

Ob/Scenely Polymorphously Perverse Sex Education

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In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault described ways in which human sciences of sexuality create an imperative in people to know the truth about themselves and others through “knowing” and confessing sexual practices.¹ Through these confessional technologies and their supporting discourses, sexual identities are created and regulated. Sex education in schools is an important site for the solidification of an abbreviated range of sexual identifications thus producing a limited education in relation to issues of sex, sexuality, and safer sex. By taking up Foucault’s work on the subject as both subject to and subject of power, Cris Mayo argues that education would better serve children and adolescents if its practitioners attempted to disrupt foundational assumptions that children are innocent and adolescents are sexually abstinent. This obscene fixation on a foundational truth about adolescents translates into a death sentence for those who are sexually and unsafely active, even while the discourse of sex education purports to protect adolescents. Mayo recommends that students, and presumably their teachers, undertake a genealogical examination of the construction of identity and, in particular, categories of “sexuality” and “adolescence” in order to open up possibilities for complicating sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

In my response, I draw out some of what would need to be noticed when breaking open these categories. I am interested in exploring questions about which adolescent body is produced as innocent and abstinent and, as a consequence, which bodies are vanquished. I argue that the maintenance of the notion of the innocent, abstinent adolescent relies on certain assumptions about race, class, and sexuality. Like, the category, “adolescent,” the category “student” must be opened up to other significations. As I have argued elsewhere, an assumption of “student” and “teacher” as unified categories constructs a student-teacher dyad and rules out recognition of differences within each category and similarities across categories.² Adolescent students are not only assumed to be innocent and abstinent in relation to their worldly, sexual teachers, like their teachers, their interests, if not their embodiment, is assumed to be white, middle-class, and heterosexual thus ensuring that some kinds of embodiment “come to matter” while others do not.³

In his book, *Sex, Death, and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS*, Jonathan Silin argues that the “immediate challenge for educators is to locate the traditions that permit us to understand the pedagogical significance of problems as they arise in society and impinge on our classrooms.”⁴ The “traditional family,” in particular, propped up as it is by assumptions about generational differences and heteronormativity frames identities of children and youth through performances of a hetero-male father, hetero-female mother and hetero-male and hetero-female children.⁵ Father knows best in this combination with mother as leading support. The available script for a female adolescent in the traditional family is a sexually innocent, sexually inactive heterosexuality. Normal

boys, on the other hand, while still innocent, are assumed to be nerds satisfied by hand contact with computers or they are assumed to be rife with raging hormones controlled through powerful cars or stereos, not actual hetero-sex.⁶

The "tradition" of the traditional family and the assumption of innocence of adolescents within this family are maintained not only by what is contained by these analytical categories. The notions of "tradition" and "innocence" are propped up by the perpetuation of racist and stereotyping myths about Blacks, First Nations and Metis peoples, suspect ethnic groups, poor people, prostitutes, drug-users and queers. Racist myths about Black male hyper-sexuality and implication in HIV/AIDS contamination; Native males' sexual ineptitude; and Black and Native females as sites of potential contamination of white middle-class respectability for hetero-males and their female partners, preserve the tradition of the traditional family and the innocence of a white and middle class adolescence.⁷ Since bisexual youth are thought to contaminate both hetero-males and females while gay men, in particular, are constructed as predators, normal, white, middle class innocent, abstinent adolescents must also be protected from bisexuality and homosexuality.

Children and youth who deviate are, by definition, not really normal children and youth. They are not the children who require protection because they are already not innocent. Buried in protective and disciplinary strategies is the "fear of a queer planet."⁸ This, of course, leaves vulnerable the sexually unnormalized child. As Michael Warner indicates, "heterosexual ideology, in combination with a potent ideology about gender and identity in maturation, [which] therefore bears down in the heaviest and often deadliest way on those with the least resources to combat it: queer children and teens."⁹

Since the categories "child" and "adolescent" could not possibly contain all those subjected to these categories, differences of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are erased, with the effect that some youth are denied their sexuality, others denied their youthfulness, and all are denied appropriate sex education. All children and adolescents are put at risk in order to conceal the knowledge that children and adolescents are often sexually active and that some of them are lesbian, gay, or queer. This is a deadly control that regulates and denies youthful sexual activities at the expense of their lives. Moreover, as Silin writes, "the moral panic about protecting children diverts attention away from the intense emotional fabric of the isolated, nuclear family in which the majority of abusive and sexual situations originate."¹⁰

All of these traditions, processes of normalization, and essentializing strategies affect the pedagogical nightmare that is sex education. How does a sex education which attempts to protect the innocence of white, middle class, heterosexually abstinent adolescents contend with racialized, sexualized others, since these "others" will also likely be in these sex education classrooms? Indeed, how does a sex education which assumes innocence contend with sex at all, since, by definition, the innocent and sexually abstinent will not be harmed by HIV/AIDS and the non-innocent others already know and may already be contaminated by HIV/AIDS? As Simon Watney indicates, "certainly no area of social life has been subjected to more

violent ideological contestation in the modern period than sex education, and the whole vexed question of homosexuality in schools.”¹¹ The question that must be urgently asked is who is offended and abused through protection, indifference, or active hatred as these become the obscene truths that stand in as educative strategies in the age HIV/AIDS?

Cindy Patton writes that in the United States what has become increasingly clear as the age of AIDS unfolds is that, given the incubation period of HIV/AIDS, a large proportion of people contracted HIV as teenagers. Patton writes of the tragic combinations that have delayed identifying young people as at risk.¹² For Mayo, following Patton, obscenity “attempts to account for possibilities prior to their becoming normalized and concretized.” This requires that sex education provide information about HIV/AIDS prior to sexual activity. It is only through this kind of a strategy that HIV/AIDS will be controlled.

Further, if we agree with Watney who takes up Freud and insist that sexuality begins when a child is born; that the unconscious knows no gender (or race or class or natural family) and that sexuality is polymorphously perverse, we must support Cris Mayo’s conclusion that schools have a responsibility to provide ob/scene education; that is, safe sex education not only for adolescents but for children as well.¹³ In this way, we refocus ourselves in the age of HIV/AIDS as safely polymorphously perverse and control that which is deadly — HIV/AIDS — and not sexuality.

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

2. Gloria Filax, *Creative Pedagogies: Troubling the Troubled Waters of Education* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1995).

3. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

4. Jonathan Silin, *Sex, Death, and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 12.

5. Michael Warner, “Introduction,” *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xi.

6. Marianne Whateley, “Raging Hormones and Powerful Cars: The Construction of Men’s Sexuality in School Sex Education and Popular Adolescent Films,” in *Redrawing Educational Boundaries*, ed. Henry A. Giroux (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

7. Cindy Patton, “Between Innocence and Safety: Epidemiologic and Popular Constructions of Young People’s Need for Safe Sex,” in *Deviant Bodies*, ed. Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 338–57.

8. Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*.

9. *Ibid.*, xvi.

10. Silin, *Sex, Death, and the Education of Children*, 198.

11. Simon Watney, “School’s Out,” in *Between Borders*, ed. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (New York: Routledge, 1994), 170.

12. Patton, “Between Innocence and Safety,” 338.

13. See Watney, “School’s Out,” 167–79; Sigmund Freud, “The Sexual Life of Human Beings,” *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 353; and Deborah Britzman, “On Becoming a ‘Little Sex Researcher,’” *JCT: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Curriculum Studies* 12, no. 2 (1996): 4–11.