

WHAT'S TO FEAR: CALLING HOMOPHOBIA INTO QUESTION

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the interplay between gender and sexuality. In particular, it looks at some reasons why mainstream society cannot bear homosexuality, or any expression of resistance to heteronormativity. The paper also considers in what makes schools particularly hostile to teaching or tolerating deviance from set notions of essentialized and normative sexuality.

CE QU'IL FAUT CRAINDRE : LA REMISE EN QUESTION DE L'HOMOPHOBIE

RÉSUMÉ. L'auteure examine les liens entre le sexe (genre) et la sexualité. Notamment, elle explique pourquoi la société en général ne peut supporter l'homosexualité ni toute expression de résistance à l'hétéronormativité. L'article analyse aussi ce qui rend les écoles particulièrement hostiles à l'enseignement et à la tolérance de toute déviation des notions établies de sexualité normative et essentialisée.

Over thirty years ago, when I started teaching secondary school in a small town in Northern Ontario, I was assigned a general level, grade eleven, French-as-a-second-language class to teach in the last period of every Friday afternoon. French was a compulsory course in that era of Pierre Trudeau – a fact that could partially explain the students' antipathy for the subject. On one particular Friday, the students were especially apathetic about working on their French, pleading tiredness, boredom, and disinterest in the subject. I had a very difficult time keeping them working. They tried to find excuses to leave the classroom, to speak to their neighbour, and generally to disrupt my attempts to force them to exercise their French language. One young man, a student who was nineteen and who was doing badly in every one of his courses, shot his hand up wanting to be recognized. I acknowledged his request for attention and he immediately asked if he could go to the bathroom. He had made this same request – and been granted it – at least twice already. I answered “no” rather emphatically. He then whispered in a voice he made sure reached me: “She’s in a bad mood because she probably did not get fucked last night.”

This anecdote clearly articulates Foucault's notion of power as exercised or negotiated: I am the teacher with institutionalized authority, and I am female. He is a student with little institutional authority and he is male. He has a certain social power and one way to play it out is to reduce me to a sexual subject. It also indicates, however, an intuitive knowledge of how gender and sexuality interact. How did he learn about the interplay of gender and sexuality? How did he think he could get away with challenging the institutional authority of a teacher? "Sexuality," said Foucault, "is a means through which power is exercised" (quoted in Kritzman, 1988, pp. 113 & 122).

The social power invested in masculinity has long been analysed by feminists (see for instance, Walkerdine, 1990; Arnot, 2002; Grumet, 1988). More recently, as I continue to retell the anecdote, always with some amount of disbelief, the question became, not what compelled (indeed, allowed) him to confront the authority of a (female) teacher, but more: what is the connection between his ability to evoke sexuality and established gender domination? A great deal has been written about hegemonic masculinity in the last decade, the best of which disrupts mainstream adherence to a notion of "true masculinity" that, as Connell (1995) reminds us, "is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a man's body or to express something about a male body" (p. 45). We currently recognize that there are multiple expressions of masculinity, because, in the words of Connell:

[T]o the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practice through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture. (1995, p. 71)

Despite numerous studies that have looked at, referred to, and reported on research about masculinity and have recognized its multiplicities and complexities, mainstream expressions of masculinity continue to put forth a notion of the term that is "generic," that is the binary opposite to femininity, and that is essentialized. It is precisely this view of masculinity that I will deal with in this paper: a version of an essentialized hegemonic conception of the term. The most salient reason for continuing to work with a normative and essentialized understanding of masculinity is that most students in both elementary and secondary schools believe that it is the *only* form of masculinity and that anything that deviates from this one expression of masculinity is, in the words of youngsters in the school hallways and playground: "gay."

Two unrelated reasons forced me to look at the interplay between gender and sexuality: the first happened when writing a chapter (Khayatt, 1992) about lesbian teachers trying to manage their sexuality by passing as heterosexual. The question occurred to me that it was not their sexuality they needed

to alter so much as their gender in order for students and staff to perceive them as "straight." Since then, and because of the work of a number of scholars (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990), I realized that the act of passing is one that relies on performativity of gender: for a lesbian, for instance, to pass as straight means dressing and acting as straight; and for a gay man to pass as straight, he must dress and act as straight. The second reason that compelled me to look at the connection between gender and sexuality occurred when I realized that the sexual acts engaged in between partners are essentially the same regardless of the sex/gender of the partners. So what is it that makes lesbians, gay men, transgendered/transsexual people threatening in mainstream society? What is the fear and loathing often engendered by queers? I suggest, in this paper, that it is not so much the sex acts that people practice as how some sexual practices disrupt what is hegemonically expected of each gender.

A number of other reasons over the years lead me to note to what extent queers¹ seem to pose a threat to mainstream and hegemonic notions of gender, but in particular to masculinity. For instance, it has seemed imperative in North American mainstream media to distance masculinity from gayness. Why else is "Western"² science currently obsessed with finding a "gay gene" (see *The Globe and Mail*, 1995, p. A12 or *The Toronto Star*, 1996, p. B2), with attempting to measure fingers to reflect hetero or homo sexuality (G & M, 2000),³ or intentionally overlooking incidents of homoerotic behaviour in animals?⁴ (Research into the "gay gene" is coincidentally almost always about men.) Furthermore, we now know that physicians surgically reshape the genitalia of those babies who are born ambiguously constituted. Yet it is not merely a matter of sexuality, since those boys at school who get bashed either verbally or physically are not those who are necessarily gay, but those who *look* gay.⁵ In the same vein, Allan Bérubé (1990, pp. 17 & 20) indicates that in the U.S. military, it is not so much that a soldier cannot be gay as that he cannot afford to look "effeminate," or soft in any way so as not to be detrimental to the morale of fellow soldiers.

Schools both reinforce and, at the same time, reflect mainstream normative genders and sexualities. Schools teach intentionally (through the curriculum) and unintentionally, through values promoted by teachers, administration, boards and parents, a taken-for-granted normative sexuality and concomitant expectations of gender behaviour. Many scholars working within education have suggested that schools reproduce gender conformity, and by extension, sexual conventionality for both boys and girls. For instance, David Denborough, discussing specifically what is expected for males (1996), states that "sexuality for many young men [in schools] becomes a key area to prove one's masculinity and source of power" (p. 5). Chris McLean also believes that "Boys quickly learn [at school] that one of the most important signifiers of masculinity is having a sexual relationship with a woman" (p. 29). In a

more recent article, Amy Wallis and Jo VanEvery (2000) take the argument even further and claim:

We do not believe that (hetero)sexuality is *only* about gender, but we find it difficult in theory and in practice to completely separate the two. Key processes which constitute both sexuality and gender include naturalization, particularly through notions of the complementarity of masculinities and femininities, with clear effects on the intelligibility of *homosexualities*. (Emphases in original, p. 410)

Furthermore, Jill Blackmore et al (1996) refer to Mac an Ghail's contention that the cultural elements that constitute "the dominant modes of heterosexual subjectivity informing male students' learning to act like men in schools describes them as 'contradictory' forms of compulsory heterosexuality, misogyny and homophobia" (p. 210).

Whether it is sexism, racism, classism, or ableism, we are frequently talking about discrimination, often systemic, sometimes harsh and hateful, always hurtful and demeaning. While "heterosexism" is an omission, a pervasive yet systemic assumption that precludes any expression of sexuality that does not conform with heteronormativity, **homophobia** is about hatred and fear. Wayne Dynes (1985, p. 66) writes in his *Homolexis* that homophobia: "connotes irrational fear of homosexual acts, persons, or sentiments."⁶ Clearly we are not just referring to "discrimination," which, appalling as it is, indicates at "best" legal injustice and at worst, hatefulness and humiliation. We are, in the case of homosexuality, discussing a "phobia," a term that Peter Redman, drawing on the work of Freud and of Laplanche and Pontalis, reminds us is derived from "psychoanalytic theory in which phobias are understood as the product of 'anxiety hysteria': an extreme fear of an object or situation characterized by avoidance strategies, in which anxiety arising from conflict in the inner-world of the psyche is displaced on to an external object or situation, which then stands in for the original" (p. 485).

My questions for this paper are: what is to fear and why fear and not simply loathing? Why "anxiety" rather than plain hatred? What is it that mainstream society cannot bear about homosexuality, or any expression of resistance to heteronormativity? And, what makes schools particularly hostile to teaching or tolerating deviance from set notions of essentialized and normative sexuality?

In his article " 'Tarred with the same brush': 'Homophobia' and the role of the unconscious in school-based cultures of masculinity," Redman (2000, p. 491) proposes several theoretical perspectives that attempt to engage with this question. One possibility favoured by both Simon Watney and by Laplanche and Pontalis is that a "homophobic" response may be a "reaction formation" where the secret object of desire (homosexuality) is disavowed publicly through violent rejection to deflect attention from the desire. An-

other possibility that Redman presents is suggested by Leo Bersani's notion of "narcissistic rage." Redman explains that for Bersani, "the murderous anti-gay rage that characterized the emergence of the HIV epidemic in the 1980s had little to do with 'repressed homosexuality' and much more to do with the unconscious threat of gay 'promiscuity' and anal sex posed to the boundaries of 'phallicism.'" Redman explains that "cultural readings of Lacanian theory suggest heterosexual masculinity is endlessly elided with the 'phallus': a fantasized position of power and self-sufficiency, within which the subject is imagined as capable of authoring its own being" (p. 491-2). Drawing from Bersani's arguments, Redman states that:

it may therefore be possible to argue that the historical elision between gay men's sexuality and femininity raises the scandalous prospect of a 'lacking' masculinity. As such, the "feminized" homosexual might be said to render the male identification with the phallus vulnerable: his existence questions the inevitability of this identification, threatening to expose as a sham the claim of heterosexual male phallic possession and thereby giving rise to "narcissistic rage."

I totally agree with the premise and the sentiment of this quotation; although I find the psychoanalytic explications both engaging and provocative, I am more inclined toward a sociological analysis. In this paper, therefore, I will attempt to elaborate sociologically on mainstream elision between gay male sexuality and femininity, and how this is played out in our schools in North America. I am arguing that it is precisely this elision of gay male sexuality with "femininity" that renders schools sites where a hegemonic masculinity disavows any deviation from heteronormativity.

In a recent issue of *Saturday Night* (Bauer, 2003) the subtitle for an article entitled "Gender Bender" is: "if your little boy wants to be a little girl... Dr. Kenneth Zucker will treat him." The reader is quickly informed of the new diagnosis of "childhood gender identity disorder" or GID. The article states that Dr. Zucker heads the Child and Adolescent GID clinic in Toronto, the only full time North American centre devoted exclusively to the diagnosis and treatment of child and adolescent GID. As readers, we are also given to understand that anxious parents from all across Canada "come to Dr. Zucker's office accompanied by their children – mostly boys – who either believe themselves to be, or desperately wish to be, the opposite gender" (p. 61). His detractors believe that Zucker is capitalizing on a cultural fear of "sissies," particularly since most of his attention is on male children. Zucker himself is convinced that "letting nature run its course raises the odds that these children will seek out gender-reassignment (sex change) surgery later in life – an enormously complicated procedure that may provide patients with the desired parts, but hardly assures their happiness" (p. 61). Zucker maintains that children suffer from their gender dysphoria, that they are harassed and bullied in school because they are perceived as sissies, that they

are ostracised, and that this condition often leads to homosexuality: "According to Dr. Zucker about 75% of children with GID report a homosexual orientation by late adolescence" (p. 61).

Throughout the article about Zucker's work, there is a collapsing of gender and sexuality, in some cases as a causal relationship, in other instances one term seems to stand for the other. Furthermore, the article does not show any understanding that "masculinity" can have multiple expressions, and that these are contextually reliant. That gender and sexuality are related, not to say fundamentally interconnected, is the premise of this paper, but it is precisely the tension between gender and sexuality that I intend to explore within the context of education.

Although schools are not the only place that children learn about gender, they do play a significant role in the development and reinforcement of gender performativity. From a very young age, as shown by Karen Bailey (1993) in her book *The girls are the ones with the pointy nails*, children are aware that there should be a difference between girls' and boys' behaviour, looks, likes, and abilities. Adolescents are even more inclined to conform to normative, even if multiple expressions of gender. (See, for instance, McLean, 1996; Marino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2001; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Hilton, 2001.) Furthermore, it is not only children and adolescents who engage in gender displays in schools, but, as both Connell (1995) and Francis and Skelton (2001) demonstrate in their study of men teachers and masculinity in British schools, there is no denying that, for the most part, "a successful construction of [normative] masculinity also requires individual male teachers to demonstrate their own heterosexual identity" (p. 488).

Although this connection between gender and sexuality is not new as I demonstrated above, I became interested in the interplay between those two concepts during the time I was working on attempting to disrupt the sexual categories by which Euro-North-American scholars assume the unproblematic transposition of sexual categories, such as "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," and "transgendered." There have been a number of volumes that recount looking for gays and lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people in various nations around the globe (see Penelope & Valentine, 1990; GLQ; Herdt, 1997), some of which recognize differences in conceptualizations of such terms. The tendency, however, is to see the development of the concept of sexual identities as parallel to those assumed by the authors, and when these do not correspond, they are presumed lacking in terms of a developmental linearity. By that I mean that frequently when conceptualizations of gender/sexuality categories occur in various areas of the world, they are measured hierarchically against a Euro-North-American understanding of sexual identities and are often found wanting. They are often perceived as a primitive instance that will eventually develop into identity categories

similar to those found in North America. It is this very tendency that led me to research how gender/sexuality practices are articulated, understood, and played out in Egypt.⁷

This study, and what I had to read in connection with it, disrupted my understanding of sexuality. Where I previously thought I was looking to trouble categories of sexuality as these are articulated in current Euro-North-American scholarship, I came to realize that any study of sexuality that proceeded without a thorough examination and a fundamental reconceptualization of how gender operates in conjunction with sexuality in a particular culture is incomplete in its analysis.

At the time of my research, my understanding of the consummate relation between gender and sexuality came as a result of two separate incidents. The first was my reading that sexual relations between two men in Egypt is not in itself denounced culturally and socially.⁸ It is the sexually passive partner who is condemned as a "*khawal*," a word that approximates the term "faggot." The second instance that allowed me to rethink some of my assumptions was when I interviewed some women who mentioned the connection between gender and sexuality within the context of what is appropriate sexually for women in Egypt. I did not particularly want to hear what they had to say because it concerned the issue of cliterodectomy, and yet I could not deny the importance of what they were saying. Several of my interviewees mentioned that one of the reasons a woman may desire another one is if her clitoris was not cut off. Cliterodectomy (*khitan al-banat*) or *Tahara*, as it is colloquially known in Egypt, means purification or cleanliness. Farha Ghannam (1997), in a monograph on reproductive health in Egypt, elaborates:

[cliterodectomy] reduces the burden of sexual practices for the husband, beautifies and purifies the female body, and maintains the dignity of the woman who should not humiliate herself by demanding sexual attention. The circumcision is also part of the process of defining gender identities. Removing the clitoris is perceived as essential to inscribe the (female) identity on her body. It is argued that, if the clitoris is not removed, it will grow and become a penis. Women will be like men. Several circumcised women insisted that they saw the "penises" of uncircumcised women. Thus, the female identity is partially formed through shaping the body in a way that exaggerates the biological features that differentiate women from men and suppress or remove "natural" features that are believed to resemble the male body. (pp. 9-10)

Unless she is "circumcised" a woman would not be able to find a husband, hence the prevalence of the custom despite its illegality.

Homeroptic practices in the Middle East are condemned officially, yet deemed necessary because of segregation of the sexes. As Dunne (1990, p. 64) observes: "The crime is not homosexuality, but the public exposure of conventionally unacceptable, if nonetheless widespread, behaviour, in effect a failure

of a social strategy of concealment.” When homoerotic practices do occur, a Middle Eastern man’s masculinity is not imperilled should he penetrate, but his (“passive”) partner’s masculinity is jeopardized in the act of being penetrated. Oberhelman, quoting Rowson, observes that boys, being not yet men, could be penetrated without losing their potential manliness, “so long as they did not register pleasure in the act, which would suggest a pathology liable to continue into adulthood” (1997, p. 70). This reflects a concept of masculinity that considers penetration as a dominant act and being penetrated as subordination. It would apply to men with either women or other men. The distinction between “penetrator” and “penetrated” seen in homoerotic practices between two men in the Middle East suggests that masculinity is defined in terms of gender: who is dominant in this intercourse?

Conversely, in Euro-North-American homoerotic sexuality, both partners are condemned regardless of who is on top because the very penetration of a man imperils his masculinity. Masculinity, in this culture is impenetrability.⁹ Clearly, impenetrability is not the only factor that defines notions of masculinity in Euro-North American contexts, but it can and does act as a metaphor for how masculinity is played out, particularly for young males in high school, but also for adult men who perceive masculinity only in its normative articulation. For instance, in a study of Norwegian gay men, Middelthon (2002) argues that they both desire and fear, even dread, the act of being penetrated anally. The author, questioning this fear, quotes a young man in her study who was able to articulate this dread:

If I am to do it [be anally penetrated] – it is terribly humiliating – then I would have to have a possibility to fuck [take] him afterwards – one example of this [he gives the interviewer a glance of apology], is that if I did not do so I would feel like a cunt [fitte] afterwards – if I had fucked [taken] him too – that would have restored or repaired the humiliation. (p. 193)

Clearly, it is not *what actually happens* between two men that is at stake, but what is *imagined* as happening between two men that may cast aspersions on their masculinity: both are imagined as penetrated. It should be mentioned, however, that not all gay cultures are included in this analysis, because mainstream representations of gay men do not include such gay subcultures as skinheads, leathermen, or other hyper-masculine images that may exist.

I suggest that because gender is perceived as an essentialist bi-polar category with masculinity as impenetrable and femininity as penetrable, the phallic penetration of a man by another man, orally, but especially anally, renders both of them “feminized,” that is, potentially capable of being penetrated. This would constitute a profound disruption to the social order that presumes that masculinity and femininity are separate categories, that they are mutually exclusive of each other and, at best, socially complement each other, but more importantly, that masculinity is imbued with social power in relation to femininity. I am not suggesting that other social factors, such as race

and class, do not affect power relations, but rather pointing to a particular domination based on gender as articulated through sexuality. A Foucaudian discursive analysis that allows categories of gender and/or sexuality to be conceived as unsettled, fluid, shifting, and with permeable boundaries is threatening precisely because it destabilizes essential notions of masculinity as impenetrable. Mainstream interpretation of the diversity of sexualities and genders relies on and demands solid categories that are separate and distinct from the essential binary notion of gender.

This paper was written with the express intention of troubling hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality as these are played out within the context of the education system in Canada. But what have we learned from the analysis above? For one, attempting to deal in schools with the subject of sexuality alone cannot work as long as this notion is not tied with an analysis of hegemonic masculinity and, by extension, femininity. Secondly, as long as in schools we are teaching boys about “tolerance” toward “homosexuality” without ever broaching the subject of what exactly is threatening about “queer” sexuality, without making the connection between the anxiety of being penetrated and their fear of having their masculinity questioned or being perceived as “feminized,” we are maintaining the status quo. Thirdly, because there are school principals who are women, and because many of the issues in education that deal with gender have been recognized, it is often felt that we have dealt with gender and now should go on to a more “difficult” topic, that of sexuality. I propose that schools should deal with gender *in conjunction* with sexuality, to show the connection and thus dispel or even just trouble the fear, the “homophobia.” I suggest that what allowed the young man in my initial story to challenge the teacher’s authority by drawing on gender/sexuality, to say that what I really needed is a “good fuck,” was that he intuitively saw me as penetrable, and himself implicitly as impenetrable and therefore somehow beyond the purview of institutional influence.

In conclusion, I think that, as long as masculinity is privileged, as long as there are systemic and personal advantages to being a man, and as long as essentialist notions of male homosexuality are conceived as a “feminized masculinity,” there is little hope that libratory work will successfully change attitudes toward sexual orientation.

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NOTES

1. I am using "queer" as an umbrella term to denote all sexualities that are not heteronormative.
2. By putting quotation marks around "Western," I am signalling my understanding that the "West" is not monolithic. Having said that, the term stands in contradistinction to "Middle East," another problematic word that flattens the diversity of that area.
3. The article maintained that you can tell if someone is gay by the shape of the fingers of a hand. The need to make a *physical* distinction between gay and straight men points based on the shape of fingers to a necessity for the media to distance straight masculinity from gay masculinity: not only are gay men different in sexuality, but they are also different physically, goes the argument. Furthermore, the article creates a binary between straight and gay masculinity, hinting that the latter are tainted or not quite the real thing.
4. See *The Globe and Mail*: Study confirms existence of gay gene in men. October 31, 1995, p. A12; *The Globe and Mail*: Brains of gay, straight men show differences. Thursday, November 17, 1994, p. A6; *The Toronto Star*: Birth Order Linked to homosexuality. Tuesday, January 16, 1996, p. B2. Regarding the size of fingers, see *The Globe and Mail*, Can Fingers Point to Sexual Preference? Thursday, March 30, 2000. And finally, see the Spring issue (Number 101) of *Equinox*, pp. 24-35.
5. See recent account of the young teenager who killed himself in Vancouver because he was harassed at school.
6. Kenneth Plummer (1975, p. 103), in his *Sexual Stigma: An Interactionist Account* (p. 103) writes that: "Other writers have recently begun to characterize this phenomenon [homophobia] with such names as 'dread of homosexuality' (Hoffman, 1968), 'homophobia' (Smith, 1971; Weinberg, 1973), 'homoerotophobia' (Churchill, 1967) and 'anti-homosexuality' (Hacker, 1971). The term that has emerged in mainstream writing is 'homophobia' which, as Dynes reminds us, was made widespread by George Weinberg and others" (p. 66).
7. See Khayatt, M. Didi, 1992.
8. Although, religiously, sex between two men is an abomination.
9. I want to thank Gretchen Phillips for this word. Private conversation in Toronto, November, 1999.

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