, he began making threats to expose their relationship. He stalked her, calling frequently and making remarks such as, “If I can’t have you, nobody will.” Fortunately for Hannah, Eric’s limited access to transportation confined most of his harassment to the telephone. She allowed him to threaten her person as well as her
career, not daring to open the can of worms that a restraining order or other such defensive maneuver might entail. Although Hannah had already lost her job because of her administrators’ suspicions, she still was hopeful she could find another teaching appointment—a possibility that would be minimized if Eric went public. Even though Hannah could not be criminally prosecuted for having sex with Eric because he was not a minor at the time of their relationship, it would be difficult for Hannah to survive unscathed from such a disclosure. Hannah hoped he would eventually let go of his own accord.

Although Hannah’s current fiancé knows about and accepts her history, Eric’s continued harassment has put a tremendous strain on their relationship. I suggested that it might be in Hannah’s best interest to leave the area, but she has neither the means nor the desire to do so. As she said, “I don’t want to let him run me off.” At the time of my writing this chapter, Hannah was still living in fear of Eric making good on his threats.

Unlike Ingram, who saw value in her relationship with Dickeson, Hannah concluded, “I wish to God—99 thoughts out of 100, I wish I had never gone to that school. I wish I had never—I wish I had kicked him out the first day of class.” Despite the terrible consequences, Hannah did learn some valuable lessons: “I know now that I’ll be a better teacher for all that. Even though I went through hell for the last three years of my life, I have learned a lifetime’s worth of lessons.” Hannah hopes to have the opportunity to apply what she learned someday:

When I have that job, I will be focused on JOB. And paycheck for family. Which is what I was originally focused on . . . . but I see the progression now. And it’s not gonna happen again. Step One is not gonna lead to Step Two anymore. Step One is gonna lead to the trash can. It’s like one of those rough drafts—you read it and go “huh uh.” Don’t even keep it because it might be a good idea someday.
Hannah may never get another job; her “rough draft” experience with Eric may well be her final teaching script. But at least the reader can benefit from her “lifetime’s worth of lessons.” Hannah offered several suggestions for teachers facing similar circumstances when I asked her to clarify how Step One led to Step Two. She started with what to do “if a situation tries to present itself”:

Go to somebody, you know, go to the counselor, say, “I’m having a situation with a kid,” or call in a parent or something. Figure out a way to not defeat the kid, don’t abuse him, realize that kids are sensitive, but realize your life is just as important, if not more, because you have all these kids . . . that you have to take care of.

Her advice was solid for a situation in which a student’s one-sided crush or pursuit has become unmanageable. But I was more interested in how to identify and stop an Eric in the making—a situation in which the teacher on some level wants to reciprocate. Hannah’s response was humorous but wise:

H: Seeing the warning signs. Watching the flirtatious attitude. Just being—OBSERVANT. And stopping every time you feel that flirtatious attitude and you find yourself flirting back. And REMINDING yourself of how old this child is. Pick out the most immature person you know, or have ever known, at that age, and put the person into—you know. Think about the kid next door who was 16 and picking his nose and flicking boogers at you. You know, find something to compare, to make a reference, that this—psychologically, chronologically, yeah, they’re two different things, but when it comes down to it, they’re pretty close.

T: No matter how mature he might seem—he’s still 16, 17—
H: Exactly. There’s something missing there. And he’s still not gonna get it. Maybe once out of a million, these things work out? But I’ve yet to come across any that have really worked. There’s just too much of a difference at that age for it to really work.

Hannah’s advice for teachers experiencing the onset of attraction to a student was twofold. First, she stressed the importance of being observant and reflexive—to recognize the feeling and stop it in its tracks at the flirtation stage. No pushmipullyu activity, no “maybe when you graduate,” no setting the stage or creating scenarios in which the flirtation can escalate.

But a teacher can’t prevent herself from feeling an occasional attraction. It happens, perhaps more so with teachers who share characteristics with the women in this study, although attraction is certainly not the exclusive domain of holistic teachers seeking to fill a void in their lives caused in part by a troubled family history. This is where the second part of Hannah’s advice comes in. Picturing the object of one’s attraction as the booger-flicking neighborhood bully because he is, after all, that age serves as a useful reminder of his juvenility. Hannah made the point that chronological and psychological ages are relatively synchronous; being 17 literally is a good indication the person is 17 emotionally, too, no matter how convincing his performance of adulthood may be. I agree with Hannah that “there’s just too much of a difference at that age for it to really work.” An age difference of a decade or more may not be problematic when the people involved are at similar stages in their lives, but the odds are against a teenager and a person whose career and life path are already settled having a tenable and equitable relationship. Hannah ultimately believed that it was naïve to think her relationship with Eric was going to be the “once out of a million” exception.
Kim

Kim’s story takes a little longer to tell, and for that reason I break her section into three parts. Although the elements are the same as Ingram’s and Hannah’s—the relationship’s denouement, job loss, and reflections on lessons learned—the sequence is somewhat different. Whereas Ingram and Hannah lost their jobs and then their loves, for Kim Damian was the first to go.

Denouement of the relationship. Hannah’s suggestion for “seeing the warning signs” of a mutual attraction and acting accordingly is not failsafe. It did not work for Kim, whose portentous “I am on full alert for warning signals. So I’m sure I will take steps at the first sign of trouble to protect myself” the first summer of her affair with Damian did not hold. Kim’s journals are filled with warning signs—moments when she suspected Damian was lying, occasions when she felt uneasy about their relationship, and times when she didn’t trust his love. At one point toward the end of the affair, Kim went back through her journals and marked the many instances that were clues that all was not well. But making note of the warning signs is an exercise in futility if a person chooses to dismiss them as inconsequential or unworthy of ending the relationship, which is what Kim did. She described how both her tenacious grip on the relationship and Damian’s manipulation of her savior-strings contributed to the affair’s duration:

I found entries within a couple weeks [after the affair started] of getting the feeling that he was lying to me, and getting the feeling that something wasn't quite right. But then my need not to be alone kinda overshadowed everything else. . . . He stole from me, he lied to me, and yet I would take him back time after time. He would play the card, "I'm too young, I've learned," and he would cry. And at one point toward the end of the relationship I said, "That's it, you just need to leave by the end of the week," and he was
sobbing, "Please, I don't have anywhere to go." And then, come to find out, he had been planning all along to leave and at that point it wasn't convenient for him to leave yet. And so there was a lot of cold manipulation on his part. But there was also my refusal to give up, and quieting that inner voice that was saying, "This isn't right."

The first journal entries indicating “This isn’t right” illustrate how Kim quieted “that inner voice.” Just as she said during her interview, they were dated a couple of weeks after they first had sex:

So why don’t I trust him? At one level, I do—with my life. I know how much he cares for me. So why do I expect him to leave me at any time for Diana? This is an irrational fear, but I can’t shake it. I’m not so sure he doesn’t lie to me sometimes, about little things. Like I’m almost positive Alcoholic Boy never gave him 6 poems to give to me. I think he makes up conversations that he supposedly has w/ other students. I think he does this to flatter me, so there’s really no harm in it.

I also don’t really think he had a 1 a.m. curfew last night. . . . I just have the feeling he was meeting someone last night.

[the next day] He just stopped by for a while—and he “lost” Alcoholic Boy’s poems. I know he lied to me about them, but is it really that important? . . . He lied for the right reasons, which is sweet. His lie doesn’t hurt anybody—it was an impulse that got carried too far. So I am going to accept his excuse and let it go gracefully.

Kim had two nagging suspicions: Damian was lying to her “about little things,” and there was something more than friendship going on between him and Diana, a classmate who was privy to the relationship (Diana was the one who “comes knocking,” interrupting their Eden, in the “Original Sin” poem in the last chapter). But Kim didn’t listen to her instincts; she was able to
couch the lies in terms of harmless flattery—Damian was trying to impress her and make her feel good, “which [was] sweet.” She could also attribute his little lies to his youthful immaturity and impulsiveness—something he couldn’t really help. Finally, she dismissed her fear about his infidelity with Diana as the irrational product of her own divorce baggage. She elaborated upon this rationalization in a retrospective letter to a friend:21

The worst part was, I knew in my gut he had been lying to me all along. I wrote journal entries talking about how I felt he was lying to me, but then I would go on and write about how I had trust issues left from the divorce.

Kim could not quiet the “inner voice” completely; it came out in her poetry, too. The following poem, entitled “Forgotten Geometry,” is about the triangle tension she intuited among Damian, Diana, and her:

it has been years
since my tenth grade
geometry class, more
years than you have been
on this earth
but suddenly, I feel the
void of all my sophomore inattention
suddenly I need to understand
triangles
for I am trapped in one
I cannot identify

21 This letter, which adopts a confessional tone, was included among Kim’s journals and poetry. It was dated about a year after the end of her relationship with Damian—prior to her leaving the school district.
terms float back to me
isosceles, right angle—
but I know there are no
right angles here
and I know you want me to
believe you
but somehow I need proof,
something you cannot provide
which leads me back to
my tenth grade dilemma
you see, I never
knew what we were
supposed to be proving

anyway

“I know there are no right angles here” is a revealing statement. She couldn’t fault Damian for
pursuing Diana; Kim understood that Damian’s need for a “normal” senior year might include
dating other people. Although Damian claimed not to be interested in Diana or any other girl at
that point, Kim suspected he was lying. He couldn’t prove otherwise; nor could she really
require it of him.

The relationship was rocky right from the beginning, but Kim stubbornly refused to let it
register beyond the level of her “inner voice.” She allowed love, fear of abandonment, and a
savior mechanism run amuck to supersede her quiet instincts. About nine months into the affair,
shortly before he graduated from adult education, Damian left the relationship:
He is gone—says his feelings for me have changed. Once again—2 years to the day, funny enough—I am alone, reeling. Too pissed this time to ask what the lesson is—I don’t fucking care. The lesson is, I’m an idiot, nothing—I deserve no better. Damian was a mirage—an illusion I created.

The “2 years to the day” Kim mentioned was the anniversary of her husband’s announcement that he wanted a divorce. Once again Kim was “alone, reeling,” abandoned by a person who professed to love her. Similar to Hannah’s self-deprecating “Stupid me, I believed it all,” Kim called herself an idiot for believing in an illusion of her own creation.

But Damian came back, and they continued to struggle. He moved in with her after he graduated, and Kim proceeded to support him—not without resentment—as he consumed food, clothing, cars, and a college education. She summarized as follows in the letter to a friend:

He managed to keep me in the dark for almost two years—which amounted to a new wardrobe, three cars (he smashed the first two), and whatever else he could get. For me, it amounted to a debt of about $20,000. . . . I brought a lying criminal into my daughter’s life, and treated him like royalty.

At the end of “almost two years,” Damian left the relationship for good. Kim said in an interview, “I came home one day to find him gone with . . . everything that I’d ever bought him. The house was just cleaned out.” All he left behind was an apologetic note. Kim described her conflicting emotions in her journal:

So here I am, alone again, with a traumatized daughter. But I am so calm—I don’t know what I am feeling. Anger—rage—at his lies and betrayal . . . . Revenge when I see how he has hurt my daughter. Sadness when I think of what I thought we were. Humiliation and regret when I think of all I invested and lost. . . . Astonishment that he would hurt us
this way. And loneliness, such a profound loneliness. My friends are telling me I never
loved him, but an illusion I had created. It would be simple to accept that now, but it is
much more complicated. I did (do?) love HIM, but it was also wrapped up in the future I
thought we would have.

Kim again mentioned loving “an illusion [she] had created.” She could theorize that she hadn’t
loved Damian so much as the illusory promise of a future with him—but the two were
intertwined. At this point Kim was too saddened and surprised by his departure to feel the full
extent of her rage. But that changed as the weeks passed and the egregiousness of Damian’s lies
began to unravel.

Kim did some sleuthing and Diana did some confessing, and finally Kim’s suspicious
inner voice was affirmed: “It was only then that the true level of the betrayal surfaced.” Damian
had been playing them both for quite some time. Kim summarized in her letter to a friend:

Here’s the gist of the situation: he never loved me, but saw me as a meal ticket, a source
of profit (this information I got to read for myself in emails he had sent another woman
using my computer. Yeah). You see, just three weeks after he had told me he loved me,
he found another girl his own age to love as well [Diana]. However, he decided why give
up on me since I was such a good provider, so for the next two years, he juggled us both.

Although Kim could blame Damian for his behavior, a lot of her rage was self-imposed. She
accepted responsibility for having “chosen a sociopath to love.” As she continued in her letter,

I was completely, utterly stupid and I still struggle with forgiving myself for that. Not
only did I nearly ruin myself financially, but I risked my career. . . . The bottom line is
that I broke my own personal ethics and went against my values. For two years, I was
addicted to him, and what was right became irrelevant. And I paid the price for it—I pretty much lost everything.

Kim was mostly disgusted with herself for being “completely, utterly stupid” and for betraying her “own personal ethics and . . . values.” It took a long time for Kim to forgive herself for failing to recognize that she should have “let him go in April [when he first left the relationship], or at the beginning of his senior year,” which is what she wrote in her journal shortly after he left. At that point she wasn’t ready to admit that she should not have entangled herself with Damian at all, but evidently she’d arrived at this realization by the time she wrote this letter a year later.

**Denouement of her job.** Kim had not yet “pretty much lost everything” as a result of her relationship with Damian. She still had her job. As bitter and painful as their denouement was, it wasn’t remarkably different from the ending of any bad relationship in which one experiences financial and emotional loss. She recovered. After Damian’s seemingly precipitous but premeditated flight, Kim never saw him again. In the next year and a half Kim received tenure, a teaching award, and heartfelt accolades from her students for the difference she was making in their lives. All seemed to be well. As she said in an interview, “I was under the impression that everything was fine.

“Meanwhile,” Kim continued, “I continued to advocate very strongly for kids.” She still embraced her teacher-savior role, and she had a new needy case—a girl this time:

I made the decision to take a female student into my home. That was against the recommendation of a lot of people; her dad was quite powerful in the town, but had been

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22 In the event this monograph goes to publication, I will ask Kim to clarify what she meant by this. I’m speculating that the breaking of her ethics and values was both personal (in that she’d centered her needs and future happiness on Damian rather than her own self-fulfillment) and professional (in that she’d crossed a teacher-student line).
sexually molesting her by HER reports. Child protective services had been involved and nothing was happening; she was left in the home, he was hitting her, she was self-mutilating, and she needed a safe place. . . . I actually went through channels—there was a Christian agency that placed her then; they had a program that allowed her to stay in my home, so it was all above board. And so I thought that I'd done everything right.

Despite the advice of her friends and colleagues not to get involved, Kim could not in good conscience ignore the girl’s situation when she had the means to intervene. Concerned that the “quite powerful” father might retaliate for her interference, Kim covered herself legally; she went through the proper channels to ensure “it was all above board.”

Kim wondered in retrospect whether her altruistic decision to help this girl was what motivated her school’s administration to move against her. The timing was too coincidental:

Within two weeks of her moving in to my house, I came into work—It was a Monday morning, first hour, my kids were watching a movie, and my principal came to my door. He said, "They need you at the superintendent's office," and of course there was that flutter of panic, but I hadn't done anything wrong! . . . My union rep was there with a regional rep. At that point I knew something horrible was going on, but I thought it had something to do with the situation with this girl. It never occurred to me that it was anything other than that. So we went down the hall to this conference room, and the superintendent . . . read me this letter that said I'd been accused of having a sexual relationship with a student of the district. And it just floored me because this was a year and a half after the fact.

Kim’s relationship with Damian had been common knowledge. Had the district pooh-bahs wanted to pursue an investigation, she assumed they would have done so long before “a year and
a half after the fact.” That this out-of-the-blue accusation so closely followed on the heels of her saving a student made Kim suspicious of the district’s real motive for resurrecting an incident they had tacitly condoned. She was afraid that “they were really out to get [her].”

Upon reflection Kim felt the “they” who “were really out to get” her included her principal. He had known about the relationship at least from the time Damian left the school almost three years before, when she’d told him she “would be dating a former student” in a fit of honesty. Had her principal had an issue with the relationship, he would have taken it up with her then. For Kim, this lag time was an indication that the letter of accusation was a tool of a deeper agenda to oust her from the school. She speculated that her principal probably had a hand in getting me out of the district. I think he knew, at the very least, absolutely knew what was coming down the pike and didn't warn me. And I honestly, the more I see how that district operates now, the more I realize he might have had a hand in it simply because he was tired of the conflicts I was creating. And tired of taking the heat for me. And maybe I can't fault him for that . . . he probably protected my job as long as he could, and just caved to that pressure.

Perhaps fueled by the girl’s father’s complaints, “they” wanted her decidedly undocile body (Foucault, 1975/1995) out of the school system, and Kim’s principal “caved to that pressure.” Although he may have been a buffer between Kim and hostile colleagues or community members in earlier incidents—they’d had a relatively good professional relationship—he “was tired of taking the heat” for her. Her prior relationship with Damian was the only leverage the district had because she “hadn’t done anything wrong” since then.

Kim was barred from her classroom and offered a choice between contesting the accusation and resigning. She vacillated initially:
I had the choice, I could have fought it—but if I left quietly, then nothing would go in my file. So, my initial thought was, "I'm going to fight this," . . . [and] I went to the [union] lawyer with the intent of fighting it. . . . [but] I realized that there was no way I could relive that part of my life. It was a chapter I had closed. I was very scared that I wouldn't teach again because of the public ramifications. I had a daughter to support, and all of that.

What helped to clinch the decision for Kim was the feeling that her union would not back her:

Throughout the time I didn't feel very supported by my union. I didn't really trust my building union rep, although he was very—put on a show, anyway, of being very concerned, although I knew better than that because he had threatened my job a few years before on a different incident. But I really didn't feel like I had any other recourse [than to take the deal].

Kim didn’t trust either the union’s representative or lawyer to defend her interests adequately. Faced with the prospect of publicly opening an old wound, Kim decided it would be wisest to resign. At least the presence of a union if not the union representatives themselves was useful in helping her negotiate the terms of her departure; she “came out okay financially.” However, having “her whole [teacher] role stripped away like that” was unquestionably the worst experience of her life.

Just as my poststructural radar goes off when I hear or feel grand-narrative discourses operating, Kim sensed that the district’s deal was shady:

The original letter [of accusation] was destroyed, and my file was cleansed. . . . Which really—once I calmed down and took myself out of the equation, was very scary because if they brushed this under the rug, what other conspiracies—I mean, it was very scary.
Kim wondered “what other conspiracies” the district had “brushed . . . under the rug” because of the ease in which her file—and she—was erased. But Kim’s district’s response was characteristic of others facing a similar scenario, according to Hendrie (1998b): “Facing the prospect of costly and risky court fights, some districts cut deals. Such agreements vary, but in many cases they entail keeping silent about accusations as long as an employee resigns” (¶ 12). Hendrie’s argument is that this colluded-upon silence allows teacher sexual predators to prey in new school territories. But this unethical practice of “passing the trash,” as Hendrie calls it, gave Kim a chance at a fresh start. Although devastating in the moment, her district’s offer of a clean resignation was her ticket out of an oppressive teaching environment. She went on to teach in a school whose administrators and faculty supported her holistic pedagogy and appreciated her efforts to advocate for kids.

**Lessons learned.** Kim ultimately moved into a different profession in which she could advocate for kids without the constraints of the current climate of public schooling (and that’s a whole different story). However, in the interim she was able to apply the lessons she learned from the district in which she was forced to resign to her new setting. Unlike Hannah, whose lessons concerned the sexualization of attraction, Kim had learned to be vigilant of her tendency toward emotional intimacy with students in general. She acknowledged that she got “too close” to students in the old district:

I definitely think a few years ago I allowed myself to get much closer to students than I do now. I think a good sign for me when I know I'm getting too close to a student is when I feel the need to—reveal my vulnerabilities to the student. When I feel the need to seek comfort from them, in terms of emotional comfort. Those are usually the dangerous situations. If I find myself feeling the need to reveal or self-disclose something I
wouldn't disclose in a typical teacher-student interaction, that's when I know it's too close, and I need to find a way to back up.

Kim’s early-warning signal was the compulsion to confess—to “reveal [her] vulnerabilities” and “self-disclose something.” Her connections with students such as Damian, Alcoholic Boy, Goth Boy, and the girl who lived with her for a while—whether sexualized or not—were “always preceded by that emotional crossing of the line. Me unburdening myself emotionally first.” Kim now knows she must “find a way to back up” if she feels this compulsion coming on.

When I asked Kim how her need for emotional connections with students had changed over time, she claimed she no longer looked to students to fill the voids in her life. I discussed this factor in Chapter 3, but it bears repeating here:

My divorce really turned my world upside down, and . . . for a while I used students to fill that void left when the family disintegrated. I think a lot of it now is that I've simply learned to fill my own void. I don't have the need to seek out help or support from students. . . . I was expecting students in the district where I was for seven years to meet my needs. Whether those needs be recognition, to fill my sense of belonging, or to feel loved, whatever.

Kim recognized that students could not meet her needs “because they're not emotionally capable in most cases . . . of that reciprocity.” As White\(^{23}\) (2003) argues, a teacher cannot embrace a Noddings-esque ethic of care toward students (Noddings, 1984) and expect that sentiment to be reciprocated. Kim accepted that her role in the classroom was to help students, not the other way around.

\(^{23}\) A nod to my undergraduate advisor, whose article I cite here helped me think about this issue of reciprocity. Thanks, Brian!
In addition to recognizing that students could not fill her voids or meet her needs, Kim had learned from experience to keep her savior instinct in check:

I just don't want to get burned anymore. . . . at what point do you stop helping people and put yourself and your own child first? . . . it's not that I don't still have the instinct to help kids, I do, but not at any cost anymore. Because I've paid too much.

Kim’s savior instinct was tested on a couple of occasions in her new district. There was a classic troubled student—on the same path as her brother and Alcoholic Boy—whom she advised, but “at no point did it ever enter [her] head” to invite him into her home. The same went for a ninth-grade girl who was having problems with her mother:

Her mother would love it if I took her off her hands. NO WAY would I do that, because I've seen how that doesn't work. You can't take a dysfunctional child and expect them to become functional just because you put them in a functional home. What happens is it turns the HOME dysfunctional. It's chaos, and I'm not willing to do that anymore. I guess I feel like I've paid my dues.

Even though Kim felt she had “paid [her] dues” with her many attempts to save dysfunctional children, she still had moments of doubt—and nostalgia—about the work she did at her previous job. The following poem excerpt captures this bittersweet sentiment:

This new life, I deserve it.

It fits me most days.

I am remade, revised, revamped.

Regrets are rare, but some nights they surface with past joys,
past boys. So many loose ends, un-resolutions.

I made it out, but have I yet paid in full?

The “loose ends” and “un-resolutions” are the unfinished stories of the boys (such as Goth Boy and Alcoholic Boy) Kim tried to save. Kim “made it out” of the oppressive community in which she taught, but she had to leave her beloved students behind. The news she heard from her friends who still lived in the community was not good; her boys for the most part were on a downward spiral of alcohol and drug abuse. Although there was nothing Kim could do about it—she realized their wellbeing was not her responsibility—she still struggled with a sense of failure:

They were damaged boys whom I felt obligated to save, and the truth is, I failed. They were not salvageable. Now I need to face the harsh reality that they may never have wanted my interference, and they certainly don't need me now. . . . No amount of love on my part will ever give them the strength they need to escape their holes. They have grown from needy boys into damaged MEN, and I need to walk away.

Whatever guilt Kim felt for abandoning her boys, she knew her love wasn’t enough to “give them the strength they need[ed] to escape their holes.” However, admitting defeat required that she examine more closely whether she had been right to attempt to save them in the first place:

I know there is a touch of arrogance in my reluctance to let it all go. You know, some narcissistic hope that I matter enough that in holding on, . . . my energy will be enough to save them somehow. And that by letting go, I will have to acknowledge that I failed, both in choosing the right ones to save and also in going about saving them the wrong way.
To “walk away” and “let it all go” was a process for Kim—a process of accepting the limitations of her savior role and recognizing that there were less costly ways to help students. Kim’s repetition of financial metaphors throughout her reflections is interesting: She paid her dues, she paid too much, and she was no longer willing to help kids at any cost, although she wondered if she had “yet paid in full.” In terms of a cost-benefit analysis, Kim learned it wasn’t worth it to save dysfunctional kids at the expense of her own family’s wellbeing. But it wasn’t just Kim and her daughter who had paid the price; her other students did, too. This was an important revelation for Kim:

I feel like—I can probably help more kids. I may not—I may not impact them at such a deep level, although I'm not so sure, I might. But I can help MORE kids. Where before I would single out, maybe one or two, a select few, and all my energy would go in them. Well, what about the other 100? I didn't have any energy left over for those kids. And I realize that it's THOSE kids who are capable of—maintaining a long-term relationship with me. They're the ones who call me with updates, they're the ones who say, "This is what I'm doing now, and by the way, THANKS." The ones I poured all my energy in, I don't hear from anymore because they're not capable of maintaining that bond.

Ironically, Kim’s desire for validation was fulfilled by “very healthy relationships with students” when she stopped measuring her worth by her ability to save troubled ones. These “healthy” students were the ones who could and did reciprocate in “maintaining that bond,” unlike those who had sapped her savior energy. Healthier students needed Kim’s attention, too, and she was able to help more of them without draining her own emotional reserves. She concluded, “I realize now in retrospect, those are the types of relationships I want to nurture.”
I suspect Kim is not done saving students. Her “zeal . . . to HELP” is too ingrained, too much a part of her social justice orientation for her to perform any other pedagogy. Even though her interaction with young people may be less formalized now that she is out of the classroom, I don’t think she’ll stop performing her holistic version of Teacher. And I wouldn’t have it any other way; teachers as dedicated to helping kids as Kim are a rarity. However, I am just as certain that Kim is done investing her heart and soul into emotional money pits, and I’m glad for her sake that she has reached this point. As hooks (1994) argues, teachers can’t be very effective at engaged pedagogy if they themselves are not healthy and whole.

Part II: The End of the Study

Looking back at my preparatory notes, I see that I have been composing now for seven continuous months. Having just one section to go is exhilarating—but oddly daunting, too, as all of my analysis and writing (which amounts to about the same thing) are realized in this moment of crystallization. I know readers are wont to page to the “conclusions” in order to obtain the nut of a study. It’s what I tend to do; I don’t often have the time or patience to follow the convoluted path to epiphany that is particularly characteristic of graduate students’ work. So I know this final section is important, but I am weary. I am experiencing the impossibility of a Cartesian duality for myself; my body is sick of/from subordination to my brain. Only writing matters; I’ve stopped taking care of myself. I don’t even paint my nails anymore, which my friends could tell you is alarmingly out of character.

I am also resisting the end. I suppose it is because I have become so adept at performing Graduate Student that I am a little afraid of becoming something else. Even though the end does not signify closure—Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2000) might say I haven’t arrived but am always in the process of becoming—there is still something final (and a little frightening) about
finishing. And, perhaps more to the point, I care deeply about my participants. I have become so invested in this work, these women’s stories, that I am hesitant to let them go, to send them out into the world to be brutalized by an unforgiving audience. Throughout the research process I have wrestled with the ethics of representation: Ultimately it was my decision of what to speak and what to silence in my construction of these women’s multiple and contradictory subjectivities. I have tried to be fair and faithful in my representation of them, but I fear how these women may be taken up—how their stories could be deployed in service to panoptic surveillance of teachers, the very thing I am arguing against.

I am concerned that my work could be used to support Shakeshaft’s (2004) claim that “rumors are an important source of information on educator sexual misconduct” by “excellent teachers” who have “close personal relationships with students” (p. 49). After all, there was certainly some truth to the rumors circulating about Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim, all excellent teachers whose holistic pedagogies entailed close connections with students. But the point isn’t whether Shakeshaft’s postulation is true but rather what the effect of its status as a truth claim may be. There is already a strong movement within education to stamp out all emotional intimacy between teachers and students, which hooks (2003) attributes to a Cartesian privileging of the mind: “Emotional connections tend to be suspect in a world where the mind is valued above all else” (p. 127).

Recent efforts by some school districts to mandate rules about hugging and other physical demonstrations of affection or comfort may have more to do with the concern that touch could become sexualized than they do with the devaluing of emotion. Kim recounted two tales related to this disallowing of touch—one of a teacher in a nearby district who had been fired for hugging her students, and another of how a teacher in her new school system was dismissed for “getting
too close to her students.” But, as Kim said when we were talking about what too close meant, “Who decides? And at what point do we define this, and at what point—like physicians or therapists, [do teachers] ‘cause no harm?’ But who decides if there's harm? . . . What's the standard?” Foucault (1975/1995; 1976/1990) might suggest that the answer to these questions lies in an examination of power relations both within and external to the disciplinary setting of schools. The implicit intent—or at least the effect—of increased surveillance of teacher touch may not be to ferret out instances of educator sexual misconduct (ESM) so much as it is to control teachers whose pedagogies deviate from a didactic, impersonal standard—teachers such as Kim whose effectiveness was grounded in her ability to develop close personal relationships with her students.

Instituting rules governing touch because sometimes some educators might sexualize it is akin to legislating prohibition because sometimes some people might become addicted to alcohol. Disallowing a physical expression of intimacy (or drinking) does not remove the threat of harm; one can always find subversive routes around rules. Touch on the part of the women teachers of this study had nothing to do with their relationships’ escalation. They manipulated their environments to enable the boys to touch—but what rule could prevent that from happening? “Thou shalt not manipulate?” More regulations will not translate to less misconduct. Indeed, particularly for Kim, increased control led to a greater desire to resist it; flouting authority was a reason she cited for having the relationship with Damian. As she said, “It was the ultimate rebel statement.” Exploring taboos can be titillating. I am reminded of Foucault’s (1976/1990) “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (p. 45; emphasis in original).

The more Kim felt disciplinary power in the form of disapproving senior colleagues operating on
her, the more pleasure she took in performing a version of Teacher that was antithetical to the school’s ideology.

Perhaps those “who decide” on “the standard” of what “too close” means are well-intentioned in their government; maybe they really do want to protect students from the occasional teacher who abuses her or his power and influence in the classroom. But the effect of increased rules and surveillance on the rest of the teaching body is what concerns me. It sends the message that teachers cannot be trusted to know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Teachers are already getting the message that they cannot be trusted to know what and how to teach through mandated curricula in this era of high-stakes assessment and accountability; micromanaging not only what they teach but how they interact with children is one more means of control over a population that is already viewed as suspect. If Shakeshaft’s (2004) criteria for identifying ESM were adopted, circulating a rumor could be a means to end the career of any teacher, guilty or not. A climate of surveillance and suspicion will have repercussions even for the majority of educators who will never be in danger of crossing an ethical line with students.

I think a more effective way of minimizing ESM than increased regulations is to talk about the elephant in education’s closet that the teaching community historically has ignored. Rather than labeling teachers like Letourneau, Ingram, Hannah, and Kim as sexual predators—as “sick” exceptions to the asexual teacher norm—educators would be better served to acknowledge that sexual dynamics in the classroom is a part of the “deep and continuous pedagogic connection to seduction as usual” (Glavin, 1997, p. 13). Disavowing the condition of pedagogical eroticism through the pretense that bodies don’t matter in the classroom will not fix the problem of pedagogical abuse in schools. As hooks (1995) argues, not talking about the
problem will not make it go away. Neither will conflating eroticism and misconduct though mandated attempts to prevent either from occurring; in fact, it could have the opposite effect. More rules could lead to more resistance. Rather, educators would be wise to hold eroticism and ESM as discrete concepts with boundaries that can be blurred.

It is impossible for me to isolate the defining moment in which the women of this study could be said to have committed ESM because I don’t see their experiences as black and white. Their affairs were an escalation of events, a continuum upon which I arbitrarily fixed “crossing the line” in this study at the point of their physical expression of what was already an emotional affair. Readers might mark the moment much earlier—say, at their pushmipullyu response to the boys’ flirtation. Some may backtrack even further: At a teacher conference in which I presented my pilot study, one audience member’s Christian ethic was apparent in his conviction that the sin was in the thought and not the deed, à la Jimmy Carter. He considered it wrong even to think about students in a sexualized way. I could empathize; early in my teaching career I felt pedophilic (or rather, hebephilic) when I experienced sparks of physical attraction toward students, or, worse yet, had a sex dream about one. Other audience members’ response to this earnest young man was that one cannot control one’s thoughts, and I agree. What one can do, however, is analyze where the thoughts are coming from and be prepared for them to surface occasionally. This level of theorizing is where I think conversations and coursework in teacher preparation and professional development programs would be most productive. Understanding how and why teachers cross the line, whatever that line may be, is more likely to be effective than the two lines of prevention and their concomitant assumptions that I see operating now in schools: Silence (the elephant will go away if we don’t talk about it) and surveillance (instituting rules that disallow any form of touch will control outbreaks of ESM).
Feminist scholars who theorize the body in education view the erotic element of classroom dynamics as a byproduct of the teaching environment that should not only be acknowledged but also considered as a means to energize and stimulate the classroom (Barreca & Morse, 1997; Gallop, 1997; hooks, 1994; McWilliam, 1996). However, the pedagogical pleasure (McWilliam, 1999) associated with the intensity and seductiveness of the teacher/learner relationship feels qualitatively similar to romance. As Tompkins (1996) writes, “Sometimes the feelings I have toward my students are romantic. It’s like being in love” (p. 144). I think what happens with teachers such as the ones in this study is not just a matter of blurring of eroticism and misconduct—their experiences were not a simple crossing over from thinking to acting or from “right” to “wrong.” Rather, the dynamic between the teachers and their student lovers could also be described as a conflation of pedagogical and romantic pleasure. The women went from loving the boys as students whom they perceived to be in need of saving to loving them as partners in romantic relationships. Teachers need to be able to theorize and recognize this blurring as well because it’s more subtle (and therefore more dangerous) than the distinction between pleasure and misconduct. One can draw a line between thinking and acting, even though that line can be blurred or shifted—but the slippery slope between platonic and romantic love is, I think, a bit more difficult to negotiate.

In the cases of the women in this study, their conflation of pedagogical pleasure with romantic love was amplified by the boys’ sexually assertive behavior. By flirting with their teachers, the boys were signifying their appreciation for them as women—as sexual beings. To be noticed as sexually desirable rather than overlooked as asexual schoolmarms was especially stimulating for these women who hadn’t received this level of attention from their husbands or partners in quite some time. Kim, who has learned to seek sources other than students to fill the
voids in her life, can now laugh at herself when she feels attracted to a student because she recognizes the feeling for what it is: a byproduct of the teacher/learner relationship. She can think to herself, “Oh, there’s that feeling again,” and know that this, too, shall pass.

There will always be attractive students with whom teachers connect on a number of levels, whether they be visceral, emotional, intellectual, or some combination thereof. The trick is not to promote this attraction to a possible romantic relationship. Teachers can enjoy a fantasy or two if they must, but they have to wait until the students graduate before fulfilling it. Chances are the desire will dissipate, perhaps because the students will have exhibited undeniable signs of their adolescent immaturity by then. Or they may well have been replaced by other students who show promise. There is no harm in fantasy; as Pink Floyd sings, “We don’t need no thought control.” The danger lurks somewhere in the space between thought and action, and I suspect the red zone varies from person to person. Kim, for example, has learned to avoid writing about emergent romantic feelings lest they become concretized: “to write a poem is dangerous / for actions follow words.” Hannah, on the other hand, suggests discarding “rough draft” fantasies because entertaining the possibility of a liaison might be dangerous: “Don’t even keep it because it might be a good idea someday.”

Even if teachers come to the conclusion that what they are feeling is romantic love, they need to consider whether it is worth risking their careers to pursue it. Although Letourneau (20/20, 2004) claimed not to regret her affair with Fualau, I certainly would not think 7 ½ years in prison and the loss of both my career and custody of my children a fair price for “true love.” Ingram regretted not waiting for Dickeson to graduate; Hannah and Kim both wished they hadn’t acted on their desires at all. What these women recognized in retrospect is what all teachers can
prepare for in advance of a situation that could lead to misconduct. Kim stressed the importance
of reflection in an interview:

The only way I can form the answer to those questions [e.g., what “too close” means, and
who decides] is through experience and through my mistakes, and learning from them. I
think if I hadn't been reflective about the relationships, in a sense that would almost be
more unethical than the relationships themselves.

Even without the benefit of experience, educators can anticipate how they would act in a given
situation; they can reflect vicariously through examination of the experiences of the women in
this study. Teachers need to decide for themselves where “the line” is based on a careful and
conscious consideration of their own ethics. Otherwise, if they are docile bodies, passively
accepting institutional definitions of “too close” without an understanding of the politics behind
such regulations, some day defiance of rules may become more appealing than acquiescence to
them. I think that is in part what happened to Kim; tired of being “a good girl all her life” in
relation to her family, ex-husband, and colleagues, the “internal switch” that she trusted to
prevent her from crossing the line with Damian failed.

Kim’s internal switch metaphor can be likened to Freud’s conception of the superego—
the part of the psyche, developed and conditioned through socialization, which distinguishes
right from wrong. Because the superego is constructed by social norms, when one begins to
question the validity or appropriateness of those norms, the superego loses its advantage in the
back-and-forth power struggle with the id—the part of the psyche that pursues what it desires
with no thought to consequence. Kim wrote a poem about the Freudian “storm of voices” in her
head:
while it makes for great poetry
it provides no protection from the storm of voices—
my id screaming at my superego refusing to back down
my ego trying desperately to keep the peace
between the part of me that wants right now
and the part of me who will settle for platonic
surely Freud is slipping somehow into this dimension
and while we are on the subject of him, what if there is more
than a little something Oedipal going on?

Kim articulated a Freudian struggle in this poem that could be mapped onto the other three
women’s experiences as well. All were “good girls” whose bad-girl ids won the struggle
between “right now” and “sett[ling] for platonic.” One could also argue there was “something
Oedipal going on” in the caregiving roles the women assumed in their affairs. As much as they
may have wanted equitable relationships and performed traditional gendered behaviors in order
to mitigate the power imbalance inherent in their teacher-student dyads, the boys were not
emotionally or economically equipped for reciprocity. As Hannah said after Eric’s home life
deteriorated to the point where she was buying him food and clothes, “It was almost like he was
my child.” I’m not a big fan of Freud and I don’t want to lend too much credence to his theories,
but I do find his model of the psyche a useful tool to illustrate the tensions these women
experienced.

One could theorize the affairs in this study from a number of perspectives. A
psychoanalytic approach might zero in on the women’s conflicted psyches, pointing to their
childhoods—particularly their problematic relationships with their mothers—for causation. The
unit of analysis for feminists would be gender. Liberal feminists might focus on the women’s resistance to the patriarchal structure of the schools; poststructural feminists might understand the women’s shifting subjectivities as a disruption the performance of *schoolmarm*, the asexual woman teacher. Socioculturalists would consider the multiple settings and the historical contexts of the social systems within which the women lived and taught. A Foucauldian scholar might take a genealogical approach to the inscription and deployment of a term such as “teacher predator.” Marxists might ask why the bourgeois women of this study were motivated to “save” their working-class, at-risk students; or they might theorize attraction, what I call the byproduct of a teacher-learner relationship, as a classroom commodity upon which teachers can capitalize. Queer theorists would trouble the heterosexual dynamics of the affairs and perhaps question the wrongness of sexualizing teacher-student relationships.

I could go on and on.

A reader could assume any one of the macro-level perspectives I mention above and rework the entire study. Feel free to do so—I encourage it. It’d make for a good discussion in an introductory theory course. But my goal has not been to take a theoretical position toward my object of knowledge and support it consistently and evenly with data, although my feminist and quasi-poststructural leanings are no doubt evident throughout my work. Rather, my intent has been to illustrate *how a teacher-student affair happens*, beginning with the women’s life experiences and predispositions that contributed to the possibility of an affair on through to the denouement of their relationships and teaching careers.

But telling a story as I have in this study has its own set of assumptions, some of which are problematic. Choosing a narrative format suggests there is a story to be told—a truth to be known—and a linear accounting of the women’s experiences is the vehicle to that understanding.
Because this narrative is not far removed from my own experiences as a classroom teacher, my sympathecic representation renders the women as familiar to the reader. Familiar, too, is my story-like representation: I began with the backgrounds of the women (setting), which led to the onset of the relationships (rising action); I peaked at crossing the line (climax), followed by role tensions during the relationships (falling action); then I concluded with the affairs’ fallout (denouement). Pillow’s (2003) critique of reflexivity as a means to truth in qualitative research calls this friendly rendering into question. She argues that practices such as bracketing biases or writing subjectivity statements “are necessarily dependent on a knowable subject and often collapse into linear tellings that render the researcher and the research subject as more familiar to each other (and thus to the reader)” (p. 184). Pillow is wary of work that claims to make the subject familiar through the researcher’s identification with it, calling instead for “the difficult and often uncomfortable task of leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar” (p. 177). She terms this task as “uncomfortable reflexivity—a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” (p. 188).

What uncomfortable reflexivity requires me to do in this work is not to assume I have any special privilege or insight into my participants’ accounting of sexual dynamics in their classrooms just because their stories seem familiar to me. In fact, it is their very familiarity that I must guard against, as Jack warns in her advice for conducting interviews:

I have learned that critical areas demanding attention are frequently those where I think I already know what the woman is saying. This means I am already appropriating what she says to an existing schema, and therefore I am no longer really listening to her. Rather, I am listening to how what she says fits into what I think I already know.

(Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 19; emphasis in original)
No one can know these women. Not I, who was as close to their relationships—Hannah’s and Kim’s, at least—as anyone. Perhaps not even themselves, as Fay (1996) argues. I cannot make these women transparent for the vicarious reader to consume, spit out, or choke on. However, as a researcher I must seek to know; I cannot simply refuse to do this difficult work. Situating that knowledge as tenuous and my linear, story-like vehicle as just one way to convey that knowledge is how I enact the refrain of my poststructuralist training: “Do it and trouble it.” try to be an ethical scholar.

At last—I have arrived at my final paragraph. I have had to weigh my concern that these women’s stories—tenuous and contingent upon context as I have tried to represent them—will be deployed in ways I can only have nightmares about against my hope that they will be used to open the door on the elephant in education’s closet and start a conversation about how it got there and what to do about it. The vicarious viewing of my participants’ experiences may affirm for some teachers that their own closets contain no elephantine traces. For others it will conjure up memories of teachers, colleagues, or students past and perhaps cause them to theorize those memories differently. It’s very rare for me to have a dialogue about my research, whether it be with a colleague in academia or a stranger at a bar, without that person saying, “Well, that reminds me of…” If the proliferation of media stories about teachers having sex with students weren’t enough to convince me of the prevalence of phenomenon, these anecdotal reports by almost everyone I talk to would suggest it. For still others, particularly early-career teachers, I hope the telling of these women’s stories will prepare them for the condition of sexual dynamics in their classrooms so that they are better-equipped to theorize, recognize, and manage it as ethically and pleasurably as they see fit.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

First Interview with Participants (to establish background and preliminary forays into the research topic)

1. Before we begin this interview, I’ll read a brief statement, after which, by saying “yes,” you will indicate that you have consented to participate in this research project. -- Have you read the informed consent document, have your questions about the project been answered, and have you signed the informed consent form?

2. First of all, tell me a little about your background—what brought you into teaching, what your teaching career has been like, what life events have led you to what you’re doing now.

3. Tell me about your teaching persona—what you “look like” in the classroom, why you choose to look that way, how you relate to kids, what the most important things are that you want your kids to learn and take from your classroom.

4. Let’s talk about relationships with students…how close is too close, in your opinion? How do you “know” if you’ve crossed the line? Is “your” line different from your colleagues’? How/why/why not? Can you give me some examples from your experiences where you felt either you or a student was in danger of crossing the line?

Follow-up Interviews with Participants (these interviews will be tailored to each participant, based on what is said in the first interview and what their experiences have been. However, I anticipate that some of the following questions will come up)

1. In our first interview when I asked you what you “looked like” in your classroom, you mentioned your (physical appearance/way you dress). Could you talk about some times when you were conscious of your body in the classroom? How do you make sense of these experiences—what was going on there?

2. Last time you told me about ______. Could you tell me a little more about how that happened/what that felt like/how your understanding of that (event/phenomenon) has changed over time? What were the points of no return, and how did you get past them?

3. You mentioned (student’s name). What was it about him/her that made him/her attractive in ways that other students were not? To what degree was s/he aware of your feelings, and (how) were they reciprocated? What, if any, measures did you take to make sure that other students didn’t pick up on the attraction? If the student was in your class, (how) did
the attraction affect the classroom dynamic? How/why did your feelings for that student change over time?

4. Did you talk to other people about how you felt about students? Who could/couldn’t you talk to, and why/not?

5. When other people found out about _____, what was their reaction? How did their reaction compare to what you expected/feared they might think?

6. What ethical/moral dilemmas were at work in your thinking about _____? How did you “resolve” them?

7. What advice would you give to new teachers about teacher-student relationships?
My name is Tara Star Johnson, and I am a graduate student about to start my dissertation research. I am interested in sexual dynamics in the classroom, and what I’d like to learn more about is how teachers handle their embodiment in a field where teachers and students aren’t supposed to have bodies, as if minds are the only field of interaction in the classroom. In my own six years’ experience teaching high school English in Michigan, I found myself overly conscious of the “teacher” image I was projecting in the classroom, and I didn’t know how to handle situations like discussing sex and sexuality when it came up in the literature, students flirting with me, or how to understand my own feelings for students with whom I’d developed a close rapport. My long-term goal with this research is to open up a space within teacher education to have productive conversations about the not-talked-about…the fact that sometimes teacher-student relationships go too far, as is evident if you look at the headlines on any given day. I think this silence surrounding sexual dynamics between teachers and students can create more problems than it hides. With this research I want to open the door on this elephant in education’s closet and figure out how it got there.

I’m seeking women who have taught or are teaching secondary English/language arts to participate in my dissertation study. The basics of what a participant can expect are:

1) To participate in 2 or more audiotaped interviews with me over the next few months, after which you will have an opportunity to read and revise or delete any material on the interview transcript as you see fit;
2) To be paid $10 per interview hour;
3) To be assured of the strictest confidentiality.

However, given the sensitive nature of this research topic, there are reasons you might not want to participate. If any of the following apply to you, well…don’t call.

1) You are uncomfortable talking about sex, sexuality, or attraction to students such that participation in this study might have an adverse effect on your psychological well-being.
2) You do not have time in your schedule this spring to provide interviews.
3) You have had a sexual relationship with a student who is a minor or have otherwise violated Standard 2 of the Georgia Code of Ethics, which states that inappropriate conduct includes “soliciting, encouraging, or consummating a written, verbal, or physical romantic or inappropriate relationship with a student (including dating a student).” As I am required by law to report child abuse, I don’t want to become privy to information that that would then obligate me to break confidentiality.

If you or someone you know might be interested in sharing stories with me about your/her experiences with sexual dynamics in the classroom—or even if you’re just interested in the topic and have questions for me, please email me at tarastar@uga.edu or call me at 706-353-2418, and we’ll talk further. Thank you for your consideration.
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Investigator: Tara Star Johnson, Ph.D. Candidate
Dissertation Director: Dr. Peter Smagorinsky

INFORMATION. You are invited to participate in this research study, which will occur during the 2004 calendar year. The purpose of this study is to explore teacher-student sexual dynamics in secondary classrooms in order to open the door for dialogue about embodiment, desire, and sexuality in the classroom. During the study you will be asked to participate in several open-ended interviews that I will conduct, in which I will ask you to share your perspectives on and experiences with the topic. The interviews will be scheduled at your convenience sometime during the spring, will occur either on the phone or in person, will take approximately ½ to ¾ hour each, and will be audio taped and transcribed for data analysis. You may also be asked to expand and/or clarify, via email or audiotaped over the phone, your ongoing perceptions about the topic. Finally, I will ask you to read the transcribed interviews so that you can 1) verify their accuracy, 2) add any additional insights, and/or 3) let me know if there is anything you don’t want me to use in them.

RISKS. There are no deceptions associated with this study, but some of the information I request from you may be sensitive and thus carries a risk of causing you emotional discomfort and stress. I will provide you with a list of counselors if needed.

COMPENSATION. If you participate in this study, you will receive a monetary compensation of $10 per interview hour.

BENEFITS. Teachers and teacher educators will benefit from this study by learning more about how high school teachers negotiate sexual dynamics in their classrooms as they read about your experiences. I also hope that you benefit from reflecting on and talking about your experiences in the classroom, and that this thinking will help you to make meaning of your experiences.

CONFIDENTIALITY. The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential unless required by law, with one exception: I AM REQUIRED BY LAW TO REPORT CHILD ABUSE. Therefore, if you reveal to me that you have had a sexual encounter with a student who is a minor, I will be obligated to reveal it. The data I collect will be stored securely and will be made available only to me, unless you specifically give me permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference to your real name will be made in any oral or written reports which could link you to the study; I will use a pseudonym to protect your identity. I will also use pseudonyms for names of other people and places that you might mention. Data on the audiotapes will only be used in professional publications and/or presentations. Audiotapes will be either stored for up to five years in a secure location or converted to digital files, but in either case any identifying names on the tapes will first be erased. I will transcribe all the data myself, and I will use pseudonyms on all documents.

PARTICIPATION. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, you may request that your data be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT. My signature below indicates that the researcher has answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Participant’s signature: ________________________________ Date: ______________

Researcher’s signature: ________________________________ Date: ______________

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D., Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu