

A SEARCH FOR OUR QUEER ANCESTORS IN EDUCATION: ELLA FLAGG YOUNG

*En busca de nuestros ancestros queer en educación:
Ella Flagg Young*

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Abstract. Educators with non-normative sexualities and genders have long existed, but strikingly little historical research has been published that explores their experiences during the Progressive Era in the USA. This was a time when working in schools opened new professional and personal possibilities for a large population of mostly unmarried women. Conducting such research presents many challenges, though, including: 1) difficulties in locating documentation about aspects of educators' lives that they chose not to record, and 2) differences in language that may have been used then versus now to describe such persons. In this article, I describe some of these challenges that I have encountered as I have researched and written a biography of Ella Flagg Young, Chicago's school superintendent from 1909-1915. I argue that Young transgressed bounds of normative sexuality and gender for her time and furthermore, her stories are of continued relevance for people in schools who now identify as LGBTQ+.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; Queer; Historical Methods.

Resumen. *Los educadores con sexualidades y géneros no normativos han existido durante mucho tiempo, pero se ha publicado sorprendentemente poca investigación histórica que explore sus experiencias durante la Era Progresista en los EE. UU. Esta fue una época en la que trabajar en las escuelas abrió nuevas posibilidades profesionales y personales para una gran población de mujeres en su mayoría solteras. Sin embargo, realizar dicha investigación presenta muchos desafíos, que incluyen 1.) dificultades para localizar documentación sobre aspectos de la vida de los educadores que eligieron no registrar, y 2) diferencias en el lenguaje que se puede haber usado en ese*

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entonces versus ahora para describir a tales personas. En este artículo, describo algunos de estos desafíos que he encontrado mientras investigaba y escribía una biografía de Ella Flagg Young, superintendente escolar de Chicago entre 1909 y 1915.

Palabras clave: *LGBTQ+; Queer; Métodos históricos.*

INTRODUCTION

Non-normative sexualities and genders have flourished in a variety of historical contexts. For example, the sudden rise of single-sex communities in and around U.S. military bases during WWII eventually coalesced into “something of a nationwide ‘coming out’ experience” as John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman put it.¹ Similarly, the expansion of women’s colleges during the late-1800s provided opportunities for women faculty to live together in companionate, if not also sexual relationships, and for romance to thrive among students.² School work has had its moments, too. When teaching rapidly shifted first from men’s to women’s work during the mid-1800s, then soon after to work done almost exclusively by unmarried women, new opportunities opened for such teachers to center their lives on other women rather than marrying by default or remaining with their families of birth.³

Strikingly little scholarship has been published about this Progressive Era moment when teaching in schools arguably became one of the earliest public professions in the U.S. hospitable to women who desired

¹ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate matters: a history of sexuality in America, third edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 289. Also see John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity”, in eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin *The lesbian and gay studies reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 467-76; and Allan Berube, *Coming out under fire: the history of gay men and women in World War II, twentieth anniversary edition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

² Lillian Faderman, *To believe in women: what lesbians have done for America – a history* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1999); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, ‘Nous Autres’: Reading, passion, and the creation of M. Carey Thomas”, *The Journal of American History* 79(1), (June 1992): 68-95; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The power and passion of M. Carey Thomas* (New York: Knopf, 1994); Patricia Ann Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden: The community of women faculty at Wellesley* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), and Anne MacKay, *Wolf girls at Vassar: lesbian & gay experiences, 1930-1990* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993).

³ Jackie M. Blount, *Fit to teach: same-sex desire, gender, and school work in the twentieth century* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

or otherwise centered their lives on other women.⁴ However, tantalizing pieces of the puzzle cry out for attention. We know, for instance, that during these years women who taught often deepened their independence by living alone or with other women in similar circumstances. In rural areas, they may have inhabited an alcove in their schoolhouse, an attached space, or shared a separate teacherage, which was housing built specifically for teachers. In cities, they likely lived in women's boarding houses or specialty apartment buildings.⁵ These living arrangements gave women greater access to private spaces in which their relationships with other women might unfold. We know also that women teachers during these decades actively participated in and even led many new professional, social, benevolent, and political associations of other women, effectively creating communities in which their relationships might thrive while they worked for broader empowerment.⁶

Should any doubts linger that some of these relationships were sexual, Katharine Bement Davis's research put them to rest in 1929. This is when she published her monumental, Rockefeller Foundation-funded work, *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women*, in which she reported (among many other things) that quite a few unmarried women educators had experienced sexual relationships with other women. In her sample of 1200 unmarried, college-educated women, over half indicated having "experienced intense emotional relations with other women". Of these, 39 percent experienced "[i]ntense relationships

⁴ Among the works that do exist are *Fit to teach*, in which I detail such educators in the history of U.S. schools. Unmarried American women teachers also traveled abroad to 'democratize' Colonial subjects. For example, see Sarah Steinbock-Pratt, "We were all Robinson Crusoes': American women teachers in the Philippines", *Women's Studies* 41 (2012): 372-92.

⁵ For women teachers' accommodations in rural areas, see Spencer Maxcy, "The teacherage in American rural education", *The Journal of General Education* 30, no. 4, (1979): 267-74; and Josephine Corliss Preston's NEA Presidential Address about the dire need for teacherages around the country, "The Nation, Our Field", *Addresses and proceedings of the National Education Association, 1920* (Washington, DC: NEA, 1920), 35-39. For a discussion of women's urban accommodations during this time, see Joan Meyerowitz, *Women adrift: independent wage earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Also see Kitae Sohn, "The living arrangements of U.S. teachers, 1860-1910", *Historical Social Research* 38, no. 1 (2013): 339-65; and Blount, *Fit to teach*, especially 45-53.

⁶ Blount, *Fit to teach*, especially 53-58; Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930", *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 3 (1979): 512-29; and Horowitz, *The power and passion of M. Carey Thomas*. Also see Kath Weston's *Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) for her discussion of familial and communal ties among circles of people who have transgressed their sexuality and/or gender bounds.

accompanied by mutual masturbation, contact of genital organs, or other physical expressions recognized as sexual in character”. Another 13 percent experienced “[i]ntense relations recognized at the time as sexual in character, but without expression other than hugging and kissing”. Did Davis’s sample of 1200 unmarried women include educators? In fact, educators accounted for over half, 52 percent to be exact.⁷ Without question, then, a notable proportion of unmarried women educators at the time had enjoyed relationships with other women that they understood implicitly or explicitly as sexual.

Beyond examining the rare study of women educators’ sex lives or the patterns of their accommodations and communities, few other strategies have been explored to reveal histories of those from a century ago who defied the bounds of conventional sexualities or genders. First, exceedingly few documents were produced then that openly discussed non-normative sexualities and/or genders. Such matters remained taboo. Second, vandals have since destroyed some of the scarce remaining records.⁸ Third, language used to discuss sexualities and genders – when it was used at all – sometimes was expressed tentatively and without widespread agreement about usage. And fourth, language about sexualities and genders from one hundred years ago often fails to map neatly onto the still-shifting categories/identities that we employ today. Consequently, translational errors are difficult to avoid.

Despite these obstacles, an important way to navigate this historical recovery work is by finding and telling the stories of individual school workers whose sexualities and/or genders might have transgressed norms in some ways. Though it would be wonderful to discover a larger association of such educators that archived its work, the odds of finding such a bonanza are low. Although mainstream bureaus produced statistics and reports that omitted such individuals, works like these can be read critically to understand their careful omissions more precisely. However, retroactively piecing together databases describing sexuality

⁷ Katharine Bement Davis, *Factors in the sex life of twenty-two hundred women* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929). See especially Davis’s data on pp. 247 and 263. Also see Vern L. Bullough, “Katharine Bement Davis, Sex Research, and the Rockefeller Foundation”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 62, no. 1 (1988):74-89. Bullough notes that the national League of Women Voters named Davis as one of the 12 greatest living American women in 1922 (p. 79).

⁸ Blount, *Fit to teach*.

and/or gender transgressive educators would range from prohibitively time-consuming to beyond reach. Finally, no personal archives have yet come to light detailing extensive webs of relationships among such educators, though Martin Duberman's biographical treatment of Roger Casement suggests that sources like this occasionally emerge.⁹ My preferred approach, then, is to recover the stories of such *individuals* when possible, a painstaking, one-at-a-time process.

In my quest to find our queer – or LGBTQ+ – ancestors, I understand that I must broaden our currently used language so that my search can encompass the experiences of educators from the Progressive Era. For this reason, I use constructions like “non-conforming sexualities and/or genders”, “sexualities and genders”, and “sexuality and/or gender transgressing” as I write from the present moment about people who lived a century ago. Expressions like these may seem unnecessarily fussy or awkward, but I use them to better honor the possibilities that existed for the people I study rather than to impose my presentist will and identities on them.

I am currently writing a biography of one such sexuality and gender transgressing educator from the Progressive Era, Ella Flagg Young.¹⁰ Young arguably is one of the most notable educators in U.S. history because of her powerful and innovative professional accomplishments over her long career. Two biographies about her already have been published. The first is John McManis's 1916 book, *Ella Flagg Young and a Half Century of Chicago Schools*, that he wrote during Young's later years and with her extensive assistance. This volume offers little examination of personal details about her, though, which is unsurprising given her almost complete refusal to discuss such matters throughout her life. The second biography is Joan K. Smith's *Ella Flagg Young: Portrait of a Leader* (1979). Smith, under no direct obligation to satisfy Young (as was the case with McManis), rendered a much more nuanced analysis in which she probed not just public, but also some limited private aspects of this story. Smith engaged in extensive archival research and careful interpretation to do this. Still, though, Young had managed during her

⁹ Martin Duberman, *Luminous traitor: the just and daring life of Roger Casement, a biographical novel* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Jackie M. Blount (in progress), *Women's revolution in schools: Ella Flagg Young, 1845-1918*.

life to purge documentary evidence about her private world. She encouraged her closest friends to do the same. This has made finding Young's personal story difficult for those of us interested in her.¹¹

For my biography of Young, I owe a great debt of gratitude both to McManis and Smith for charting the contours of this educator's life. I also have the luxury now of searching vast historical databases and other sources that did not exist when McManis and Smith prepared their biographies. These newly available resources have allowed me – though still with great difficulty – to reconstruct parts of Young's private life. In what follows, I describe a few of these pieces, how I found them, and how I interpret them. In the end, I suggest ways that we might approach recreating the mostly hidden histories of other individual educators who defied the bounds of normative sexualities and genders, especially during times when school work offered many such individuals hope and support.

THE CASE OF ELLA FLAGG YOUNG

Ella Flagg Young was one of the most significant teachers, leaders, and intellectuals of her time. Just when teaching shifted decisively from men's to women's work, she quickly proved so skillful in Chicago's crowded classrooms that within a few years, she was appointed principal of the city's new School of Practice and charged with preparing the system's future teachers. She then soared through a series of leadership positions or challenges in which she was one of the first women *in the country* – if not *the* first: principal of one of the two largest schools in the city (grammar school), assistant and then district superintendent, Ph.D. recipient from and full professor at a research university (University of Chicago), head of a large normal school (Chicago Normal School), superintendent of a large urban district (Chicago), and president of the National Education Association (NEA). In her later years as a famous

¹¹ John McManis, *Ella Flagg Young and a half century of the Chicago Schools*. (Chicago: McClurg, 1916); and Joan K. Smith, *Ella Flagg Young: Portrait of a leader*. (Ames, IA: ISU Research Foundation Press, 1979). Two significant dissertations have proven quite helpful, too. These are Rosemary Donatelli, "The contributions of Ella Flagg Young to the educational enterprise" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1971); and Constance (Connie) Goddard, "Ella Flagg Young's intellectual legacy" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois Chicago, 2005).

public figure, newspapers around the country steadily carried syndicated reports about her activities.¹²

Young regularly crossed conventional gender boundaries during her remarkable career as she gained responsibilities and achieved honors previously reserved only for men; yet she had done so even as she presented as traditionally female in obvious ways. She always kept her neatly parted hair pulled back in conservative, conventional women's styles. She consistently wore simple, functional women's blouses and long skirts except in her later years when she invested in more ornate, but still normatively feminine, full-length dresses. She had married a man during her early 20s, though he died only a few years later. Ever afterwards, she usually was known as "Mrs. Young", thus signaling that she had fulfilled women's customary obligation to marry if possible.

My first hint that Young might have transgressed traditional bounds of sexuality came as I read Smith's biography. Smith repeatedly mentioned someone named Laura Brayton. In so doing, she essentially created a bare outline of Brayton's relationship with Young:

- Brayton started her teaching career at the school where Young served as principal.
- They became friends after each moved on to other positions.
- Eventually they became companions.
- When Young was catapulted into the Chicago superintendency and national attention, Brayton left her teaching responsibilities behind to become Young's personal secretary.
- Then after Young died of influenza during the 1918 pandemic, her will decreed that Brayton receive most of Young's by then sizeable and carefully invested estate.¹³

McManis's earlier biography, however, did not mention Brayton's existence. Given these accounts, both Smith's hints and McManis's omissions, I understood that Young's relationship with Brayton was central

¹² McManis, *Ella Flagg Young*; Smith, *Ella Flagg Young*, and Blount, *Women's revolution in schools*.

¹³ Smith, *Ella Flagg Young*, see especially pp. 36, 60, 186, 199, 207, 211-12, 214, 222, and 230.

and significant. And I suspected I knew much of why Young so vehemently resisted discussing her private life. An important part of my motivation for undertaking this biographical project was and is to much more fully flesh out the outline that Smith suggested. I also sought to understand Young's life and work in light of her non-normative sexualities and genders – essentially how these may have informed her ideas, work, and relationships.

First, to lay the groundwork for understanding Brayton and Young's relationship, I needed to know precisely when they met, worked together, and then lived together. For historical figures over the past century and a half who have merited one, not to mention two or more biographies, information about their primary relationship(s) exists in many forms and sometimes is relatively easy to find. Such individuals tend to leave rich archival collections behind, Jane Addams and John Dewey, for example. Young, however, left no such documentary collection. Neither did Brayton nor any of the other members of their small, tight friendship circle.

Even still, many kinds of sources exist that reveal aspects of their personal lives. These include marriage records, newspaper reports, correspondence among friends and family members with ample mentions of significant relations, cemetery records, and the like. Few of these kinds of records are available to shed light on Brayton and Young's relationship, though. For example, even if Brayton and Young had wanted to get married, legal and cultural restrictions at the time obviously would not have permitted it. The only such existing record for Young is for her 1868 marriage to William Young when she was 22.¹⁴ He left within three years to recover from tuberculosis, then died two years later in 1873.¹⁵ They lived together only about two and a half years.

By examining Chicago Board of Education minutes, I learned that Brayton and Young likely first met at the start of the 1883-84 school year.

¹⁴ "N. Ella Flagg and William Young married on December 30, 1868". Vol. 001, Cook County, IL. Illinois Statewide Marriage Index, searched at the Chicago Historical Museum.

¹⁵ Young recorded the year of her husband's death when she completed a form in advance of receiving an honorary doctoral degree from the University of Illinois in 1910. UIUC Archives, folder: Young, Mrs. Ella Flagg, '10 LLD (Deceased). She named William's cause of death in a newspaper interview: "Innovations Due with Mrs. Young", *Chicago Tribune*, July 30, 1909, 3.

That is when Brayton launched her teaching career at the Skinner School, which was then led by Principal Young.¹⁶ They worked at the same school until 1887 when Young moved to the central office to become an assistant superintendent.¹⁷ A year after Young left Skinner, Brayton was promoted to Head Assistant Teacher at another school.¹⁸ They did not formally work directly together again until Brayton became Superintendent Young's personal secretary some twenty-two years later.

Beyond Young and Brayton's professional engagements together, I next sought to determine when they lived together. Once again, they left no documents that would help future historians in this quest; so I painstakingly worked my way through the collection of Chicago city directories maintained by the Chicago Historical Museum's archives. I discovered that during Brayton's early years as a teacher (from 1883 through 1896), she lived with her aunt, Dr. Mary Harris Thompson.¹⁹ Dr. Thompson, a noted physician and Young's close friend, had founded and run a hospital for women and children in the city. After Thompson died in 1895, Brayton and Young moved into a new residence together. Though they subsequently changed residences multiple times and traveled abroad extensively, they were together from 1896 until Young died in 1918.²⁰

What was the nature of Young and Brayton's relationship? Clearly, they enjoyed a warm and abiding friendship. However, were there also romantic or possibly sexual elements? No documents exist that reveal intimate expressions of love or fondness that they may have spoken to one another. If Brayton and Young ever spent time apart and corresponded with each other, their letters are lost. Exceedingly few letters that

¹⁶ June 29, 1883 Meeting Minutes, *Chicago Board of Education, Proceedings, Sept. 1882-83*, 178.

¹⁷ Notes from the June 29, 1887 meeting, *Proceedings of the Chicago Board of Education* (Chicago: The Board, 1888), 228; and "Appendix," *Annual Report of the Board of Education, 1887* (Chicago: Jameson & Morse Co., 1888), 258.

¹⁸ *Proceedings of the Board of Education, 1888-1889*, July 10, 1889 meeting, 303. (Board of Education Archives).

¹⁹ See *Lakeside Annual Directory for Chicago from 1883-1996* (Chicago: The Chicago Directory).

²⁰ See *Lakeside Annual Directory for Chicago from 1896-1912* (Chicago: The Chicago Directory). From 1913-17, Brayton is not listed in these directories. However, various news reports confirmed their shared residences. See Blount, *Women's Revolution in Schools*.

they sent to their friends exist and are available.²¹ In one rare letter, Young wrote Jane Addams (who carefully archived her own papers and correspondence) to congratulate her on the publication of her recently published book, “Miss Brayton and I are enjoying the expansion of ‘Twenty Years at Hull House’....”²² This short, friendly note implicitly affirms that Young and Brayton were close companions who shared each other’s small and large confidences and experiences. Did Young perhaps feel freer to speak of Brayton in this way in a letter to Addams than with other people? After all, Addams also enjoyed a companionate relationship with a woman, Mary Rozet Smith. In one letter, Addams wrote to Smith during brief time apart: “[y]ou must know, dear, how I long for you all the time....”²³ Other women in Young and Brayton’s extended friendship circles also enjoyed companionate relationships, like Marion Talbot (Dean of Women, University of Chicago) and Sophonisba Breckinridge (activist and Political Science Professor, University of Chicago).²⁴ Such relationships were known to exist among white college-educated professional women who enjoyed the independence and economic means to pursue them.²⁵ They were by necessity discreet; otherwise, they stood to lose their privileged positions. Black and Brown working-class women, though, who may have been less fearful of losing status could be more open about their companionate or intimate relationships with other women.²⁶

²¹ For example, see letter from Laura Brayton to Jane Addams, Sept. 21, 1915, Jane Addams Collection, Midwest Women Archives at the University of Illinois Chicago, 8-1523-1524. Young wrote a brief message to Addams at the bottom of Brayton’s letter.

²² Letter from Ella Flagg Young to Jane Addams, December 12, 1910, Jane Addams papers in the Swarthmore College Peace Collection (microfilm), DG 1, Box 2.

²³ Quoted in Stacy Lynn, “Jane Addams, Mary Rozet Smith, and the Disappointments of One-Sided Correspondence”, Jane Addams Papers Project. <https://janeaddams.ramapo.edu/2019/07/jane-addams-mary-rozet-smith-and-the-disappointments-of-one-sided-correspondence/> (consulted on December 22, 2021). Lynn notes that Addams did not save the letters that Smith wrote to her even though Addams saved her own for posterity.

²⁴ Kathryn Vandervalk, “Entangled Lives”, *UChicago Magazine* 114, no. 1 (Fall 2021). <https://mag.uchicago.edu/law-policy-society/entangled-lives> (accessed December 22, 2021); and Mary Jo Deegan, “Dear Love, Dear Love’: Feminist pragmatism and the Chicago female world of love and ritual”, *Gender and Society* 10, no. 5 (October 1996): 590-607.

²⁵ Lillian Faderman, *To believe in women*.

²⁶ Lillian Faderman, *Odd girls and twilight lovers: a history of lesbian life in twentieth-century America*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

Other than a few letters like Young's short, friendly note to Addams, other correspondence that was exchanged by Young or Brayton with their closest friends is virtually nonexistent. To determine this, I kept a careful list of Young and Brayton's closest friends as well as some in their extended friendship circles. For each, I searched for archival collections. I also ran extensive queries using a variety of databases. Among what emerged were fragments like newspaper obituaries of friends who stressed the importance of their friendships with Young.²⁷ These details, however, do not help me much in understanding Brayton and Young's relationship.

Turning to other strategies, I searched for blueprints/floorplans for apartment buildings, hotels, and houses where Brayton and Young had lived to see if these accommodations had only one bedroom. Similarly, for their travels abroad, I searched for information about their shared cabins on ships. These efforts proved futile, though. Even if I had learned that Young and Brayton had shared bedrooms or even a bed, their relationship still could have been asexual.

Occasionally, I stumbled upon useful clues about their relationship. First, Brayton was listed in the 1910 census as "companion" and Young as "head" of household.²⁸ Though this listing was decidedly asymmetrical, i.e., only one rather than both named as "companion", it nonetheless is language that at least one of them had to have offered the census-taker. At the time, women who lived together as companions typically were not begrudged such relationships that were thought to keep them from being lonely. Many did not even consider the possibility that such women's relationships might have romantic or sexual components. Nonetheless, a "companionate" relationship could have encompassed any of these kinds of attachments.²⁹ Even though this language ultimately clarifies little, I have decided to use it when I speak about Brayton and Young's connection because it is how at least one of them described their relationship.

²⁷ For example, Clara Walker, one of four women in Young's will, was described as "an intimate friend of Mrs. Ella Flagg Young". "Obituary", *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 13, 1919, 21.

²⁸ 1910 Census, Illinois, Cook County, Tract G8, Supervisor's district 1, Enumeration District 391, Ward 7, Sheet 19.

²⁹ Blount, *Fit to teach*.

Perhaps most confusing – and illuminating – of all, is my discovery of how Brayton managed Young’s gravesite a little more than a year after her burial: Brayton paid to have Young’s coffin repositioned within its larger plot. To explain, some context is in order. In 1918, Young’s 73rd and last year, she traveled across the country by rail to promote Liberty Bond sales in support of U.S. troops fighting in Europe. Brayton and a few of their friends traveled with her. Along the way, Young and Brayton contracted influenza during its most infectious stretch of the 1918 pandemic. Their friends then accompanied the stricken women back to Washington, DC, where Young and Brayton had established their permanent residence, then immediately transferred the rapidly declining women to a hospital. Young succumbed a few days later. Young and Brayton’s friends who had travelled with them realized that Young’s remains needed to return to Chicago to be buried in the Flagg family plot. Some of them accompanied Young’s casket on the train back to Chicago. One of them, Mrs. George Bass, made arrangements for Young’s funeral.

All schoolhouse flags around Chicago flew at half-staff in Young’s honor.³⁰ Because of the pandemic, large events such as funerals in Chicago were prohibited.³¹ Nonetheless, a few close friends and long-time colleagues attended Young’s thoughtful, but relatively low-key event.³² At the Flagg family plot in Rosehill Cemetery, Young’s casket joined those of her mother, father, sister, and brother. The four members of her family of birth neatly filled the western half of the large plot. Young’s remains were buried in the eastern half, to one side (rather than in the middle). Those who had arranged Young’s interment clearly thought that another person would be buried beside Young on the eastern side of the plot. That person could have been no one else but Brayton. If there were any concerns about how this arrangement looked, no one spoke publicly about it. I find it reasonable to conclude, then, that anyone who knew Young understood that Brayton was her companion, her most significant relationship, her chosen family. Of course they would be buried side-by-side.³³

³⁰ “Flags to Fly at Half Mast Today for Mrs. Young”, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1918, 8.

³¹ David E. Ruth, “Don’t Shake – Salute!”, *Chicago History* 19, no. 3 (1990): 4-23.

³² “Military Tinge at Funeral of Ella F. Young”, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 29, 1918, 16.

³³ Similarly, the prominent Chicago-connected philanthropist, Robert Allerton, and his long-time companion, John Gregg (his adopted son), each had their ashes scattered at the same Hawaii bay where they had spent much of their time together. See Nicholas L. Syrett, *An open secret: the family*

Meanwhile, Brayton, still in Washington, DC, remained so seriously ill that she floated in and out of consciousness for days, unaware that Young had died. When she eventually recovered, she returned to Chicago to live on her own. Young had left the bulk of her sizeable fortune to Brayton. Brayton also served as Young's executor and as such, handled any remaining business connected with Young's estate. A little over a year after Young's death in 1918, Brayton had Young's casket exhumed and then repositioned right in the middle of the eastern half of the family plot. Then in 1935 when Brayton died, she was buried in the middle of her own plot located about 100 feet away from Young's.³⁴ Brayton likely had purchased her separate plot around the time that Young's remains were moved. I also assume that this plot was the nearest one to Young that was available at the time Brayton purchased it.

How do I know that Brayton paid to have Young's body moved? When I first visited the Flagg family's plot at Rosehill Cemetery, I asked the office staff if they had any records about Flagg and Brayton that I could copy for my biographical research. They kindly obliged.³⁵ In the months after, I studied those records. I saw that Young seemed to have two different interment records, which made no sense to me. I simply could not figure it out. Then at another time as I pored through my complete photocopied sets of Young and Brayton's respective probate records, I discovered a receipt in Young's file issued by Rosehill Cemetery staff for digging up Young's casket and then repositioning it, service requested and paid for by Brayton.³⁶ I then returned to the cemetery records I had obtained earlier, worked out the coordinates specified in them, and then determined precisely how Young's body had been moved. Brayton did not intend to be buried beside Young, but instead in another plot near her.

story of Robert and John Gregg Allerton. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 164-5, 168; and more generally, Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*.

³⁴ I personally observed that sometime between 2005 and 2011, Rosehill Cemetery relocated some burial sites. From conversations with staff, I learned that they first attempted to contact any surviving relatives. Because Brayton had no surviving family members, her grave and plot were moved farther away from Young's grave – by about 200-300 feet farther north and west by my estimation.

³⁵ Plat information for the Flagg family including Ella Flagg Young's first and then final positions: Rosehill Cemetery plat and interment records. Rosehill Cemetery Company, Chicago.

³⁶ Billing statement in Probate Records of Ella Flagg Young. Case#: 57693. Archives, Office of the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County.

Why would Brayton have repositioned Young's remains? Was she concerned that the public might learn of their relationship? Certainly, in their time, they already were generally known by those around them as companions. However, their relationship was not a focus of public discussion. The two women somehow were able to maintain a zone of privacy even as Young was frequently in the national spotlight during her last nine years. Young guarded this zone by side-stepping any public questions about her private life. Brayton helped by describing herself as Young's personal secretary, which meant that she had justification for accompanying Young on her travels, at social events, in managing numerous large and small engagements, and even living together. No doubt, Young needed help managing the heavy demands of national fame. "Hiring" Brayton made sense because she was by all accounts, diligent, thorough, and kind. After extensive digging, I have not uncovered any contemporaneous public critique of this arrangement.

However, in the years leading up to Young's death and extending decades after, generalized interest in the lives of independent women workers, activists, artists, politicians, and other professionals increased steeply. Some was critical. For example, when Theodore Roosevelt addressed the 1905 National Congress of Mothers, he conjured a growing threat posed by women who deliberately chose to forego marriage and motherhood.³⁷ On the other hand, several studies highlighted the accomplishments of such women, detailing links between women's achieved eminence and their decision to remain unmarried.³⁸ Even still, though, critics turned this logic around and asserted that well-educated, accomplished women likely were less attractive to men or, possibly, might even be deviant. This growing scrutiny followed women's increased political power on account of suffrage victories, economic power, and other successes in the public sphere. It came from those who believed women generally had overstepped their bounds and become too powerful. Eventually, this growing backlash focused especially on women who

³⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, "Address", *Report of the national congress of mothers*. (Washington, DC: National Congress of Mothers, 1905), 77-86.

³⁸ Cora Sutton Castle, *A statistical study of eminent women* (New York: Archives of Psychology, 1913); Emilie Hutchinson, *Women and the Ph.D.* (Greensboro, NC: The Institute, 1929); and Luella Cole Pressey, "The women whose names appear in American men of science for 1927", *School and Society* (1929): 96-100.

centered their lives on other women, in part because many such women had been significant leaders in the broader women's movement. And many of these women had been educators at some point in their lives.³⁹

A clear manifestation of this critique was the increasing use of such derogatory terms as "old maid teacher" and "spinster teacher" (which later was often conflated with "homosexual" or "lesbian" teacher). Among the millions of books scanned and listed in Google Books, an Ngram depiction of these terms shows sharp increases in their frequencies from the late 1910s through around 1930. The more descriptive (and less disparaging) term "unmarried teacher" began a steep increase in usage even earlier, starting around 1908 and extending through the late 1930s.⁴⁰ In short, awareness and then critique of unmarried women educators – and the possibility that some might have had intimate relationships with other women – was growing during Young's final years. Brayton may have been acutely aware of this shift and sought to protect Young's legacy.

Another possible explanation for Brayton's rearrangement of Young's gravesite is that Brayton and Young's relationship may have been purely a deep friendship without any romantic or sexual components. Given the heightened scrutiny and critique of women in companionate relationships, though, Brayton may have been especially adamant about avoiding even the appearance of any impropriety.

In the years after Young's death and re-burial, Brayton engaged in efforts to preserve public memory of Young and her accomplishments. Among them, she authored an essay about Young published in a biographical encyclopedia of the nation's most famous women (1925).⁴¹ Around the same time, Brayton corresponded with John Dewey to seek his help in editing and publishing a collection of Young's scholarly writings.⁴²

³⁹ Blount, *Fit to teach*.

⁴⁰ Google Books Ngram Viewer. <https://books.google.com/ngrams> with the search string: "unmarried teacher, old maid teacher, spinster teacher, lesbian teacher" (Accessed December 22, 2021). Note: The term "lesbian teacher" was not used much until the mid-1970s and afterwards, including Anita Bryant's *Save Our Children* crusade (1977) and the fight against the Brigg's Initiative (1978).

⁴¹ Brayton wrote the entry for "Young, Ella Flagg", Mabel Ward Cameron, ed. *Biographical cyclopaedia of American women, Vol. II*. (New York: Halvord Publishing Co, 1924-25), 1-6.

⁴² Letter from Laura T. Brayton to John Dewey, June 8, 1924, John Dewey Center, Southern Illinois University.

Dewey had been Young's doctoral advisor and the two had worked very closely together during his years at the University of Chicago. The University of Chicago Press had even published an edited volume containing three of her essays and three of his, each essay reflecting their mutual intellectual influence.⁴³ Ultimately, though, Dewey did not find a willing publisher for a posthumous collection of Young's work.⁴⁴ Brayton also joined ambitious efforts by the Chicago Woman's Club and other organizations to build a suitable memorial for Young. For complicated reasons, though, these efforts ultimately failed, too.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Brayton had done her best to ensure that history would treat Young kindly.

CONCLUSION

In the end, were Ella Flagg Young and Laura Brayton our queer/LGBTQ+ forebearers? The answer to this is complicated. Young and Brayton certainly would not have recognized our contemporary use of terms like *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *trans**, or *queer*... and so would not have used such language to describe themselves. In particular, "lesbian" did not enjoy broad usage until the mid-twentieth century.⁴⁶ Among those of us with non-conforming sexual identities, choosing our own language to describe our sexualities has been important for our efforts to build community and resist oppression against us. During Brayton and Young's time, sexual dimensions of women's relationships with each other usually remained unspoken; but if they were discussed at all, language usage generally was inconsistent and nonspecific.

⁴³ Ella Flagg Young and John Dewey, *Contributions to education series*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1901-02). See also Jackie M. Blount, "The mutual intellectual relationship of John Dewey and Ella Flagg Young: *Contributions to Education Series, 1901-1902*", in eds. Antoinette Errante, Jackie M. Blount, and Bruce Kimball *Philosophy and History of Education: Diverse Perspectives on Their Value and Relationship* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 27-38; and Jackie M. Blount, "Ella Flagg Young and the Gender Politics of Democracy and Education", *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 16, 4 (2017): 409-423.

⁴⁴ Letter from John Dewey to Richard J. Walsh, August 7, 1930, John Dewey Center, Southern Illinois University.

⁴⁵ Blount, *Women's revolution in schools*.

⁴⁶ Google Books Ngram Viewer. <https://books.google.com/ngrams> with the search term "lesbian".

Similarly, Young likely would have opposed contemporary ways of identifying as gender nonconforming. Without question, though, she regularly marched outside professional boundaries then accorded to women and in this sense, she transgressed gender bounds. She likely would have viewed her efforts as a highly visible and influential school leader as helping to open opportunities for women to claim powers that had been systematically denied to them. She did suffer some criticism, though, when she publicly asserted her views, behavior that some people regarded as abnormal gender presentation. For instance, Helen Mead, the wife of one of Young's University of Chicago colleagues, George H. Mead, sarcastically described Young in a letter to Alice Dewey, whose husband was John Dewey. Helen Mead wrote in unconventionally gendered terms about seeing Young at a dinner event: "It [Young] was like a war-horse with the scent of battle".⁴⁷ Young sometimes acted powerfully and certainly was a force to be reckoned with. Despite such seeming gender transgression, she also endeavored to present a traditionally feminine appearance and countenance, though modestly so.⁴⁸

In reciprocal fashion, although Young and Brayton – from the vantage of their historical moment – would have resisted our contemporary labels for sexualities and genders, I sometimes have been frustrated with their reluctance to describe themselves and their relationship publicly, especially in any sexuality and gender transgressive terms. This is true even though I understand that at the time, women teachers were held to exceedingly lofty standards of morality, were expected to serve as models of unimpeachable behavior, and, to these ends, typically were scrutinized closely by their communities. Consequently, I know they almost certainly would have been horrified to learn that one of Young's future biographers would try to see if their homes had only one bedroom. After all, they invested great effort in carving a zone of privacy around their lives together and likely would have regarded my efforts as intrusive. I do understand this perspective and consequently have wrestled extensively with the ethics of my approach. Ultimately, though, I have decided that because: 1) Young was a very public figure in her

⁴⁷ Letter from Helen Castle Mead to Alice Chipman Dewey, October 2, 1905, John Dewey Center, Southern Illinois University.

⁴⁸ Blount, *Women's revolution in schools*.

time, 2) her unconventional gender(s) and sexuality(/ies) enhanced her capacity to become a highly accomplished and significant leader in some ways, and 3) Young knew that they could just as easily be held against her, her gender and sexuality transgressions therefore are important parts of her story and should be explored by anyone who wants to understand her.

Perhaps what interests me most deeply about Young and Brayton, though, is that however they may have characterized their relationship and their genders, they were among a class of people who would have been increasingly stigmatized in education. Had they lived during the Cold War, they might have been driven out of school-related work during the sweeping mid-twentieth century purge of unmarried, widowed, and divorced women teachers.⁴⁹ During the late-1950s and into the 1960s, by maintaining a companionate relationship even without openly claiming any sexuality and gender non-conforming identities, they could have been hunted down, interrogated extensively, publicly humiliated, or even fired as Karen Graves has so carefully documented in her history of Florida's Cold War purge of lesbian and gay teachers.⁵⁰ In short, even though particular identities, labels, and behaviors do not neatly correspond across this past century, many of us have faced some kinds of oppression on account of our sexuality and gender non-conformity. This is a basis for our kinship in my view.

Though Young and Brayton were not fired or humiliated during their lives for their seeming sexuality and/or gender non-conformities, they were largely forgotten afterwards. Brayton made herself invisible in some ways during her years with Young by strategies such as keeping her image out of published works. Her traces in the historical record ever since have been rare and quite difficult to find. Young, arguably a towering figure in the history of U.S. education, hardly surfaces in published education scholarship since her death. Some of her ideas have been attributed to Dewey and others, for example. More significantly, Young's choice to

⁴⁹ Jackie M. Blount, "Manly men and womanly women: deviance, gender role polarization, and the shift in women's school employment, 1900-1976", *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 2 (1996): 318-38.

⁵⁰ Karen L. Graves, *And they were wonderful teachers: Florida's purge of gay and lesbian teachers*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

leave no personal artifacts to posterity makes her story difficult to discover and interpret.⁵¹

I argue that an important reason Young and Brayton may have made these choices to obscure their personal lives was because they understood that their relationship, whatever it was, might have been condemned were it named and discussed openly. Also, they both may simply have been private people by nature. Another factor may have been that Young's family of birth faced some difficult crises that she did not want to air publicly, including her older sister's imprisonment throughout her adulthood and her mother's death by tuberculosis, then an often-unpeakable malady.⁵² And finally, Young – a very public figure – nonetheless consistently managed to create broad spaces for private thought and relationships. This may have been a fundamentally important part of her effort to support and renew herself over the long term; as such it may offer a window into understanding who she may have been.⁵³ Though Young and Brayton had their reasons for leaving no documents to future generations, ultimately I find their stories to be of great significance and well worth the effort to recover them because of Young's important contributions to the field of education and because of the questions their stories raise about LGBTQ+ history.⁵⁴

Telling the stories of our queer/LGBTQ+ forebearers in education, those folks who in some ways transgressed bounds of normative sexualities and/or genders, is challenging. The language we choose to use generally does not translate easily or well across time. Sources are difficult to find and interpret. They often require looking in shadows to identify what evidence is systematically missing vs. what exists, and then devising arguments, perhaps imperceptible at first, that elucidate previously unseen facets. And then we may find remarkable stories of those who came before us, people we recognize in important ways who aspired to create more equitable, welcoming, and empowering schools for all its members.

⁵¹ Blount, *Women's revolution in schools*.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ I thank an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript for this meaningful insight.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

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