

All that cloth can carry (on a queer body)

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### Acknowledgment of country

I begin by acknowledging the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands I live and work, and where this text was written. I pay my respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands.

### Guidance for the reader

This chapter does not make grand universal claims. Rather, it suggests that in some instances, the deliberate stitching of cloth that is turned into a garment and worn has implications for the vitality of the stitched cloth, the garment made from it, and the person wearing the garment. Universalism in fashion discourse is problematic due to its capacity to erase and mask locally and culturally specific ideas. This chapter acknowledges that it is important to view perspectives in their proper geographic and cultural contexts. Many of the ideas presented in this chapter are locally, that is geographically and culturally, specific. This chapter is written on Gadigal land, in the so-called Sydney, by a queer immigrant settler from Finland. The reader is best placed to determine the ways in which the ideas presented in this chapter play out in their location and context.

### Introduction

Some cloth and clothing exist as repositories for grief, for example arising from witnessing ecological collapse and extinction, a devastating pandemic, personal loss. This chapter explores queer materialities in fashion: what can cloth carry? Through examples, including the author's cross-stitched poems and portraits, this chapter examines the transference of loss, of grief, into cloth. Grief is a potent facet of being alive: stitching loss amplifies the vitality of cloth. Altering the cloth surface by stitching grief into it effects a transformative change in both the stitcher and the cloth. Thousands of stitches traversing the two faces of a cloth become a repository of memory and emotion, an honouring of loss. Does the stitched cloth then become sacred? And conversely, when does a sacred cloth become a rag?

The chapter explores the material knowledge of the stitcher, of the wearer and of the viewer: what can cloth carry when we know it to contain the grief of the stitcher? While many of the works discussed here remain as textiles, this chapter also examines instances when such cloths are fashioned into garments or otherwise

placed on a body, and when the surface of a garment is altered with stitches of sorrow. What happens when the stitched surface is placed on a living body and it is viewed by both the wearer and others? Can cloth carry the grief of the wearer or the viewer in the way it carries the grief of the stitcher? While this chapter focuses on grief, trauma and loss, it acknowledges that vitality and aliveness include other experiences and emotions, such as joy and wonder. A queer experience of the world is nonetheless a never-ending negotiation of loss by way of not fitting in. Queer people experience discrimination on a spectrum ranging from throwaway comments to violence and loss of life. To be queer and alive is to be strong and resilient, in part because of the constant embodied negotiation of loss, both historical and current.

This chapter approaches fashion as expressed through physical garments made from cloth, while acknowledging that a garment upon completion is not always 'fashion'. The textiles that garments are made of are of particular interest here, specifically textiles that have been embroidered by hand. Several textiles discussed in the chapter are not made into garments. They nonetheless reveal critical insights about stitching grief into cloth, hence their inclusion. The physical action of pushing a threaded needle through cloth over and over to embellish the surface of the cloth is not a neutral act. At any and every moment the stitcher has thoughts and experiences emotions. This chapter asserts that a transference of emotion may occur from the stitcher to the cloth. If that cloth is made into a garment that is worn, the experience of the wearer carrying the embedded emotion is regarded here as a significant act.

In a chapter titled 'In praise of hands', Henri Focillon (1989/1934, 180) writes: "The hand is not the mind's docile slave. It searches and experiments for its master's benefit; it has all sorts of adventures; it tries its chance". This echoes my experience of stitching, and it colours my reading of other stitchers' processes. To stitch is to think, a way to process thoughts: one reflects while stitching, one has eureka moments while stitching, one arrives at difficult questions while stitching. In the book *In Praise of Hands*, Octavio Paz (1974, 21) states, "Since it is a thing made by human hands, the craft object preserves the fingerprints — be they real or metaphorical — of the artisan who fashioned it. These imprints are not the signature of the artist; they are not a name. Nor are they a trademark. Rather, they are ... the scarcely visible, faded scar commemorating the original brotherhood of men and their separation." Outdated gendering aside, the authors of both texts underline an earlier argument: to stitch is not a neutral act.

### Mauri and aliveness in fashion

This chapter takes cues from two authors, Amie Berghan and Otto Von Busch, who discuss fashion and vitality or life force from two different yet complementary perspectives. Berghan (2020) discusses mauri, the Maori term for life force, in fashion supply chains. According to Berghan, mauri is the “vitality or life force, that weaves the physical and spiritual worlds together” (8). Mauri exists in both living beings and entities often considered “non-living” in modern western contexts, such as soil and water, and, argues Berghan, textiles and garments. Berghan posits that the primary reason for fashion’s waste is not “human greed and entitlement, but [it arises] as a reaction to the mauri of the garments” (4). Berghan’s powerful argument guides the discussion of textiles here.

Berghan speculates that the throwaway culture in fashion is due in part to a subconscious sensing of the mauri-depleting nature of fast fashion garments. We discard them relatively quickly because we innately know they are not good for us, that they diminish our life force. While Berghan primarily focuses on toxic textile manufacturing and dyeing processes, the idea could expand to the conditions in which the garments are manufactured, where expert machinists handle the cloth at the machine. Examples of stitched cloths and garments later in the chapter demonstrate the transference of the stitcher’s emotions and trauma into cloth through stitching; a similar transference of the garment worker’s experience into the garments is possible<sup>1</sup>. Given that we wear garments directly on our bodies for much of the day and often while we sleep, we ought to be more curious about the conditions in which the garments are made, and the wellbeing of the people making them. Human hands have touched everything we wear: through our clothes we are connected to people we will likely never meet. Yet this connection holds power and promise. Each day we have myriad reasons for getting dressed in the clothes that we do, and every day one of those reasons could be to honour and celebrate the individuals who with their expert hands at the sewing machine brought the garments into existence.

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<sup>1</sup> I was recently asked about the relationship between labour conditions and prayer in regards to Muslim prayer mats (Saed, 2021). The journalist noted that some prayer mats are manufactured in questionable labour conditions, with problematic materials such as polyester, going “against the religious principles they aim to embody”. I opined that “if there’s trauma and abuse in the factory, that [trauma] gets transferred into the product”.

In building on the work of biologist Andreas Weber to develop a thesis of vitality in fashion, Von Busch (2021, 15) asserts: “A vitalist perspective in fashion starts the sustainability journey by affirming how fashion contributes to a sense of aliveness. Sustainable practice is not merely to keep living but to enhance life and desire.” Vitality or aliveness is not limited to ‘positive’ qualities/experiences such as joy: grief and trauma are as much functions of aliveness. Not feeling anything would be more akin to death or stasis, the opposite of aliveness. Von Busch (2021, 27) explicitly promotes three changes in perspectives in fashion, one of which is a shift “from fashionable goods to how the vitality of fashion cultivates *fashion-abilities*, that is, capabilities to engage, embrace and modulate the aliveness of fashion”. In the context of stitching grief, these fashion-abilities can be understood to include both the skill to intentionally stitch while reflecting on grief, and the capacity to read the layered meanings in the stitched cloth.

Aliveness is a concept that helps us understand the state of fashion today: the absence or deficit of aliveness in fashion is arguably catastrophic in scale in various parts of the fashion system, from fibre production to garment manufacture to consumption patterns to body image issues, and so forth. Examinations of fashion supply chains by fashion brands and various measurement tools are often mechanistic and reductive, with narrow measures. Admittedly, ‘aliveness’ or ‘mauri’ would present challenges for assessment, however it is worth noting that mauri is now being embedded into other systems. For example, the Mauri Model Decision-Making Framework (MMDMF) integrates mauri with systems thinking, and the tool has been successfully employed in New Zealand to arrive at decisions about water use that impact a wide range of communities and stakeholders (Morgan et al, 2021). In a similar vein, embedding notions of aliveness in western systems seems plausible, and aliveness could be examined systematically within fashion and textiles. As Morgan et al (2021, 205) note, the MMDMF has been adapted to other cultural contexts, such as forest management with local communities in Papua. Its potential in fashion and textiles ought to be investigated further, guided by Berghan. For example, while specific measures such as the greenhouse gas emissions of a fibre’s production phase or the toxicity of a dye chemical are vital, they tell nothing about the health of the overall system. There is an urgent opportunity to connect ideas of life force or mauri with the now established work of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al, 2009) in fashion and textiles as a frame for a more detailed and specific work.

### Stitching queer grief and trauma

There are long histories of hand stitching used to process grief and trauma. The examples here include scholarly accounts of hand-stitch by practitioner-researchers, as well as accounts of historical and ongoing examples. The common thread through the examples is that they embody an explicit statement about the emotional state of the stitcher. I will discuss relevant examples of my own stitched work in the chapter, situating them in this larger arc and community of practice. The stitched cloths and their stitchers discussed throughout this chapter are in various ways queer. During a panel titled *Are You Still a Slave* (The New School, 2014), bell hooks defined queer as “not being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.” Whether it is a queer design academic stitching about avian extinctions because the overwhelming loss of extinction compels them, or a patient at a psychiatric hospital driven to embroider fragments of an autobiography onto their patient uniform in protest of their predicament, these are inherently queer acts and artefacts at odds with their surroundings.

In discussing the curation of an exhibition of “conflict textiles” titled *Stitched Voices*, in Aberystwyth, Andrä et al (2020: 342) argue that “needlework and its curation introduce forms of knowledge and ways of knowing that have the potential to unsettle prevalent approaches to and understanding of war and militarized violence”. As a cross-stitch artist with a long career in fashion education focusing on sustainability and social justice, I speculate that needlework can equally expand our understanding of other traumatic phenomena, including climate change and biodiversity loss. I do this in *Precarious Birds*, a collaboration with design scholar Zoë Sadokierski focusing on avian extinctions (Sadokierski & Rissanen, 2022). Conversations about extinction and loss with scientists inform the poetry I cross-stitch in the project; the emotional qualities of the conversations transfer to the stitched cloth. The stitching imbues the cloth with a particular aliveness coloured by grief. Andrä et al (2020: 344-345) discuss conflict textiles as “object witnesses”, with capacity to speak in documentary, visual and sensory registers. While the textile objects of *Precarious Birds* are not conflict textiles in the same sense as those in *Stitched Voices*, they are object witnesses in the irreversible loss of bird species in a conflict of survival brought about by one species, ours.

[Figure 1

Figure caption: Cross-stitch of Munchique wood-wren (*Henicorhina negreti*) by the author, *Precarious Birds*, 2019. Courtesy of the author.]

Harrison (2020), one of the artists in *Stitched Voices*, processes her personal experiences of the Troubles in Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s through stitching. While stitching, she considers the viewer with the intention that they can similarly process their experiences of the same events when encountering her work titled *Continuum*. For Harrison, “stitching acts as a metaphor for both damage and healing” (419). On one hand, the needle pierces the cloth, while on the other, the stitches collectively make the cloth whole again, not unlike the stitches made by a surgeon. The analogy with surgery is not uncommon among embroidery artists. My own artist statement for several years has included some version of the phrase: “I stitch myself back together again, and again.”

The *Common Threads Project* conceived by Rachel Cohen, a clinical psychologist, works with victims of gender-based violence. An account of a pilot project in Ecuador (Cohen, 2013) describes how a series of workshops create a space in which participants can stitch *arpilleras*, a Chilean tradition of narrative textiles. *Arpillera* is Spanish for burlap, perhaps echoing the ordinariness of the tradition. Stitching *arpilleras* is a way for the participants to express and process trauma that may sometimes be too painful to express verbally: “survivors of violence may find it helpful to engage in nonverbal approaches to respond to what has happened to them, and for healing from its effects” (157). Cohen notes that many cultures have traditions of narrative textiles, and that locally specific traditional cultural practices must be considered by clinicians when designing interventions such as the workshops in *Common Threads*. In discussing touch and textiles, Pajackowska (2010) argues that when we conceive of textiles as language-like, as in the narrative textiles produced in *Common Threads*, “the textile is no longer conceived as inert matter but as an active material system ... imbued with meaning” (139). ‘Active and alive’ easily describes all textiles and garments discussed in this chapter, regardless of the ‘completion’ date of their stitching. The aliveness, a life force, persists through time.

Convalescing soldiers returning from the First World War were sometimes assigned embroidery and other forms of needlework while in hospital healing from the traumas of war, in Australia and New Zealand (Davidson, 2004) and in the United States and the UK (McBrinn, 2021, 110). Although these examples are now in the more distant past than those created within the *Common Threads* project, healing an unspeakable trauma by stitching unites both the stitchers and us, the viewers, across time. Both my grandfathers fought in the Second World War, and we were taught from a young age not to ask them questions about the war. Sometimes hints

of the horrors were whispered among adults. Sometimes when I stitch, I think of my late grandfathers, and of the generation of soldiers before them who stitched to heal, and I wish them all, and us, peace<sup>2</sup>.

In a more recent and personal context, Berlo (2020, 162) describes the grief after her husband abruptly left, in relation to her encounter with the Bayeux Embroidery<sup>3</sup>: “My academic work was stalled. I cried in my office, panicked that I did not have the strength to face my students. I couldn’t eat, or think. But I could pick up a needle and thread and sew.” She expands: “The streaming light illuminated my embroidery hoop and – ever so slightly – thawed my frozen heart” (163). McBrinn (2021, 26-7) writes about Rock Hudson’s needlework, first noted in the press in the 1970s and again after his death from AIDS in 1985. Apparently, Hudson stitched in his final weeks in hospital. While this was fodder for the tabloid press as Hudson’s homosexuality became public, I cannot help wondering what comfort or joy stitching might have brought to Hudson in the face of impending death from AIDS. Stitching, while often solitary, never feels lonely; there is peace in the solitude. And while many quilts created as part of the *NAMES Project*, perhaps better known as the *AIDS Memorial Quilt*, are put together through myriad means, some are stitched, sometimes by groups of people. When I witness quilts from the *NAMES Project*, I look for hand stitches, and upon encountering them, I think of the stitcher in the company of the person that the quilt memorialises, with gratitude.

[Figure 2

Figure caption: Quilts from the *NAMES Project* on display in Washington DC, USA. National Institutes of Health, public domain.]

A well-known embroidery sampler by Elizabeth Parker at the Victoria & Albert Museum dating to circa 1830 is essentially one long paragraph of stitched text outlining Parker’s experiences and concerns. Embroidery samplers have centuries of history as tools to develop skill and mastery in embroidery. Parker’s sampler is unusual in that it is entirely text, and written in a highly personal, confessional tone when she was still a teenager. Parker discusses at length her suicidal thoughts (the Victoria & Albert Museum notes that thankfully she lived to an old age) and reading the sampler, questions arise about Parker’s motivation while stitching. She may have

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter is being finished during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the northern spring of 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Often referred to as the Bayeux Tapestry, the cloth is embroidered, not woven.

stitched with another viewer in mind, or the sampler may have been a way for her to process her traumatic experiences, or both. Based on my experience as a stitcher I estimate the piece to have taken Parker more than 200 hours to stitch. Its survival is testament to others, including museum curators and conservators, recognising the inherent value in Parker's stitching. It possesses an undeniable aliveness almost two centuries after Parker's efforts, and while we live in a world vastly different from hers, we can identify and empathise with her concerns. In *The Subversive Stitch*, Roszika Parker (2010, 89) describes an earlier, unsigned sampler that is similarly unusual for its personal tone. Aliveness is stitched into cloth and is again recognised by strangers centuries later.

The examples discussed so far exist as textiles, without contact with the body except perhaps a stroke of a hand. An embroidered jacket in the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, Germany, offers us a glimpse of stitched trauma on the body. On first encounter the jacket is harrowing. Agnes Richter was a patient at a mental health facility in Germany from 1893 until her death in 1918 (Röske, 2014). During her institutionalisation Richter stitched autobiographical text on the jacket extensively. Not all of it is legible, however among other things it contains the phrase "I plunge headlong into disaster". It is clear from sweat stains and other signs of wear that Richter regularly wore the garment. Bryan-Wilson (2017, 34) notes how cloth can "traverse the line between public and private as it travels with us on our bodies as we shift from the domestic realm to the street". The act of stitching the words, just as in Parker's sampler, externalises Richter's thoughts and emotions and as such already offers some release. I speculate that the act of wearing the garment has the capacity to further amplify healing. The trauma becomes a conquered trophy worn by the subject. And as with Parker's sampler, along the way a curator or a conservator recognised the potency, the aliveness, stitched into an otherwise mundane jacket so that we can bear witness to Richter's turmoil more than a century later. Furthermore, American fibre artist Michael Sylvan Robinson is heavily influenced by Richter's jacket in their textile activist practice (Calahan & Zachary, 2022); the aliveness of her stitches exudes power that inspires activist needlework today, and hopefully far into the future.

### Stitching queer loss

I examine all of the stitched works discussed here as a gay man who cross-stitches, in a world that often treats a man who stitches as unusual, as queer. Yet for me, while stitching is sacred, it is also an everyday, mundane activity. McBrinn's (2021) expansive and loving account of queer men who stitch is affirming. I began an



ongoing series of cross-stitched poems in 2016 with *#communication*. It is an embroidery sampler of short phrases cross-stitched daily over 100 days and posted on social media. They are responses and reactions to written communications (text messages, chats, online comments) that are today very immediate, sometimes public and often ambiguous in their meaning. The daily stitching was a radical act of slowing down, at a time when there was, and is, a sense of urgency around all communications. Working on *#communication* was an alternative experience of time in my then home New York, a city that often claimed its inhabitants as chronically insufficient no matter how little we slept and how many hours we worked. Over the 100 days the piece took approximately 120 hours to complete. The stitched frame circling the piece was a response to the June 12th, 2016 mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, which occurred on day 90 of the project. The violence of the Pulse shooting was overwhelming. The dance floor of a gay club had always been a safe place for me, and reading about such a space being violated, with unbearable loss of queer life, was distressing. Stitching, at times while sobbing and shaking, helped process the grief and anger. Today those stitches hold the anger, as much as they hold the memory of the dead.

*Whispers* is a poem that loosely recounts my experience of leaving the Lutheran Church in Finland at the age of 19, in reaction to deeply homophobic comments made by senior leaders within the church at the time. Reading old diary entries helped revisit the emotions more than two decades later. The poem builds on the common experience that many LGBTQIA+ people have of constructing their chosen families, to build a community around oneself to whom one doesn't need to constantly explain oneself, to have a family that keeps one safe. I stitched the poem three times during 2017, including a Dutch version for *DW B*, a Belgian literary magazine (Rissanen, 2018). Each experience of approximately 40 hours of stitching was equally emotive. While the stitched cloth holds a deep loss - the church had until my late teens been a safe place - it also holds a deep love of my queer family.

In 2013 I exhibited the first phase of an embroidered series, *Rest in Porn*, in response to the suicides of three prominent gay porn actors in 2012-13: Dror Barak (porn name Roman Ragazzi), Peter Kozma (Arpad Miklos) and Wilfried Chevalier (Wilfried Knight). I created the work because I was aghast at the callous and dismissive reaction of some people online to the suicides, due to the men having been sex workers. With this work I wanted to restore their humanity while being unapologetic about their line of work. In 2018-20 I cross-stitched a triptych of portraits of the actors, an object witness to honour them. For much of the 170 hours of stitching I

reflected on the suicides of the men, and to me the stitched cloth is now sacred, arguably no different from a religious, sacred textile. Posting about the work on social media as it progressed became another space for healing: several people knew Kozma and Barak personally. Learning more about them was an unexpected joy of the project. I still hope to learn more about the third, Chevalier. The triptych is now in a private collection, where the current custodian tells its story to those encountering it newly, and I dare to hope the collective healing continues.

[Figure 3

Figure caption: *Rest In Porn*, triptych of cross-stitched portraits by the author, 2018-20. Courtesy of the author.]

Placing stitched textiles on a body can occur directly, or through an intermediate step of making a garment from the textile and placing that on a body. Depending on context, either approach may or may not occur within fashion. Here, the primary interest is two-fold: first, the contact made between the stitched cloth and the living body, whether of the stitcher or another person, and second, the experience of the viewer of the cloth situated on a body. Reading the stitched textile, whether in garment form or as cloth, on the body is risky. This risk is something that fashion and textile artists and designers, curators and scholars ought to pay attention to. Through stitching, the cloth is embedded with experience and emotion, in many cases trauma, yet this may not be obvious to a viewer, especially if they have not been informed of the nature and motivation of the stitched work. The risk is that the stitched cloth is read primarily visually and interpreted as merely another garment. This in turn risks it being seen as somewhat disposable: perhaps of some value now but not in the not-so-distant future. That risk was highlighted recently in the highly emotive social media debate about the trend for garments made from quilts. Mary Fons (2022) argues that making garments from quilts dishonours the labour of the quilt makers. Yet Fons does not sufficiently discuss the various contexts in which quilt clothes are worn. The reverence that many wearers of quilt clothes have for quilt makers must be acknowledged, even as there are valid criticisms to be made about the economic logics driving the trend.

In writing this chapter I took the sampler #communication off its frame and placed it on my body six years after the Pulse massacre. While the stitched cloth was on me, I read the names of the 49 LGBTQIA+ people killed at the nightclub in 2016. The purpose of this exercise was to have an embodied experience of the grief I felt six years earlier while stitching the frame. I did not know any of the victims; yet it was

impossible for me to read the 49 names without my voice breaking, without the grief and anger overtaking my body. I also took the poem *Whispers* off its frame to place it on my body. Once carrying the poem, I read it out loud. I concentrated on the feeling of the words on my skin as they came out of my mouth. While the loss is there, the overwhelming love in the cloth envelops me. These are cloths electric with aliveness.

Materiality in fashion, in part through globalization and the economic perspective of fashion often imposed on it, is often universalised. Both place and the hands are abstracted from fashion's materiality. At best we may know the primary place of garment construction through one line in a label, 'Made in'. This masks the material provenance, the complexity of garment manufacture and the makers. I argue that we must be determined in our effort to reinstate a sense of place and a sense of the maker in the materiality of fashion, to understand its vitality in endless locally specific contexts. For example, cotton is grown in Australia in highly extractive monoculture settings but it is also grown on farms through regenerative farming practices, with care for earth and all her inhabitants. The poverty of aliveness in the dominant system must not mask aliveness in the fringes. For vitality to emerge where it is missing and to flourish where it already exists in fashion's materiality, we must be intentional in holding space for and breathing life into it.

#### Conclusion: stitches to come

This chapter has examined a series of hand-stitched textile objects through a lens of aliveness, a life force. The examples focus on loss and trauma, explicitly recognising that stitching is a practice of healing for the stitcher. For some viewers, experiencing these textiles may also be a healing experience; they certainly are to me. This work strives to better understand how such healing practices may be intentionally amplified in textiles and fashion. Further research is required by researchers and practitioners in different geographic, linguistic and cultural contexts to test these ideas. Different languages may have different words for vitality and life force, or none at all, and further work ought to consider these nuances. Rachel Cohen's *Common Threads Project* has been repeated by various communities in several continents since the pilot, pointing to stitching being a potent healing force across humanity. Similarly, versions of the AIDS quilt have emerged in North America, Europe and Australia: stitching individual and collective grief can transcend culture and language.

I am a middle-aged gay man who came out in 1991. Back then, my younger, naive self imagined that progress in human rights was an inevitable force of nature, that at

some point in the future we would be more free, with more rights, with less fear. That is not uniformly the case<sup>4</sup>. Admittedly in some respects there are more ‘rights’ in several countries where one may live a life that feels generally safe. Nonetheless, our ‘rights’ are fragile as ever, and in many parts of the world gay men are murdered with impunity, and gay teenagers commit suicide in larger numbers than their heterosexual counterparts. So I keep stitching myself back together as I continuously fall apart in facing the precarity of queer life, mine and others’. I have made it further along than many of my generation and for that I am grateful, yet I despair for the generations of queer children today and in the future. I dare to dream of a world where they have an opportunity to grow into themselves, however they are, without discrimination, without bullying, with their innate vitality intact. I stitch to hold that possibility alive. One day I will stitch my last stitch, and my hope is that it exists in some temporal proximity to my last breath.

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<sup>4</sup> As one example, during the writing of this chapter in March 2022, Florida passed the ‘Parental Rights in Education’ bill, widely known as the ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill. The bill bans discussions of gender identity and sexuality in Florida schools up to the age of nine.

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