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The Queer Archetype: Cultivating Queerness in Public Schools

Heteronormativity extends across our nation perpetuating binary gender norms and privileging heterosexuality as the preeminent, natural way of life. It is only *natural* that within the realm of queer studies and lesbian, gay, trans, queer, intersex, and questioning (LGBTQIQ) activism that a form of homonormativity begins to take shape. Lisa Duggan first coined the term homonormativity in 2003 to describe the assimilation of heteronormative ideals and constructs into LGBTQIQ culture and identity. This paper looks at the discourses surrounding the ways in which public schools create acceptable modes of gayness through policies of tolerance and heteronormative and homonormative inculcation.

Social institutions like schools condition young people to accept modes of homosexuality that conform to hegemonic notions of appropriate gayness. Public and private schools across America require students to adopt attitudes of tolerance towards minorities matriculating amongst the general student population. Kathleen O. Elliott's ethnographic study of "Midwest High School" (MHS) provides proof of how public schools craft homonormativity through policies of tolerance. Upon entering MHS, Elliott was appalled to hear students casually throwing homophobic slurs about as teachers and others in authoritative roles strolled by with complete disregard.

Elliott's study shows that LGBTQIQ students who play on sports teams or hold positions of authority believe their high school to be extremely tolerant of gay people. Their experiences, however, differ significantly from other LGBTQIQ students. Elliott's study asserts that gay, lesbian, and trans students who do not adopt traditional hegemonic modes of high school popularity suffer several forms of bullying from name-calling to physical assaults. For Elliott, "blanket tolerance fails to address the complexities and structural roots of inequalities related to race, class, and sexuality" (161).

According to Elliott, institutionally enforced modes of tolerance protect specific types of queer

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students. Tolerance can both protect and harm LGBTQIQ kids because these policies do not support all LGBTQIQ students. Dan, for example, is one of the students Elliott interviewed and observed during her stint at MHS. Dan is perhaps the best example of the "right way to be gay" due to his level of involvement at school. Vice President of his class and a member of the varsity football team, Dan believes the school body is extremely tolerant to LGBTQIQ students. Elliott notes, however, that Dan's physical appearance is in-keeping with traditional modes of teenage popularity. Dan enjoys wearing preppy clothing, he drives his own car and hangs out with other popular kids on the football team. His high school experience is much different to that of Tonya. Other students taunt and tease Tonya because she enjoys dressing in baggy clothes and her hair is coiffed into a crew cut. Tonya reports that her male friends often joke about "setting Tonya strait" (159). For Tonya, MHS is not the tolerant utopia that Dan describes.

Elliott concludes that the tolerance enforced at MHS protects a very specific type of LGBTQIQ student. White, middle-class, masculine gay students sit at the top of the tolerance hierarchy. These students are typically involved with sports or student government and do not participate in LGBTQIQ activism. In fact, the LGBTQIQ students who choose to downplay their sexualities proved to be the most popular. Dan expressed to Elliott during an interview, "People who go around rubbing their sexuality in others' faces are going to be teased. Flamboyant kids should expect to be noticed because they're making themselves targets" (159). Dan's assimilation to heteronormative high school ideologies contributes to homonormative stereotypes.

Elliott calls for the promotion of gender fluidity awareness in schools. She wants to move beyond a focus of LGBTQIQ education that limits queer experience to abjection and survival. Kevin Kumashiro also believes that public schools should adopt other modes of dealing with homophobia. His four-part-plan places significance on educating the Other as well as others about the Other. His plan breaks down like so: 1. Education for the Other; 2. Education about the Other; 3. Education that is

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privileging and Othering; 4. Education that changes students and society. For Kumashiro, "learning is about disruption and opening up to future learning and not closure and satisfaction" (39). Yet, is overhauling our public education system's views of LGBTQIQ education possible? And where do we start?

Gender and sexuality education has always been a point of contention between parents, educators, and politicians. Proponents for gender and sexuality education initially argued for a gender-balanced classroom, however, scholars have begun attacking this meretricious mode of education since the late 1980s. Karen Gallas argues that "a gender-balanced classroom is a goal that reflects incomplete understandings of classroom life and denies the dynamics of the cultural milieu of today's classroom" (2). Gallas posits that children do not categorize their social actions according to a particular kind of stratification. Similarly to Kumashiro, Gallas argues for a socially holistic approach to learning that pays attention to the historical moment of a particular class's generation.

Gallas builds from Bakhtin's concept of prosaics as the unfolding of the ordinary events of daily life and the unfinalizability derived from life's mistakes, ruptures, points of confusion, and even chaos. Understanding that each new human encounter cannot rely on past modes but must be freshly constructed in the moment, Gallas argues that schools that value unfinalizability and uncertainty produce children with the opportunities to create dialogic communities. Anne Dyson refers to these communities as "classroom neighborhoods." She posits that "these communities represent a melding of many cultural viewpoints and are collectively constructed in the classroom, incorporating the "unofficial worlds" of children's lives into the flow of the "official world" of school" (19). Inspiring these microcosms to respect and value other cultures and alternative lifestyles is not an easy task. Sadly, many teachers risk losing their jobs because their desire to improve education is sometimes viewed as too progressive or not in-keeping with the school board's agenda.

Queer pedagogy asks its educators to meet this risk head-on. Educators must work through their

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own issues with homophobia and fight incoming resistance from authoritative forces. Elizabeth Meyers notes three levels of resistance that every educator must overcome to promote LGBTQIQ-sensitive material. Structural resistance occurs at the most fundamental level of education. It is inherent in the very system and manifests itself in different ways like separated sex-ed classes and the disproportionate amount of time that teachers spend with males over female students.¹ Meyer's second level of resistance is pedagogical resistance which describes anxieties regarding inappropriate relationships fomented by sexually explicit material. Meyer's refers to this level as Eros-anxiety as teacher/student relationship taboos can be so exaggerated that teachers can lose their jobs at the very insinuation of a romantic/sexual relationship (Lancaster, 113-136). The final level is psychical resistance in which the educator must fight his/her personal issues with gender and sexuality studies in classrooms.

Meyers hopes to promote an understanding of sexuality as a force, sexuality as private and public, and something from inside our bodies and made between bodies. She asserts, "we must focus on sexuality in terms of its contradictory and ambiguous workings" (21). This seems to be a concurrent theme within gender and sexuality studies discourse. The canonical works of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick are pillars on which queer pedagogy study rests. *Gender Trouble* and *Epistemology of the Closet* are foundational texts for those writing about queer pedagogy. The discourse surrounding queer pedagogy stems from realizing the construction of sexuality, gender, and the rhizomic possibilities inherent in each.

Few studies of sexuality in elementary schools have been published, however, the general consensus among those writing on the subject suggests that a complex interaction of forces conspire to keep sexuality out of sight in public schools (Thorne & Luria, 1986; Ferguson, 2001; Renold, 2005). In

¹ On average, teachers spend more time with boys than with girls, this widely accepted and agreed upon characteristic of public school is at the heart of Karen Gallas's study. Her initial quandary into gender and sex education in the classroom began as a study of "noisy boys and quiet girls."

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"Walking the Line: Teaching, Being, and Thinking Sexually in Elementary School," Erica M. Boas interviews ten elementary school teachers from various socio-economic school districts. The assortment of interviews yields anecdotal evidence that teachers often use heteronormative narratives to explain things to their young students. Boas provides several examples of heteronormative narratives during her classroom observation. Over and over again lessons in which nuclear families were presented to students (most vividly as sock puppets) in classrooms as teacher lectured their pupils on the merits of sharing, obeying, and tidiness.

Additionally, all of the teachers, the majority of whom taught kindergarten and first grade, shared examples of their students' *inappropriate* public displays of affection. These acts range from a student grinding her hips on a mat during nap time to two girlfriends kissing for an inappropriate duration. In each case, teachers agreed that school was not the place for sexual behavior; below are three examples from Boas's personal communication with the kindergarten teachers she interviewed:

"Maria: It's not something that school is about. Kissing and hugging and doing other things like that are for home or somewhere else. Not for school.

Grace: I know kids come in [to kindergarten] with all kinds of behaviors that they do just because they're little kids. But they have to learn that in school, or in any public place, they can't do that. They just can't, you know?

Cassie: [Girls] can't be all sexy and stuff running around the classroom" (Boas, 138-155).

These passages help illustrate the *child in danger* tableau that proliferates within American society and frequents regularly in academic discussion. A.A. Ferguson argues that children who display "adultified" behaviors become those most in need of saving (33). And so the young girl who dresses "all sexy and stuff" becomes the child most in need of a teacher's moralizing attention. In elementary school, children begin learning about what is normal, and, through various acts of inculcation like recycling heteronormative narratives in lessons or the refusal to broach the subject of sexuality altogether, kids

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are imprinted with specific hegemonic categories for appropriate sexual behaviors, what Boas refers to as "normalizing missions" (134). "Normalizing missions" strive to make "normal children", those ingrained with the values of white, heterosexual, middle-class norms and values.

This is precisely what Judith Butler attempts to navigate through in an effort to claim a "livable/bearable life." Resisting pre-digested norms, a livable life is one with expanding possibilities. When teachers feel the need to impose hegemonic values on children, they are doing more than fabricating artificial barriers, they are instilling young students with heteronormative norms. The "normalizing missions" Boas describes inscribes children with the very limits that must be challenged and overcome by LGBTQIQ identified children later in life.

Butler contrasts her notion of the livable/bearable life with the good life and argues that the good life is only available to people whose lives are already possible and recognizable and who do not have to devote most of their energy to figuring out ways to survive and persist (31-32). For her, the question of the livable life must necessarily precede the question of the good life, because to strive for a good life, one must first be recognized as having a life (205). Expanding upon Hegel's desire for recognition, Butler posits that desire is bound up with questions of power and social normativity. It is through the experience of recognition that people are reified into social beings. Butler pushes Hegel's theory further to note that since people are recognized and constituted through social terms, these terms are malleable and alterable.

There is an implicit tension between desiring norms in order to survive, and maintaining a critical distance from them. For Butler, a critical relationship to norms depends on a collective ability to convey alternative, oppositional "norms" that incite action. Butler argues that *doing* and *being* are fused together as she writes, "if I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility" (273). Transforming norms, as Butler vehemently

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expresses, comes from a comprehension of how one is constituted by them.

In her analysis of grief, intersexual mutilation, and the livable/bearable life, Butler examines how bodies are normalized and made "human." Butler explicitly concerns herself with the question of autonomy. Choosing one's own body means navigating among norms. This is a daunting fact for LGBTQIQ children in schools, one that sadly some kids do not survive. Butler contests that individual agency is bound up with societal critique and social transformation; those pushing for progressive changes to grade school curriculum include this message in their campaign. One's personal gender is determined to the extent that social norms support and enable acts of claiming and occupying.

Similarly, Anne Fausto-Sterling believes more progress could be made if we were to focus on individual differences and how "the brain develops as part of a social system" (145). She opposes biological studies that privilege essentialist claims about a heteronormative sexual binary. Yet, many scholars are beginning to ask what exists past queer, is there a postqueer?

Heather Love writes that clinging to queer identity is a way saying no to the good life (187). Along a parallel vein to Butler, Love recognizes that a queer life is not necessarily a valued life. Unlike those who fit into the confines of accepted gayness, as seen at Midwest High School, other LGBTQIQ students adopt a queer lifestyle at great social cost. As we see the effects of heteronormativity and homonormativity begin to shape LGBTQIQ youth, a better understanding, appreciation, and awareness of sexuality must be able to develop in elementary, middle, junior, and high schools. However, as the term *queer* begins to unravel all of its possibilities, some scholars, like Love, wonder if those embracing a queer definition are also buying into a neoliberalism (187). She wonders if queer is indeed an advancement, or has it transmuted into a now static, boring thing.

Resisting the inclusion of sexuality in elementary school dialogue is a grave mistake. Through purposeful abeyance of sexual imagination and adherence to a heteronormative paradigm, educators, administrators, and parents send sexuality into remission only to equivocally address it at a more

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appropriate time, i.e. adolescence. High school becomes the stage for sexual exploration, but as Katherine O. Elliott's ethnographic study asserts, "the boundaries of accepted sexual identities has been redrawn to include a specific version of queer sexuality--one that fits within the bounds of dominant white, middle-class masculinity...However, the majority of LGBT[QIQ] students at the school remained outside these boundaries, further marginalized from the "normal" heterosexual peers and, now, their "tolerated " queer classmates" (166). The need for tolerance begins in elementary schools as teachers inundate their pupils with heterosexuality as the status quo.

The discourse regarding childhood expressions and exploration of sexuality in elementary school suggests that norms are to blame for the stifling of sexual exploration. Theorists agree that queer sexuality is based in possibility. A panoply of avenues to explore and identities to pursue, however, educators are often dissuaded to get involved for fear of they might incur the State's wrath. Luckily, some brave pioneers are seeking alternative modes of education that promote the rhizomic opportunities invoked by the term *queer*.

In January of 2010, David Glick opened the virtual doors to the GLBTQ Online High School. He taught in Minnesota in a small, rural, mostly Christian district and was shocked at the discrimination he experienced for being Jewish. Although he was conscious about discrimination and oppression before that time, living through it brought home to him the ways that GLBTQ youth ask for help from schools to address harassment and violence often to find that the administrators' responses are ineffective and that most people wish they would just "get over it" (171). These experiences led him to imagine starting a school in a different format, to create a welcoming space for students who feel that they do not fit into their home community, and feared they might never find safety or acceptance there. The school includes regular high school curriculum like chemistry and calculus, but also boasts an impressive array of gender, sexuality, and queer history courses.

Ideally, LGBTQIQ students should matriculate unabashedly with their fellow schoolmates; free

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to express themselves and explore their sexualities. However, as the discourse surrounding sexuality in primary schools and the treatment of LGBTQIQ high school students suggests, alternative modes of education must be explored. As Glick argues, "Every GLBTQ kid should have the opportunity to enjoy their teenage years regardless of whether they live in a progressive state like Vermont, or a very conservative state like Texas" (177). Perhaps until the world can grasp the exponential variations and possibilities of a queer life, students who feel threatened would be best served at an online institution like the GLBTQ Online High School.

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