"QUEER"ING IDENTITY/IES: AGENCY AND SUBVERSION IN CANADIAN

EDUCATION

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"Lezzie, fag, sissy, dyke!"

These slurs are tossed around in schoolyards, classrooms, hallways, and homes

across the country; "That's so gay," probably the most common sexuality-directed slang

term, is used to comment on anything that diverges from what is deemed acceptable and

cool; stereotypes of sexual identity, such as tomboy or pansy are leveled at any child that

crosses even the finest of gender-divided lines. Such descriptives are extremely

powerful, affecting both their immediate recipients and ultimately each young person's

cognitive development and understanding of meaning surrounding divisions of gender.

Furthermore, this gendered name-calling reinforces a heterosexual and patriarchal

ideology. Education systems are involved in this preservation of heteronormativity, or

"the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and

prescriptive sociosexual arrangements" (Ingraham, 1997, p. 275). It is important to look

at the ideologies that are part of education systems in order to analyze those practices that

create such biased space. In doing so, one can develop forms of resistance which are

beneficial to young persons growing up in Canadian schools. In the case of this article,

the subject of discussion is not youth in general, but rather queer youth. Queer as a group

includes those persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and/or two-spirited,

as well as those who feel themselves to be outside of any societal definitions of gender/sexuality. And by youth, I am referring to those students who are part of a high school education system.

The task at hand is of incredible proportion, for if we are to transform those systems that perpetuate oppression, we must evaluate the roles they play in maintaining the heterosexist order. We must also examine the oppressive philosophies that underpin education systems in order to formulate practices, teaching skills and resources which challenge and critique dominant methods of education. There are a number of strategies that both queer youth and educators can employ, namely the use and analysis of the performed body—a two-edged sword in terms of the literal performance of dramatic productions which focus on queer issues, and the ontological performance of gender that queer youth perform every day. A second strategy is exhibited in the rising trend of Gay/Straight Alliances: high school groups that develop out of student-led movements to effect change in their own environments. The resultant queer/feminist pedagogy is of a diverse nature, one that situates agency with the subject of oppression and recognizes the strength of subversive identity/ies. Through this theoretical lens I will reveal the human potential for action. Rather, queer agency in facilitating revolutionary change.

The Spoke/n Word: "Queer" As a Pledge of Resistance

Queer is a term, which—like crone, cunt, and bitch for some feminists—is in the process of being reclaimed as a site of power. As a term that has historically connoted perversion and illegitimacy, rendering its recipient helpless, there is a fear of queer's inability to transcend its history:

The main reason why the self-application of 'queer' by activists has proved so

volatile is that there's no way that any amount of affirmative reclamation is going

to succeed in detaching the word from its associations with shame and with the

terrifying powerlessness of gender-dissonant or otherwise stigmatized childhood.

(Sedgwick, 1993, p. 4)

With the utmost of respect, one understands the pain that queer has caused and

may continue to cause, but the potentiality of such a term far exceeds what might have

been imagined as it has become a deconstructive as well as empowering platform of

difference. Picture a high school hallway which has long heard the words queer, fag and

dyke thrown as insults to passersby and then suppose those same students who were once

targets of such inappropriate, though unpunished, name-calling found the community and

courage necessary to establish a queer group on campus. This group would then wear the

name proudly, using it in speech as well as in public displays. The strength of the group

in positioning the term positively strips the power it holds as a crass and offensive insult

and furthermore, unifies a diverse group of students who identify with numerous

definitions of sexual identity.

The ensuing politics of difference are distinct from any politics of identity in that

they disrupt the rhetoric of sameness and structural normativity (Duggan, 1992)

insomuch as queer, by definition, distorts the straight and narrow path. Annamarie

Jagose defines queer as:

[T]hose gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the

allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire.

Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin,

when it is more properly its effect . . . queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms [sex, gender and desire] which stabilize heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any "natural" sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as "man" and "woman". (1996 p. 3)

The value of such a deconstruction of sex, gender and desire is that it puts into question all forms of gender discrimination, be it aimed at cross-dressing, intersexuality, gender ambiguity, gender-corrective surgery (Jogose, 1996 p. 3) as well as sexism. However, the efficacy of queer theory rests on whether or not it will successfully remain applicable and accessible to those persons who are most affected by and defenseless to heterosexism, namely youth.

There are varying levels of dependency at work in the lives of youth. These dependencies restrict the choices, communities, and experiences available to those who need something other than what is provided—or rather, not provided—in public school systems, as well as the familial relationships of children and youth. If queer theory is to truly be of revolutionary capacity it is imperative that it explicates those power relations which create heteronormative ideology. Chris Ingraham discusses the effects of heteronormativity in detail, reminding us that aside from the well-known and interlocking hierarchies of race, class and gender, heteronormativity serves as a functionalist category of comprehension. This understanding contributes to the heterosexual imaginary, Ingraham's self-defined term which "conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution" (1997, p. 275). It is important for feminists, queer theorists and educators to realize the legitimacy of this claim in order to develop the tools necessary to dismantle its

effects. The far reach of the heterosexual imaginary extends to economic resources, cultural power, and social control (Ingraham, 1997) and is itself institutionalized as a defining system in locating gendered identities and furthermore, in creating a culture of tolerant homonegativity. Whereas the traditional term homophobia refers to the fear of or prejudice against homosexual persons, homonegativity refers to the subtle beliefs and more specifically the behaviours that persist even once someone believes they are unprejudiced towards homosexuality.

For example, a person may hold the belief that sexual diversity is no problem, they may even have gay or lesbian friends and think nothing of it, but when they learn that their five-year-old daughter's kindergarten teacher is a gay man, they may immediately transfer her to a different school, exhibiting the deep-seated, mythological belief that queerness and child abuse are somehow connected. This parental response is typical of the homonegativity that stems from a national ideology of heterosexism and one need not hear the redundant declaration that child molestation is statistically committed by straight men. The connection between an entire education, which promotes heternormativity, and a grown society that stigmatizes, alienates and excludes queer persons is not a grand leap; this shows the desperate need for a transformation of these cultural ideologies that must be spearheaded by education systems.

Louis Althusser (1971, p.52) speaks to the relationship between identity and ideology, defining ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence". Identity is granted to us merely in relation to the constructed ideologies of the heterosexual and patriarchal order; youth identity is construed in reference to this very persistent sense of national Canadian identity. This lack of

demonstrable freedom in any true self-identity exemplifies the breadth and power of any ruling structure, but it also—rather coercively— enables us to look at the crucial role of agency in queer youth. I am not attempting to say that queer youth are entirely extracted from the shackles of the normative ideology, but the very notion of existing as someone who, by societal definitions, still exists outside of any reproductive and patriarchal model, enables the presence of a subversive identity

Any language referring to homosexual persons is subversive; it gives meaning to something that a heterosexist society does not recognize as legitimate behaviour in the structural code of ethics. Insults are spit out with anger, punches are thrown in their defense, and the passing terminology of homosexuality will never cease to ring of clinical and perverted overtones, and yet, in the same nature as the use of queer, many of those so-thought insults are embraced by marginalized groups as exemplified by the affectionate and empowering use of dyke, fag or homo.

This transformation of language exhibits a gap in any rational ideology for it negates and likewise re/configures meaning and definition. In relation to the queer subject we see the agency of those who neutralize the heterosexual imaginary, simply by existing. In this effect, the use of queer as a descriptive term contributes to the localizing of the subversive identity and pragmatically advances the transformation of the national ideology.

So what is the role of youth, and more specifically queer youth in this radical redirection of meaning? It is cliché to say, "youth are the future," but there is nothing cliché about deconstructing the ideologies which inform our education institutions in order to enable anti-bias graduates. Young people occupy a sphere which is somewhat

outside of the economic and capitalist agenda—though undoubtedly they are affected by it—in that they themselves are not yet "working for the machine". The formation of self often takes a rebellious nature in teen years and the coalitions and organizations constructed at this stage are of importance due exactly to their resistant character. High school groups such as Gay/Straight Alliances as well as independent theatre groups contribute to this revolutionary agenda by utilizing the agency of the "for the people, by the people" strategy. Yet, they maintain a space that is within—but not of—a system which desperately needs the challenge.

<div align="center">Queering the Performance</div>

The notable philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler examines performativity and its relationship to definitions of gender. She understands gender as that which is defined by cultural discourse, as opposed to any inherent gendered identity. In keeping with the above discussion of the heterosexual imaginary, Butler delineates the gendered identity as created against the backdrop of compulsory heterosexuality. The performance then, is any exhibition of gender, for each gendered appearance is only acted in accordance to what culture expects of the body. Butler cites drag as a metaphor for performatavity: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (1997, p. 120). However, drag is itself of a different nature than culturally sanctioned gender representation because it enables the internally sexed body—male or female—to perform the contrary gender—female or male, respectively.

Butler facilitates a valuable un-fixing of gender and subsequently relates it to the political realm in that, "the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics;

rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated"
(1997, p. 127). But, how does this relate to queer youth, and more specifically, how can
complex theory be useful in a very practical and youth-centered way? Obviously the
grand abstractions of Butler's work, and many other theoretical texts for that matter, are
not necessarily accessible to high school students, and given the value of theory in
offering critiques and challenges to mainstream ideologies, it is necessary to bridge that
gap in order to create an effective praxis.

So, let us take Butler's performativity literally, using it as a political subversive in
the form of youth drama. If identity is not fixed or static, the performance can illuminate
the re/configurations and performances of being. Drama is the taking on of imaginary
roles and the presentation of alternative realities. Youth theatre can work as a
deconstructive tool by exhibiting this performance and accordingly challenging both the
audience and the actors' ideas of identity. Any theatrical play is drag. Any performance
of alternate selfhood challenges our notions of reality, for example: Sam, a young student
in grade eleven who makes a daily habit of tormenting her effeminate neighbour, gets the
part of a young lesbian in the theatrical production of Rubyfruit Jungle.[1] The audience
possibly assumes Sam to be lesbian (such is our inability to distinguish real from
imaginary), but at the very least, they assume she is open-minded and accepting of gays
and lesbians. The effect these assumptions may have are key to the role of performance
in challenging identity because: (a) members of the audience may be affected by the
play's message and then proceed to reexamine their opinions on homosexuality; (b) those
who assume Sam is queer may treat her differently, thus sparking discussions and

debates; and (c) Sam will likely internalize parts of her role, and will perhaps evaluate some of her own long-held beliefs.

The Laramie Project by Moises Kaufman (2001) is another powerful example of the political agency of drama. The play recounts over two hundred interviews, which were carried out by Moises Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theatre group, following the brutal kidnapping and murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. The production is staged as a series of vignettes, giving voice to over sixty different townspeople, all expressing their experiences and concerns surrounding both the murder and Matthew's sexuality. The significance of this particular play is that it presents many differing opinions, looking at a larger context of a story and truly understanding the implications of the murder as enabled by prevalent homonegative ideologies. Also, the play is written to enlist a smaller number of actors to play multiple roles, a format which demonstrates a plurality of identities. It allows for contradiction, in that, one seemingly fixed actor adorns many guises and opinions. Audiences are sure to identify with one or more of the many characters, as well as to empathize with the characters' conceptual transformations throughout the duration of the performance.

If student groups or Gay/Straight Alliances were to perform or sponsor either The Laramie Project or other queer-content plays, it could be useful to present the performances in scene fragments followed by a debriefing session. The debriefing would provide a forum for analysis and questions, requiring the audience to participate in the performance. Questions posed could include: what are similarities between Laramie, Wyoming and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (any location); how were the two boys who committed the crime shaped by their community and education; how has the murder of

Matthew Shepard impacted and changed each character; how did you feel about the actors after seeing them perform roles of differing opinions; and how does this performance of heterosexism and homophobia contribute to one's understanding of its effects?

These questions are difficult ones, requiring participants to really examine their own heterosexism. When presented in such a stark and telling format—the telling of hate crimes and their effects—it is very difficult for anyone not to take a step back and rethink previous scornful convictions. As we have already begun to do in dissecting the use of The Laramie Project to facilitate discussion and the un-making of ideologies, we will continue with this notion of strategy in a summary of how valuable and essential groups such as Gay/Straight Alliances are in challenging students and educators as well as in supporting queer and questioning youth.

<div align="center">Gay/Straight Alliances</div>

The biggest problem for me has been the loneliness. Because I'm Chinese as well makes me feel even more isolated. Being Chinese and gay puts me into a unique position. My parents are very traditional . . . [they] discount it and put it down as 'American craziness' . . . . I really would like to have had lesbian friends during my high school career. (F., age 17 from Malinsky, 1997, p. 44)

Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs) are gaining more and more recognition and support in Canada as a necessity for high schools if they are truly to be safe spaces for queer youth. These organizations are youth led and operated, enlisting the support of a teacher sponsor, but not a teacher director. GSAs intend to:

1. Create safe environments in schools for students to support each other and learn about homophobia and other oppressions.

2. Educate the school community about homophobia, gender identity, and sexual orientation issues.

3. Fight discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools.

(from: Gay Straight Alliance Network, http://www.gsanetwork.org)

The very presence of such groups in schools challenges the normative ideology by existing as subversives within carefully dictated boundaries of conduct and as mentioned above, this contributes to their agency. The student-led nature of GSAs ensures a desirably rebellious nature, because students are not yet responsible for paychecks and parental concern. Queer students are instead concerned for their safety, in search of palpable identity, and in need of support systems committed to transformation. They need to find their own capacities in instigating the deconstruction of the heterosexual imaginary and in creating environments where they can truly feel pride.

The development of GSAs in high schools is a necessary action if we are to challenge the heterosexism and homonegativity in school systems. In this way, queer students are given the opportunity to create positive social communities—which may literally be a lifesaving activity—and to challenge the early inscriptions of gender that subsequently undergird the cultural and economic world. A young college student from Michigan State University reiterates this very challenge in saying:

We can manipulate the educational system and use it as a tool to disrupt the status quo and as an instrument of social change. For that to work, we must look for

new ways of doing things, and we must all be ready to lift as we climb.

(Whitaker, 2000, p.29)

A Queer/Feminist Pedagogy of Education

Nearly every individual in this country steps through the doors of a public educational institution, where we learn to count, to add, to read and write, to socialize, and to understand ourselves in relation to the socioeconomic and cultural domain. The role that educators play is one of phenomenal magnitude when we realize the potential they have to both incite and constrain attitudes and behaviours. Feminists have long argued for a restructuring of our school systems into ones that instill equality and diversity since it is a logical supposition that anti-bias education will generate anti-bias perspectives. If only it were that straightforward. One would hope that all school systems would have successfully adopted such a working model, counteractive to the interlocking hierarchies of gender, race and class.

An important challenge for feminists has been to recognize the heterosexism that lies at the basis of patriarchy. Divisions in the feminist movement saw liberal feminists, radical feminists and radical lesbians criticizing each other for shortcomings and exclusions,[2] arguments that succeeded in further dividing an already fragmented liberation movement. Charlotte Bunch (1997) illuminates the dangers of a feminist ideology which seeks to end women's oppression, but does not pay heed to the heteronormativity which is in fact an organizing structure of patriarchy. She speaks:

The heart of lesbian-feminist politics . . . is a recognition that heterosexuality as an institution and an ideology is a cornerstone of male supremacy. Therefore women interested in destroying male supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism must,

equally with lesbians, fight heterosexual domination—or we will never end

female oppression. This is what I call "the heterosexual question"—it is not the

lesbian question. (1997, p. 55)

The dangers are such that any political and revolutionary movement will meet brick walls

if it restricts analysis and focus to a specific self-appealing area of oppression, and as

Bunch reiterates, "We, as lesbians, are a minority. We cannot survive alone" (1997, p.

58). But if the formidable task of challenging heterosexism is not an integral part of

feminism, other manifestations of oppression will prevail.

Furthermore, any oversight of the material lives of each and every marginalized

group denies knowledge of the particular experiences that are valuable to full analyses of

the relations of oppressions to culture, sex and socioeconomic locations. Lesbians, in

particular, have an interesting experience of class structure due to the fact that by not

living under a specifically male-dominated household, they realize by necessity what it

means to support themselves entirely. Bunch explains how this relates to lower- and

working-class women who are well aware of economic demands and further that this

shared experience contributes to the coalescence of lesbian- and Marxist-feminists

(1997). In dialogues such as this, feminists and queer theorists can further understand the

interplay of capitalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity.

The problematic of education, from the primary to the university level, is that the

heterosexual imaginary dictates curriculum, teaching practices, administrative decisions,

personal identification, and resource distribution. Although racist and sexist teaching

practices have begun to experience contention, heterosexism still persists, often in full

disclosure from students and staff. Discrimination is often based on the ingrained sexist

stereotypes of gendered representation which are irrevocably threatened by any variation

of this standard, as well by the repercussions that same-sex sexual identification has on

an entire societal ideology created by Judeo-Christian doctrines of family and

reproduction.[3]

Part of the depth of the heterosexism in schools is the invisibility of queer-ity. A

complaint often leveled against queer persons is that same-sex identification cannot be

addressed on equal footing as racism or sexism due to obvious visible differences—an

African-Canadian high-school student is defined as such every time s/he enters a room,

whereas a queer person is not necessarily outed by her/his appearance (Taken from a case

study of harassment, GLSN, 2001). This claim speaks to an honest concern felt by those

who are marginalized due to race, but it also illuminates the invisibility felt by queer

students and teachers. Both heterosexuality and homosexuality are activities which are

not necessarily distinguishable by appearance; however, the specific norms which

constitute one's physical presentation are firmly entrenched, and were one to diverge

from those expressions of self—as queer persons often do—s/he would experience social

consequences.

When speaking of the invisibility of queer identity, we must acknowledge the

danger of such a situation. Many queer youth attempt to "pass" or to hide their sexuality,

creating a public persona and a private persona, each containing their own personality

and physical representation. To return to Judith Butler's concept of drag, we can see how

the queer body performs heterosexuality in order to satisfy the national heteronormative

ideology. Another problem associated with invisibility is the isolation queer youth feel

because of the very fact that no one knows. Parents, teachers and friends cannot see a

difference and often misappropriate resources in trying to help (Schneider, 1997, pp. 11-30; Malinsky, 1997, pp. 35-51; Fontaine, 1997, pp. 101-111). This is where the community of a Gay/Straight Alliance would be useful in creating a space which does not expect queer youth to be invisible. Such a space allows queer youth to experience themselves as agents in the advancement of diversity education in their schools, and additionally as valid representations of gendered identity.

If we are to seriously address the consequences of heteronormativity in constructing our realities, it will require not only an identification of its materialization/s, but also an analysis of the structures, from which arise the ideologies. A queer/feminist pedagogy is one which understands the diverse discriminations at work in high schools and incorporates teachings that dismantle all factors contributing to a heteronormative ideology. By enlisting the help of queer students, educators can bring to discussion notions of the body and how it performs gender. They could also use the suggestions regarding drama analysis and Gay/Straight Alliances to create a curriculum based on critical thinking and diversity. Perhaps this analysis will be further tested by those persons who are directly involved in curriculum development and high school programming. Although any study would be better suited to work with teams of young people, for as was mentioned above, both their youthfulness and rebelliousness provide grand sites of strength and resistance.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

I recently found a short skit entitled "I am what I am," by Lorna Cherot (2000). The skit was a product of the critiques of the feminist movement as focussing only on the challenges for white, middle-class women. Cherot casts seven women, six white women

and one black woman, in roles of: two radical lesbians; two straight radical women; two liberal women; and one black woman. The skit parodies the divisions of the feminist movement, showing the breakdown of communication that happens when multiple identities are not recognized. "I am what I am," concludes with the solitary black woman frantically challenging the white women—who are not listening to her—by shouting, "No one's gonna hand you your liberation—you gotta take it!"(p.113) In effect, the play exhibits an insightful proclamation of the oppressed.

Transformation comes from personal agency. The heterosexual imaginary will not be reconfigured in corporate offices and ivory towers; it will be changed by grassroots movements and student-led revolutions of education. The subversive identities of queer youth contain the potential to infiltrate existing structures of oppression through supportive networks such as Gay/Straight Alliances and also Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Ally centres on university campuses across the country. Youth can benefit from dramatic enactments of gender and the body, using such plays as The Laramie Project and the above-mentioned "I am What I am" to challenge the fixidity of gender and identity. A pedagogy which emphasizes multiplicity, but localizes agency will recognize diverse forms of oppression, and thus seek to change the ultimate national ideology of bias, while enabling youth to be agents of their own revolution. This is truly a vision of strength and integrity and in the words again of Stephen Paul Whitaker:

> Each of us has within our power the ability to disrupt and transform some of the barriers we have overcome. But to do so, we each must recognize the privilege of our positions. We must not only fulfill our own potential, but also actively work to foster the potential of our neighbors [sic]. (2000, p.20)

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<div align="center">Endnotes</div>

[1] *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) is a book by Rita Mae Brown which chronicles the life of Molly Bolt, a young girl who realizes she is lesbian at a young age. Molly develops great determination, defiance, and pride in her sexuality as she 'takes New York by storm' (quote from jacket flap summary).
[2] See: "Fourth world manifesto" by Barbara Burris (1971); "Socialist feminism" by the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (1972); "The woman-identified woman" by Radicalesbians (1970); "Politicalesbians and the women's liberation movement" by Anonymous Realesbians; and "On separatism" by Lee Schwing

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[3] Let me not slip into a generalized universalizing of history and religion. I am speaking to Canadians, through an understanding of the role that 'God the father' plays in a very large majority of our population. That said, there are many persons who practice other religions that also have a male, patriarchal figure at their helm. And for those atheists out there, no one can deny that Judeo-Christian ideology far surpasses those who practice organized religion, it is part of the fundamental organizing principles of our Canadian nationality.