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Towards a Queer Pedagogy of Conflicted Practice

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This essay reimagines the queer-issues classroom through a reformulation of queer pedagogy as a pedagogy of conflicted practice. I locate this practice against an historicized spectrum of conflicting versions of queerness, arguing that tensions and incoherencies among variant versions of queer can limit possibilities for queer-positive pedagogy. The last twenty or so years have seen a burgeoning tension between identity-politics based “lesbian and gay studies” and a “queer” poststructuralist revision of subjectivity that works to overturn the hegemonic absolutism embedded in all fixed identity models. As a result, “queer pedagogy” and “queer issues” get caught between versions of sexual subjectivity that are often positioned as necessarily opposed. I argue here that teaching queer issues is best done through a pedagogy of conflicted practice, that is, through the simultaneous recognition of

gender and sexual identities as both (at least experientially) coherent/stable and as provisional/historicized. In working through this project, I mobilize educational theorist Michael Apple’s situationalist paradigm for counter-hegemonic thinking in order to mediate the question of how queer pedagogy, particularly in the queer issues classroom, can usefully function through conflicted practice. My goal is to illustrate that sophisticated queer pedagogy may happen best when we are contextually and concurrently attuned to multiple understandings of queerness in the largest contexts of both educational structures *and* evolving frameworks for thinking about gender and sexual identity.

Spectral Analysis

Like queer itself, queer pedagogical practices are hard to define — and, of course, in many

ways that is the point. But as we are attentive to building classrooms in which issues of sexuality are central and as we try to make that particular space more than merely tolerant of queer students, teachers, materials and ideas, clarity regarding what we are working with and towards is critical. The queer pedagogical project, which is explicitly interventive and political, can be aligned with liberatory pedagogical stances, particularly in terms of a Freirean attentiveness to the learner as she achieves awareness of the material experiences and ideologies in which it she embedded, something Peter McClaren neatly describes as “the historical self-realization of the oppressed by the oppressed themselves” (125). Queer pedagogy demands we think hard about what makes the queer classroom queer, as well as what we wish to achieve when we try to imagine about queer positive educational spaces: What is the queer classroom? Who and what are these queer students, teachers, materials and ideas? What effects do we hope queer pedagogy will have on students, instructors, and institutions?

Starting with these questions, I would like to work through some definitions of “queer” by performing a little spectral analysis, that is, to examine queerness as it takes place across a spectrum while taking specters of the past into account. My goal is to find ways for thinking about differing conceptualizations for sexual and gender identities (the queer spectrum) while paying close attention to how the queer past (the specters of history) — including the present as an also-evolving historical moment — remains with us. I want to sketch out this queer spectrum by pointing to some roughly defined but familiar iterations of queer, specifically, lesbian and gay studies and poststructural queerness, and examine them both in the context of pedagogical work that is specifically focused on queer issues.

To summarize the queer spectrum in brief: lesbian and gay studies (like most modes of analysis concerning sexuality issues) owes much to feminist and lesbian feminist models for inquiry into issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. This relationship is reflected in the rise of lesbian and gay studies in the 70s and 80s, when groundbreaking scholars theorized and strategized about the place of lesbians and gays as students and as instructors, as well as how to best work towards curricular reform and the incorporation of both marginalized sexual identities and issues of sexual orientation. Lesbian and gay studies focused on safe classrooms and institutions for lesbian and gay students and instructors, and tried to make the acts of speaking, writing, reading, and thinking about lesbian and gay issues not only possible, but valued as legitimate pedagogical and intellectual acts. It also expanded classroom parameters — in terms of “out” lesbian and gay teachers and students, the inclusion of sexuality and sexual identity as points of discussion, research, and analysis, and the introduction of new curricular elements that worked against traditional forms of representation. The categories “lesbian and gay” also carried the *de facto* understanding that lesbians and gay men had something called a sexual orientation, and that that “something” was both relatively distinct and available for protection and analysis.

When the 1990s arrived, the tremendous influence of poststructuralist thought began to profoundly affect lesbian and gay studies. Foucault’s historicized and archeological work in the history of sexuality functioned as the cornerstone of a realignment of the established frameworks for thinking and talking about sexuality — including in the classroom and in the curricula — as that framework began to be reconfigured through the lens of postmodernity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men*

(1985) is perhaps most commonly considered the inaugural work of queer theory — and with the simultaneous 1990 publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, David Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* and Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, queer theory developed with astonishing speed and sophistication. Categories of sexual identity were reevaluated as conceptually embedded in what Michael Warner termed the "minoritizing logic of toleration" (xxvi). Queer theory posited that even as lesbian and gay studies worked to make lesbians and gay men visible, it participated in dynamics of self-limitation and subordinate otherness, defining itself as a band of supplicants bargaining for admittance into what Gayle Rubin identified as the strict and hierarchical "charmed circle" of acceptable configurations for sexual identities and practices (13).

Queer theory argued that strategies for "visibility" and "acceptance" for sexually transgressive people left (normative) forms of heterosexuality and heterosexual privilege unchallenged and attempted to assimilate homosexuality in a way that mirrored (and reproduced) the problematics of privilege. This was considered an error of both logics and politics — an analytical failure that did not grasp the constructed nature of (sexual) subjectivity and a political mistake that promoted a revised hierarchy of good/bad desires and subjectivities.¹ A new way to think outside of or around the heterosexuality/homosexuality debate emerged from the poststructural framework of queer theory, a breakthrough that enabled newer voices — such as the trans community — to enter discussions about sexuality and gender. From the poststructuralist queer viewpoint, the fact that history makes sexualities finally emerged as more compelling, and perhaps more vital, than the idea that sexualities

make history.

Both the lesbian and gay studies and poststructural approaches have deep implications for pedagogical practice, and each has distinct strengths and weaknesses. A lesbian and gay studies approach renders particular sexual/gender identities visible and legitimate, working towards shoring up specific-subject validity. Through its focus on subject recognition and validation, specific revision of curricular content, and student/teacher rights discourse, lesbian and gay pedagogy performs some of the most important civic work a classroom can attempt. However, it also reifies the arbitrary and constructed divide between the homosexual and the heterosexual, tries to win a fixed game, and excludes other ways of being a sexual subject (which may or may not include other forms of sexual identity and behaviors). The "straight" instructor who is a BDSM practitioner, the transgendered teaching assistant, the intersexed student — can a lesbian and gay pedagogical framework speak to them? And can their voices be heard as they speak back?

The poststructuralist queer perspective, on the other hand, is ready to listen to everyone. It denaturalizes the excessive powers of traditional heterosexual identity, and it does the epistemological work of addressing how all sexual identities are constructed via any number of social, political, and cultural factors via history, language, power, and institutions. Queerness exposes heterosexuality to be as counterfeit, inconsistent, and provisional as any form of sexual identity. Because heterosexuality is understood as naturalized (not a fact of nature), the poststructuralist perspective has opened a world of queer diversities long overdue for consideration, such as trans issues or S/M practice. Yet this glowing moment of triumph is often chilled by an uneasy feeling of erasure. As femi-

nist reactions to the destabilization of the category of “woman” amply testify, eliminating the stability of sex/gender identity categories — particularly in the classroom — might not only have the effect of eliminating a *something* (the potentially insidious coherence of the “lesbian,” for example) but risk also erasing a *someone* (the lesbian-identified person). This raises the panicked specter of inadvertent eradication. What does it mean if, in order to save the lesbian, we had to destroy her?

Situationalism

Moving from the abstract entanglements of theory to the applied realm of the classroom, I want to turn now to the question of context. In his analysis of hegemonic ideologies in education, Michael Apple has cogently noted the critical element of situationalism. Apple writes that any interpretation or analysis of a program of study must involve several factors, including:

- (1) the school as an institution, (2) the knowledge forms, and (3) and the educator him or herself. Each of these must be *situated* within the larger nexus of relations of which it is a constitutive part. The key word here, obviously, is situated. (3)

While it may seem contradictory to contextualize issues of subject in/stability within an explicitly Marxist framework, the factors that Apple identifies here provide an innovative and productive outline for looking at the tensions between identity-stable and poststructuralist models for queer pedagogy. A rethinking of how factors of institutional placement, epistemological frameworks, and instructor identities impact queer pedagogy enables a fresh, revealing analysis of queer-positive classrooms and pedagogies.

Embedded in “Inclusion”:

Institutional Models for Identity

Extant models for managing difference at institutions of higher education in the United States are so familiar that they are, to most of us, almost invisible. Our current models call upon deeply-rooted, “known” identities that are directly in play with the specific ideological structures of liberal culture: concepts such as “multiculturalism” and “diversity on campus” reflect the general perception of gender, racial/ethnic and sexual identities as stable. Such terms are at the center of the missions of many colleges and universities, frequently serving as guiding principles and gauges for institutional self-assessment. The liberal humanism of inclusivity is bound not only to a politics of addition and models for recognition, protection, and rights, but also fundamentally predicated on the relative coherence of both the “group” that needs including and the “group” that includes. Inclusivity also has everything to do with how pedagogical projects get pushed in certain directions, specifically, the direction of identity politics.

This model is quite evident in early lesbian and gay studies models. For example, when the lead-off essay in the important 1994 collection *Tilting the Tower* addressed the place of lesbian instructors as change agents, they made a trip back to 1950 and Eleanor Roosevelt speaking on human rights:

Where after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home... The world of the individual person...the school or college he attends. ... Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity... Unless these rights have meaning

there, they have little meaning anywhere.
(Mittler and Blumenthal 9 – 10)

Lesbian and gay studies has long employed this kind of reasoning, a line of thought also reflected in the “diversity” context within which most institutions of higher education operate. Regardless of where any class, curriculum or theoretical perspective falls on the queer spectrum, the course material and the pedagogical efforts involved are very likely to be at least partially understood in a coalitionary sense. Thus, the queer classroom is situated or, more accurately, is likely *to be situated* (regardless of the perspectives of particular instructors or students) within a stable, multicultural-identity politics model.

Institutional group-think is so powerful it can reconfigure more radical models. For example, “lesbian and gay studies” is largely being replaced by the institutional shorthand of “LGBT studies,” expanding the current forms of category reference with a “B” and a “T” in order to include the frequently marginalized identity of bisexuality and the newer formulation of transgender. But the ever-more standardized “B” and “T” can also reflect additive models for thinking about identity, even despite obvious differences between them. Bisexuality retains sexual object choice (the homosexual/heterosexual dyad) as the critical referent for sexual identity, both rupturing that dyad and also fundamentally reinforcing its conceptual framework. In terms of trans issues, transgender phenomena are located precisely at an effort that is deeply postmodern — at least in the sense “that [transgender] takes aim at the modernist epistemology that treats gender merely as a social, linguistic, or subjective representation of an objectively knowable material sex” (Stryker 8). Trans works then, at a conceptual level indicating “a different under-

standing of how bodies mean, how representation works” (Stryker 9).

My point here is not to cite either “bisexual” or “transgender” as a better or worse formulation for thinking about sexuality, gender, and/or identity, but rather to point out the similar ways in which they are often institutionally mobilized as categories in similar ways despite their fundamentally incongruous understandings of subjectivity. General adoption of an LGBT acronym may mean that, at the institutional level, even radical non-categories such as trans can be folded into the identity politics, protectionist models by placement within institutional frameworks. A queer pedagogy that recognizes institutional context will understand that many important elements of pedagogy may always be, on some level, shaped by institutional discourses about inclusion or debates about “diversity.” The institutional experiences of students and faculty, as well as curricular organization and articulation of curricular requirements, may be fundamentally predicated on these ideas.

Interdisciplinarity

A situationalist approach also addresses the importance of “knowledge forms,” a concept I want to employ to further and freshly consider queer pedagogy in the queer issues classroom. Here a brief look at feminist pedagogy and women’s studies is helpful, particularly because the general area of feminist pedagogy (which can happen, hopefully, in any classroom) and the more specific parameters of women’s studies (an institutionalized branch of feminist scholarship and teaching to which feminist pedagogy is central) have both long understood interdisciplinarity as a crucial pedagogical and political tool. Women’s studies has consistently acknowledged that intersecting disciplinary perspectives often successfully

reflect and represent ways of thinking and knowing that are innovative and liberatory. Marjorie Pryse notes that because

interdisciplinarity incorporates disciplinary approaches to knowledge when they are useful, while it “borrows” and “incorporates,” it does not feel constrained by disciplinary methods and rules for the uses of such approaches. Therefore, from the perspective of disciplines, interdisciplinary research can appear unfounded, illegitimate, transgressive, disturbing, and fundamentally challenging. (3)

Within the liberatory project of queer pedagogy, attention to issues of interdisciplinarity is critical precisely because, as inquiry moves powerfully across fields of analysis and investigation, cross-disciplinary perspectives open new and radically disruptive epistemological spaces. Interdisciplinarity creates new perspectives that can particularly and effectively attend to how diverse, even paradoxical, elements from intersecting disciplines open up new knowledge models.

Such models for new configurations of knowledge are critical for queer pedagogy because in such disciplinary hybridizations and collapsings lie crucial questions of center and margins, of seemingly stable knowledge and the problematics of in/stability. At its core, interdisciplinarity posits that there are different ways of coming to knowledge and knowing, that there are many different and valid knowledge forms, and that different epistemic systems can be put in if not harmonious than at least productive relation. Interdisciplinary frameworks produce new epistemological perspectives by simultaneously conjoining in useful dialogue what other organizational structures (institutions, for example) so often posit

as separate, or even mutually exclusive. A pedagogy that understands and embraces this kind of interdisciplinary work can move forward to productively address the incongruences of a variety of queer perspectives.

Hence, the queer issues classroom that consciously espouses an interdisciplinary approach will be ideally positioned to articulate both the lived lives of subjects in an active political context and also in terms of the processes that construct those subjects through complex dynamics of formation and reification. Thus, for example, the juxtaposition of later twentieth-century LGBT politics alongside a perspective that illustrates how the LGBT subject herself is produced within the languages and structures of law, could address both identity formation across time while speaking to the particular realities of lives lived within those categories. Interdisciplinarity, when considered as the active and conscious engagement with the intersection of knowledge forms, comprises a critical strategy for effective teaching in the queer issues classroom.

Situated Instructors and Students

There can be no doubt that instructor identity is an important element when considering how best to teach queer issues. Intensely fraught, even dangerous, issues of visibility and authenticity are likely to accompany pedagogical (or any other) self-presentation in the queer classroom. For many reasons, queer issues instructors often struggle with the question of how/if to address their sexual identity (or their rejection of sexual identity models); such instructors are also always the potential object of both potential enmity *and* the deeply-invested identificatory projects of others. In the latter context, it is likely that the queer issues instructor will be positioned as a “voice” for a certain group, collapsing certain projects (especially

postmodern ones) right at the point of instructor self-presentation (Gibson et al. 69 – 70). Queer issues classrooms are often classrooms in which students are interested in identification and whether (for example) the instructor is or is not lesbian or gay. The “is s/he or isn’t s/he?” question will often reassert itself in ways that reflect the familiar cultural rubrics of stable identity politics. Students who identify as LGBT will likely look for role models and for safety zones as well as institutional mentors (the extent to and urgency with which they do so depending on the student, the class, and the larger context of the institution). Hence, engagement with multiple levels of questions concerning instructor identity — especially within the queer issues classroom — are not always optional or under the control of the instructor. Since our dominant discursive and conceptual structure for thinking about sexual identity is the heterosexual/homosexual dyad, it is that dyad that can persist in such a context. As long as some people identify or are identified as gay or lesbian, that identity will partially situate the instructor despite her wishes in the matter.

Additionally, I would also like to push this issue past the framework of the instructor’s (desired or perceived) performance of gender/sexual identity towards the issue of how queer pedagogy is/should be attentive to other markers or elements of identity besides gender and sexuality. Gender and sexuality are, of course, only some of the elements at play on what Apple calls the “larger nexus of relations of which [the instructor] is a constitutive part.” As I have noted, poststructural demands for recognizing the instability of identities can be understood as politically disabling or inadvertently encouraging passive bias. It is possible for poststructural discourse to be perceived as eliding difference and unintentionally vanishing

signifiers of power and privilege not only in terms of sexuality and gender but also race, ethnicity, class, and nation as well — each of these contexts comprising “identity” in ways that are both as experientially real and historically constructed as gender or sexual orientation.²

However, the project of situationally considering the instructor may usefully bring forward the question of how to best engage with intersectionality (to borrow Kimberlé Crenshaw’s term) in the queer classroom. The ways in which white dominance (for example) has played out historically through various disciplines reveals (among many things) that “inclusivity” has often centered white privilege in ways similar to the centering of heterosexuality, threatening to create an “admittance” model that not only leaves heterosexist assumptions unchallenged but also hampers a more fundamental critique of the default settings of white privilege (or male privilege, or imperialist and nationalist assumptions). Recognizing intersectionality and the ways in which the simultaneous interplay of aspects of identity are mutually and actively constitutive of each other may be one way in which more radical approaches to difference can be more productive than “simple identity” models. If intersectionality attempts to locate and engage with a dynamic simultaneity of identity locations, queer attentiveness to race and other markers of identity (including dominant ones like whiteness and heterosexuality) poises us on the edge of a pedagogy that both renders difference visible and complexifies identity itself.

Black feminisms and transnational feminisms, among other modes of feminist analysis, have addressed the insidious structural coherency of referents embedded within classrooms that embrace inclusion models. As Amy Winans notes, “the additive approach to inclusivity or celebration of difference tends to leave

dominant cultural assumptions and their complex relationship to power unexamined” (104). The problem of “getting everyone in” and doing so in a way that is not simplifying, unsophisticated, and merely additional requires not just revision, but re-vision. Thus, any instructor who is mindful of both self and other as complex locations of multiple, interlocked identities and relations to power is most effectively situated to facilitate a classroom where “identity” is posited as both stable and actively located within a relational dynamic.

The Queer Pedagogy of Conflicted Practice

In his foundational work on queer pedagogy, Steven Seidman considers whether the lesbian and gay studies model reproduces an unproductive “social logic of normalization” (170). He concludes that essentialism and the “ethnic modeling of homosexuality” demands that queer pedagogy be rooted within a lucid critique of such essentialism (Seidman 174). Seidman emphasizes that inclusivity begs a place at the table of dominance on behalf of one group, shoring up the power relations already in play and insidiously worsening the problem (174). Other theorists and practitioners of queer pedagogy share Seidman’s perspective, urging that queer pedagogy move past its ethnicity model towards broader epistemic interrogations since “subversiveness is not a new form of knowledge [i.e., lesbian and gay history] but lies in the capacity to raise questions about the detours of coming to know and making sense” (Luhmann 147).

Despite this call for seditious epistemologies, however, the literature on queer pedagogy overflows with the frustrations of instructors who have tried to queer the classroom through a purely poststructuralist approach. In a very instructive article on the poststructural queer classroom, Mary Bryson and Suzanne de

Castell claim that “little or no educational value” lies in creating a queer pedagogy through allowing “minority students to recount their experience of ‘difference’” (300). Yet despite their unambiguous and explicit commitment to creating a classroom without fixed “sexual orientations,” the experiment fails outright; “lesbian identity,” they recount, “was always fixed and stable, even in a course that explicitly critiqued, challenged, and deconstructed a monolithic ‘lesbian identity’” (294). The problems encountered by Bryson and de Castell reflect the ways in which an entirely deconstructive approach to queer issues will always be at least in some measure undercut by the reassertion (through students, institutions, and/or the curriculum) of something called sexual identity — a significant challenge for the postmodern impulse as it runs up against deeply engrained cultural and institutional models for sexuality and gender.

However, even as we acknowledge this challenge, we also know that to fail to contest the historicized/constructed nature of sexual identities is to permanently lock our students and our curricular and epistemological frameworks into a set of binaries that are stacked *against* the undermining or fundamental disruption of heterosexual (white, able, male, Western) privileges. Further, we risk naturalizing whatever we fail to effectively contextualize: that is, the sex/gender system as it stands, with specific forms of heterosexuality, as well as other dominant identity-based signifiers, at the center. Hence, our pedagogies, both inclusivity-based LGBT and poststructural ones, will always fall short in precisely the ways in which each theoretical model itself fails: by either asking too much of identity, material, students and teachers (to embody a constructed identity, to speak as, to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) or by underestimate of identity’s pow-

ers (to imagine we can exist in a state outside of forced embodiments and the cultures and institutions that protect, punish, and enforce certain identities).

Clearly, there is no return to lesbian and gay studies. Nor can we be content to imagine that adding new categories and morphing lesbian and gay studies into LGBT studies will simply “solve” the issues embedded in debates about sexual and gender identity. But if we can’t entirely leave identity behind, we also know that attentiveness to radically disruptive “identities” like trans, as well as historicized critiques of lesbian, gay and bisexual identities, are critical. So if institutions, knowledge forms and (perceived/refused) identities pull us in every possible direction, can these tensions be put into successful pedagogical praxis? The answer to that key question is yes — and I would argue that we must locate queer pedagogy within a model that thoughtfully sets both stable identity/poststructural frameworks in simultaneous motion. Queer pedagogy can (of course) be one or the other, but I would posit that at its best it is likely to be both, even as these definitions conflict. This posits that we may need to be supremely queer by mobilizing identity from multiple directions, as material and class content allow, and deliberately articulating and validating different kinds of understandings of sexuality and subjectivity concurrently — the essentialist and the post-structural, the stable and the unstable — as conflicted practice.

And the way to do this honestly and effectively is, I think, to do it consciously. Not to pretend that essentialist and deconstructed subjects are not in conflict, but to openly present to students what probably feels like a puzzle from a particularly interesting episode of *Star Trek*, where two different things are present in the same space at the same time. They cannot both be there, of course — and yet they clearly

are. To imagine that we can successfully deconstruct the categories such as lesbian and gay, particularly in the context of the forms of support/punishment meted out to instructors and students in terms of (perceived-as-stable) sexual orientation, is an error of excessive optimism, or naiveté. Experiential identities, set in the homosexual/heterosexual dyad but also simply “categorical,” are often (at least construed as) stable as in the classroom and on campus. And, even if we imagine we can deconstruct such identities entirely and successfully, the relentlessly-inclusive, “other-oriented” liberal institution will continue to speak in those terms from policy to curriculum.

The version of queer to which I want to add our spectral analysis is in many ways an amalgamate one, a kind of LGBT-queer. This version, I believe, represents how queer is even now sometimes mobilized, although not always adequately theorized, within the academy and the classroom. The LGBT-queer does not reflect an earlier “lesbian and gay studies” model but rather mobilizes “queer” as both radically different but also in conversation with “sexuality and gender identities.” One sees this impulse already developing within the phenomena of expanding queer “subtitles”: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersexed, pansexual, s/m, etc. Small wonder, then, that the urge to expand limits and dismantle the categorical absolutisms of sexual/gender identities has resulted in an expansion in (of all things!) categories. Such expansions are typified by conferences such as “Alphabet Soup,” the apt title of the 2007 Midwest Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Ally College Conference (the “MBLGTACC”) (Reed 16).

A queer pedagogy of conflicted practice is neither simple nor easy. Under the aegis of LGBT queer there appears (in any number of disciplines and interdisciplines) a group (or

groups) with a history, a literature, cultures, languages and communication strategies, geographies, social movements, etc. These groups are understood to have confronted (and confront) dire challenges within everyday life, and to have mobilized in familiar, “social movement” terms. But in its clear awareness of the constructed nature of sexual identities, the LGBT queer classroom can also be understood as a critical site of ideological resistance against absolutist categories of sexual and gender identity, even as it acknowledges the force, effect and importance of such groupings and classifications, as well. This approach reflects Deborah Britzman’s interest in “attempting to exceed such binary oppositions as the tolerant and the tolerated and the oppressed and the oppressor yet still hold onto an analysis of social difference” (164). This perspective also means that the LGBT queer is also in conscious, active dialogue with and against the conceptual terms most commonly (and uncritically) mobilized by educational institutions — critical elements (as I hope I have shown) in the pedagogical elements of teaching queer issues, as well.

There is no doubt, of course, that there are likely to be several levels of variance and stress within the model of conflicted practice (a phraseology which usefully has “conflict” embedded in its very heart). On one level, there is the difficult work of getting two very different, even opposed, knowledge models in simultaneous and active motion. But in a university setting typically obsessed with “difference” and “diversity,” it is worth considering that the conflicted practice for which I argue here is a form of grappling with differences in intellectual and critical perspectives. Pedagogical diversity may include different, even opposed approaches, and epistemological “diversity” itself may enable our students to

grasp the simultaneity of both lesbian and gay studies and queer theory — not only as diversity of opinion, but as two forms of structural analyses where neither eradicates the other. Joined with an interdisciplinary perspective, such an approach can move past the impasses of theory towards recognizing the possibilities of synchronized differences.

Additionally, there is the issue of classroom conflict itself. Never-simple questions of instructor and student identities are particularly fraught spaces within the queer issues classroom, and the extent to which students are invested in their own “identities” in this context is both important and highly variable. The queer classroom, like all classrooms, complexly grapples with issues of identity affirmation / denial, social interaction/isolation, safety/threat, and knowledge (re)formations. Hence, for example, it may be quite likely that students who perceive themselves as “coming out,” and who are deeply invested in the progressions of that very specific process of claiming and naming a sexual orientation, may be deeply attached to identity models. And, of course, the project of the classroom as liberatory space is tightly linked to spaces where students — especially LGBT students — feel safe to claim and express identity in productive, affirmative ways, even when those “ways” may be seen as essentialist or limiting.

On the other hand, as Giroux points out, it is critical “for educators to comprehend the changing conditions of identity formation,” an observation that calls us to look toward students’ familiarity with and embracing of the fragmentations of (post)modernity (69). To continue my “coming out” example, it is worth considering that perhaps the pressing need to “come out,” while familiar to many LGBT persons and their allies (and certainly reified culturally and institutionally), may be a less

appealing process to some, particularly younger, people. While I do not for a moment wish to imply that all students are younger people, I do want to highlight the possibility that generational differences may produce different contexts and ideas concerning the nature of sexual and gender identities. A queer classroom in which conflicted practice is employed could accommodate multiple (both established and newer) perspectives.

Conflicted practice then, actively invites great attentiveness to one of the most difficult parts of pedagogy, the creation of a space where multiple voices can formulate critique without dismissal and in which multiple models for the interrogation of knowledge and selfhood are in play. Often we teachers make the too common error of believing that there must always be unity and general concurrence. We too quickly see disagreement as inherently negative, something that bell hooks has cogently identified as a deeply felt pedagogical impulse to avoid conflict. This avoidance is especially tempting when we lead high-stakes classes filled with many perspectives on selfhood, difference, and justice:

...teachers, especially in the diverse classroom, tend to see the presence of conflict as threatening to the continuance of critical exchange and as an indication that community is not possible when there is difference.... (135)

What hooks observes in the context of classroom conflicts about race and sexuality hold true, I believe, in classrooms where the critical differences may also occur regarding the approaches through which difference itself is mediated and discussed.

A multiplicity of critical perspectives is not to be feared, but to be embraced with careful and conscious acknowledgement of the strengths and weaknesses of each. In my own experiences of teaching queer issues through a pedagogy of conflicted practice — most explicitly in an upper division women's studies course entitled "Sexuality Studies" — I have found that both LGBT and straight-identified students tend to first balk at the idea that sexual identity is an historical and social construct. Regardless of their "sexual identities," it is equally hard for the majority of students to give up a vision of sexual identity as a form of abstract desire that floats free of culture and to instead embrace an unstable sexual selfhood organized and managed by both concrete and abstract structures of power. Typically, and perhaps predictably, as the experiential stability of sexual orientation has come up against a constructivist approach to identity, tensions in my classes commonly arise among factions of queer students relative to their (shared or not shared) concerns about the political (in)expediency of queerness and possible further erasure of their lesbian or gay or bisexual subjectivity within straight society.

Perhaps feeling (incorrectly) that they have less to lose, straight-identified students in my classes have typically embraced constructiveness arguments with more ease — at least at first. But as steady intellectual pressure is placed upon heterosexuality as an also-invented identity and upon the non-naturalness of heterosexual privilege, the majority of straight students can find it very challenging, and sometimes quite upsetting, to imagine that *their* sexual orientation, and the many privileges that come with it, also collapse when we see sexual identity as socially produced. While usually willing to embrace the facts of heteronormativity and the reality of its brutal enforcement, my straight-identified students often powerfully struggle with debates that threaten to unseat the naturalness of their identity and disrupt their familiar roles as “benevolent tolerators.” Conflicted practice challenges heterosexual students to recognize the possibility of the invention of heterosexuality *even while* simultaneously demanding acknowledgment of the privileges of heterosexuality that fall to straight-identified people in a world that operates within a strict hierarchy of experientially real and socially significant “sexual orientations.”

A queer pedagogy of conflicted practice

challenges us (teacher, students, and administrators) to embrace contradiction, to expand our knowledge of LGBT experiential, historical, and literary events, and to concurrently acknowledge the mechanisms that make such events moments of history, not of absolute truth. What that will enable is pedagogical practices that see identity from many sides and carry a powerfully liberatory perspective, revealing that it is possible to create a queer pedagogy that at its core is not hegemonic and which is honestly mobile through many kinds of queer understandings. To do so is to not simply allow/demand that identities “speak” or to insist that identities be abandoned. Conflicted practice allows us multiple points from which to actively refuse collaboration with epistemological frameworks that conjure a fantasy of innocent students, instructors, curriculums and/or institutions waiting to be educated about LGBT issues and unimplicated in heterosexual privilege and the enforcement of heterosexual norms. A queer pedagogy of conflicted practice declares its presence in two places at once, as well as its determination to do the incongruous, the paradoxical, and the impossible. And what could be queerer than that?

NOTES

- ¹ It is important to note that queer theory was and continues to be influential within the activist community and has played an important role in how LGBT politics have been (re)formulated over the past two decades. Queer theory is (to draw a synthetic and unsatisfying distinction) both academic and activist in its political formulations, a fact seen perhaps most clearly in the political activism of Queer Nation. See Fraser, and also Berlant and Freeman, for explorations of how queer theory and populist activism have intersected and mutually informed each other.
- ² There has long been active discussion concerning the political efficacy of dismantling identity categories. The debate has been particularly vibrant within the academic feminist community. Articles such as Goldstein's pointedly titled "Queer Theory: The Monster that Is Destroying Lesbianville" and the aptly named collection *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* provide strong evidence of the tensions between a more essentialist approach and the collapse of categories such as (but not limited to) gender, as well as the exciting possibilities and dangers of such conflicts.

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