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## A Light In Dark Times: In Overt Defense of Trans-Affirming Spaces in Education

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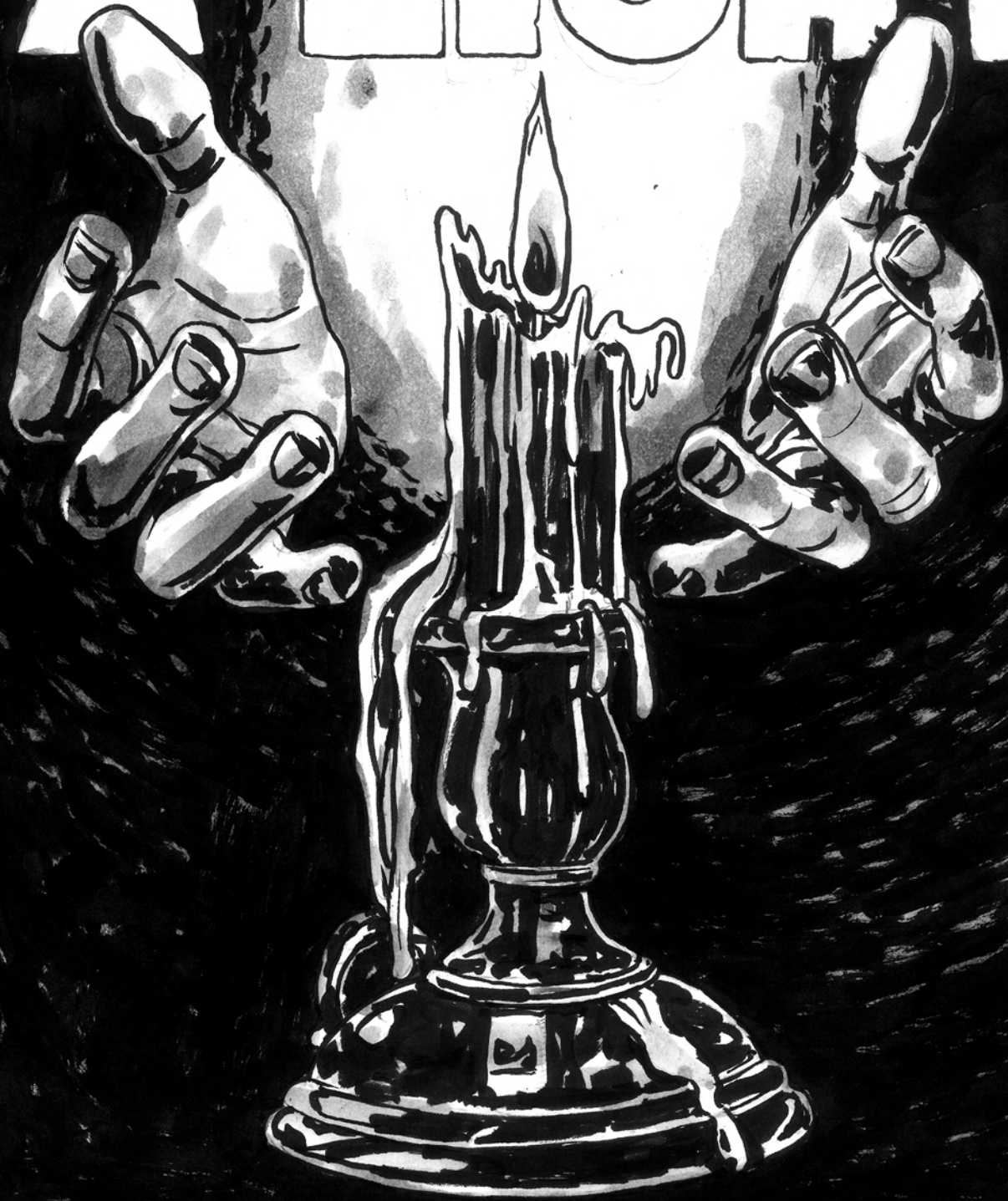
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# **A Light in Dark Times: In Overt Defense of Trans-Affirming Spaces in Education**

*James F. Woglom, Stephanie Jones, and Dylan Brody*

# A LIGHT



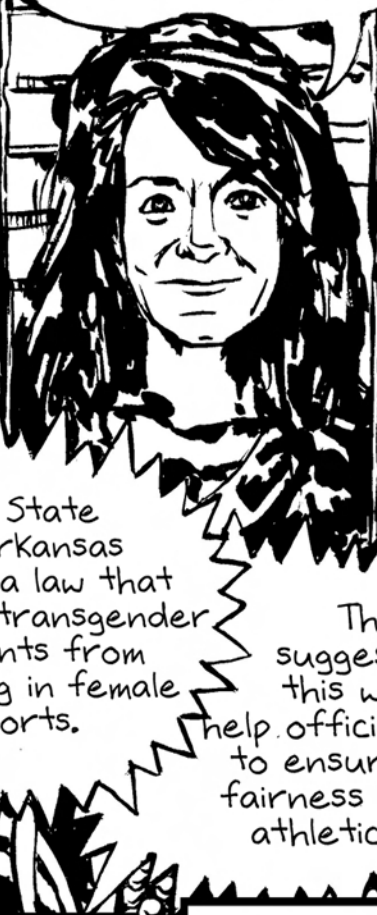
# IN DARK TIMES

In Overt Defense of Trans-Affirming Spaces in Education  
James F. Woglom, Stephanie Jones & Dylan Brody

The attacks against transyouth rights, trans-affirming education,

trans healthcare, and the very humanity of

people who don't conform to expected gender norms is monstrous.



The State of Arkansas passed a law that prohibits transgender students from competing in female sports.

They suggest this will help officials to ensure fairness in athletics...


It's hard to imagine what would fuel someone's motivation to rip away the possibility of a young person living a dignified, joyful life.

And it feeds on a fear of ourselves, doesn't it? It's a fear that all people will question cisgender norms and patriarchal values that depend on the man-woman gender binary.



It's also a fear of education and an ignorant targeting of schools and teachers as if children aren't immersed in a world of visual culture where gender and sexuality are always-already pedagogical material they are making meaning with.

How can educators make sense of the political discourse around gender and better understand a society that teaches and polices gendered norms and expectations of people from the time we are born?

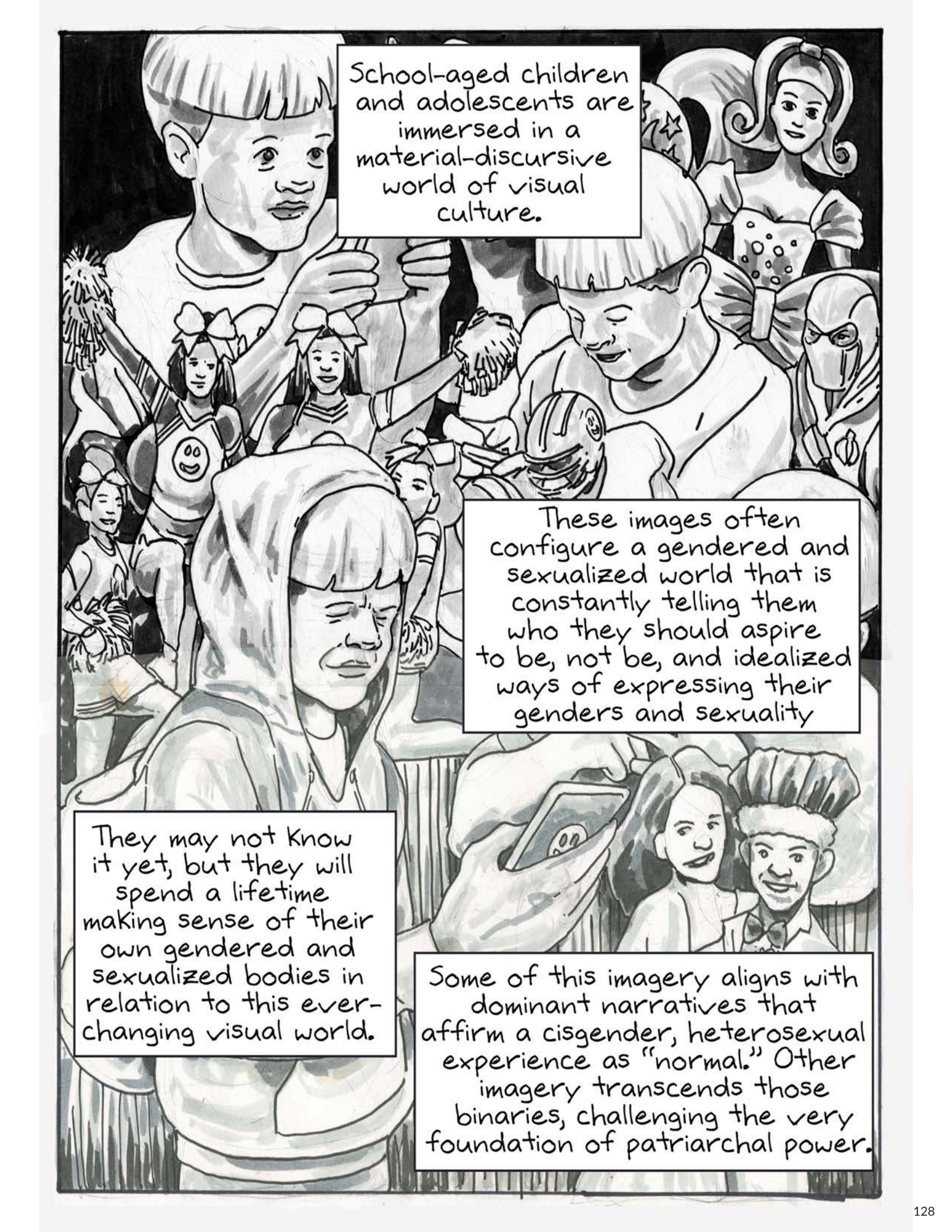


Parents and caretakers often create imagined futures for themselves and their children based on their images of gender and sexuality.

Many of these images are projections of visual culture that produces cisgender and heteronormative ideals.

The masculine-feminine binary that pervades visual culture limits what seems to be possible when it comes to living in fully human ways.

This binary is ever-present in child-focused imagery, including colors, clothes, and toys, and even very young children face backlash and resistance when stepping outside of the confines of a binary norm.




School-aged children and adolescents are immersed in a material-discursive world of visual culture.

These images often configure a gendered and sexualized world that is constantly telling them who they should aspire to be, not be, and idealized ways of expressing their genders and sexuality

They may not know it yet, but they will spend a lifetime making sense of their own gendered and sexualized bodies in relation to this ever-changing visual world.

Some of this imagery aligns with dominant narratives that affirm a cisgender, heterosexual experience as "normal." Other imagery transcends those binaries, challenging the very foundation of patriarchal power.

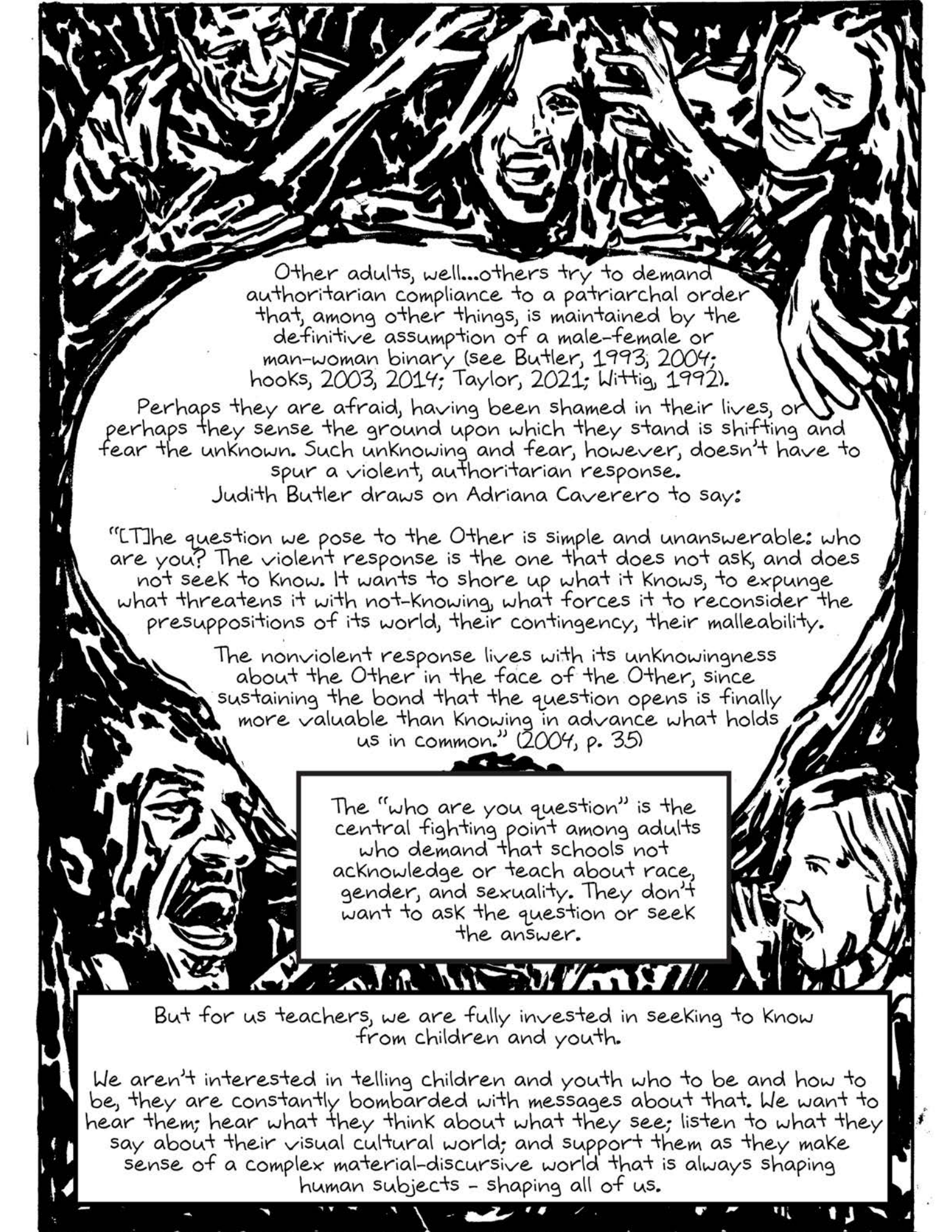


Gender-affirming and queer-centered living and learning spaces can feel more powerful and joyful for everyone in them.

In these spaces, some adults fight for their bodily autonomy and their right to be accepted as fully human. This is heartbreaking, and their resistance to these pressures is beautiful. These adults often work with and for youth's rights. They are a trusted person that youth can talk to. They establish organizations, create art, writing, and passionate protective bills. They produce school curricula that include and affirm gender queer, non-binary, trans, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual people. (see Barcelos et al., 2022; Blackburn et al., 2010; Casper & Schultz, 1999; Chasnoff & Cohen, 2008; Linville, 2022; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

They make space in this difficult world for their own joy-filled ways of being, and they make space for joy-making with children and youth as well.

The overwhelming darkness of the proliferating anti-LGBTQ+ education policies and legislation can be depressing, but we know that people are still living, thriving, and experiencing joy in their bodies while still being targeted. We don't hear enough about these life-giving efforts, but they persist.



Other adults, well...others try to demand authoritarian compliance to a patriarchal order that, among other things, is maintained by the definitive assumption of a male-female or man-woman binary (see Butler, 1993; 2004; hooks, 2003, 2014; Taylor, 2021; Wittig, 1992).

Perhaps they are afraid, having been shamed in their lives, or perhaps they sense the ground upon which they stand is shifting and fear the unknown. Such unknowing and fear, however, doesn't have to spur a violent, authoritarian response.

Judith Butler draws on Adriana Caverero to say:

"[T]he question we pose to the Other is simple and unanswerable: who are you? The violent response is the one that does not ask, and does not seek to know. It wants to shore up what it knows, to expunge what threatens it with not-knowing, what forces it to reconsider the presuppositions of its world, their contingency, their malleability.

The nonviolent response lives with its unknowingness about the Other in the face of the Other, since sustaining the bond that the question opens is finally more valuable than knowing in advance what holds us in common." (2004, p. 35)

The "who are you question" is the central fighting point among adults who demand that schools not acknowledge or teach about race, gender, and sexuality. They don't want to ask the question or seek the answer.

But for us teachers, we are fully invested in seeking to know from children and youth.

We aren't interested in telling children and youth who to be and how to be, they are constantly bombarded with messages about that. We want to hear them; hear what they think about what they see; listen to what they say about their visual cultural world; and support them as they make sense of a complex material-discursive world that is always shaping human subjects - shaping all of us.



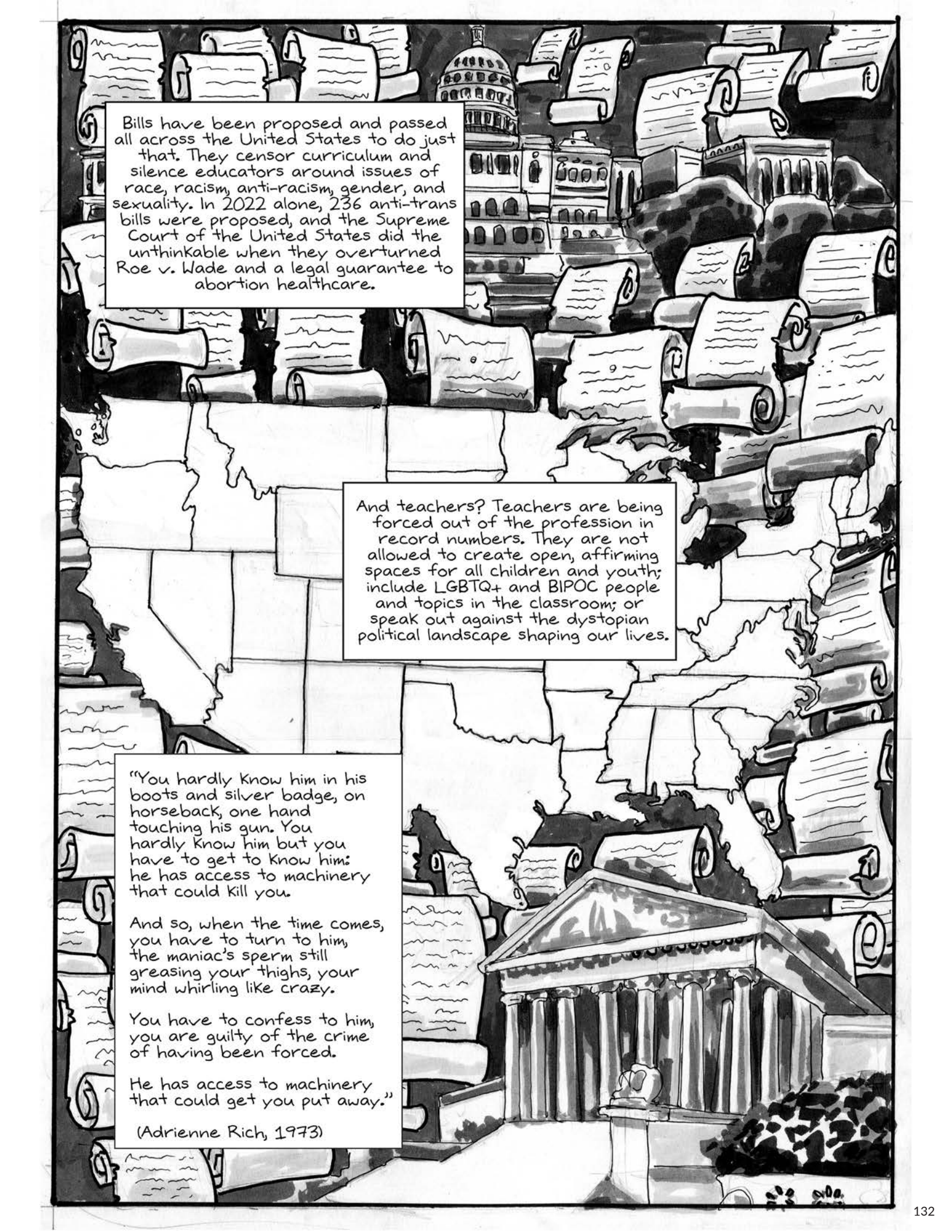


One doesn't have to look any further than the barrage of images in our everyday lives to see that our society is simultaneously obsessed with bodies and disgusted by them; outspoken about what the body should and should not be, and silenced about what might be possible.

We are actively involved in a pedagogical dance with the material-discursive world within which we live and create.

Recent legislative action constricting curriculum won't end the teaching and learning that happens in formal or informal spaces, but they will do violence, making youth and educators feel more vulnerable and dehumanized.

But that is partially the intention, isn't it? To rip away our rights to be safe and protected as we fully express our shared humanity and enforce an authoritarian script?



Bills have been proposed and passed all across the United States to do just that. They censor curriculum and silence educators around issues of race, racism, anti-racism, gender, and sexuality. In 2022 alone, 236 anti-trans bills were proposed, and the Supreme Court of the United States did the unthinkable when they overturned *Roe v. Wade* and a legal guarantee to abortion healthcare.

And teachers? Teachers are being forced out of the profession in record numbers. They are not allowed to create open, affirming spaces for all children and youth; include LGBTQ+ and BIPOC people and topics in the classroom; or speak out against the dystopian political landscape shaping our lives.

"You hardly know him in his boots and silver badge, on horseback, one hand touching his gun. You hardly know him but you have to get to know him: he has access to machinery that could kill you.

And so, when the time comes, you have to turn to him, the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs, your mind whirling like crazy.

You have to confess to him, you are guilty of the crime of having been forced.

He has access to machinery that could get you put away."

(Adrienne Rich, 1973)



The legislators passing these bills produce hopelessness, despair, anger, resentment, and entitlement, and encourage division and violence. They create social and political dysfunction at every turn.

In an attempt to uphold the fictional, fantastical, idealized, and oppressive image of a cisgender, heterosexual, White, middle-class, patriarchal, nuclear family who reads the Christian Bible and conforms to images of life that are only found in 1950s media and visual culture, those who have been elected to serve the people of this country are harming us all.

How can we all fumble our way into being more comfortable

being a part of conversations about how visual culture

produces possible ways of being?

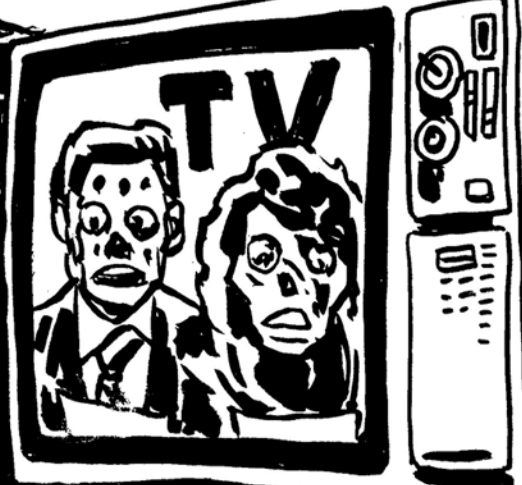


We have talked a lot about how important language is and how important it is to have words and phrases we can use to articulate things we are seeing and hearing.

We have to keep reminding people that there is no escaping a conversation about gender and sexuality. When an infant comes to preschool in a t-shirt that says "Ladies' Man" that child is literally inside the labyrinth of gender and sexuality. So instead of ignoring that, we can raise questions and point out what we notice.

Our everyday visual culture is filled with these meaning-producing images about gender, sexuality, and patriarchy. And of course the formal curriculum for education is replete with patriarchal, white supremacist, and colonialist assumptions about art and cultural imagery. Much of this centers bodies as subjects, making it fairly easy for educators to pose questions about the bodies that are produced, the messages produced through those bodies, and different ways students can make sense of those messages.

If our schools are left unchecked, there is a risk that they will overtly tell students who to be, what to think, and how they should aspire to live. By creating inclusive and affirming spaces, we can disrupt the internalized fascism of the discursive systems and histories that ensnare our society.



We can begin to recognize the manner in which fascist ideologies and hegemonic power structures are inscribed and reinscribed in our shared culture and institutions, and invite students to join us in co-authoring alternatives.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**James F. Woglom** is an artist/educator, associate professor of Art Education, and co-chair of the School of Education at Cal Poly Humboldt. He received his PhD from the University of Georgia, where he studied arts-based research methodologies and socially engaged practices. His co-authored graphic novel on social justice-oriented teacher education, *On Mutant Pedagogies*, was awarded the American Education Research Association's Qualitative Research Group's Outstanding Book Award.



**Stephanie Jones** is a Meigs Distinguished Professor at the University of Georgia where she teaches courses on feminist theories and pedagogies, bodies and sex education for children and youth, justice-oriented teaching, critical literacies and writing, and post qualitative and post-humanist inquiry. Her feminist post-humanist scholarship focuses on justice-oriented formal and informal K-12 and teacher education.



**Dylan Brody** (they/them) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia. Their primary focus of scholarship is rooted in Critical Studies, with particular emphasis on early childhood (0-3), dimensions of justice in play, abolition, anti-oppressive pedagogy, and wonder as a healing portal.