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## A CONTRAPUNTAL ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSES OF DESIRE IN EDUCATION

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Implicated in contributing to the problems youth today face in trying to claim an education, an informed active participation in the social order, dominant discourses of desire in education foreclose formal, critical analysis of social structures that construct, police, entreat, and deny desire.<sup>1</sup> Looking at the ways in which desire is encoded in sex education curricula and the ways in which students find spaces—outside the formal curriculum—to collectively and critically decode it, illuminates desire as a space where the agency of subjects of desire takes shape.<sup>2</sup> This essay puts federally funded discourses of desire in education in conversation with the counterdiscourses produced in student created, alternative spaces by examining recent research on sexuality education and sharing aspects of ethnographic research on Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs).<sup>3</sup>

I emphasize that both discourses presume desire as foundational to ethics, but the former denies the multiplicity of desire, failing to take into account student experience,<sup>4</sup> (unintentionally?) reinforcing a racialized-class-based-gender hierarchy, leaving the students bereft of the information, resources, and sense of entitlement required to assume the responsibility that is demanded of them. At the same time, however, students resist the institutional barriers to their full democratic participation and organize to fill in the gaps they find in the curriculum and popular culture. While the counterdiscourse acknowledges the multiplicity of desire and endeavors to develop a more critical understanding of what it means to be a desiring subject, most of the discursive space is dedicated to strategizing about how to rid their hallways of the homophobic hatred that persists in permeating them. While this student activism importantly highlights how desire informs agency and responsible, collective action, I want to suggest that it is at the expense of being able to more fully interrogate desire as a site whereby the micropolitics of power come to light together with the agency of subjects of desire.

Just what is desire (and what does it mean to be a subject of it)? This is the ultimate question, for which I have no answer. What I do have is a call for philosophers of education to begin to more seriously grapple with it. I would like to suggest that a more finely developed phenomenology of desire could not only inform policy debates over sex education implementation but also enhance efforts to create transformative critical pedagogies dedicated to educating for full and active participation in democratic society. For centuries philosophers have been grappling with the nature/structure of desire, aiming to establish its foundational role in producing socially responsible citizens,<sup>5</sup> self-

consciousness,<sup>6</sup> and the development of reciprocal intersubjective relations.<sup>7</sup> How has it come to be, then, that desire is encoded as something dangerous, something to fear, repress, and/or resist in the majority of America's public schools?

The first part of this essay engages critique of educational policy and practice of sex education that deny female and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) sexual subjectivities and frame desire as individual, dangerous, and in need of repression. Drawing on the work of Michelle Fine, Cris Mayo, and Lynda Measor, I illustrate how the policies surrounding the implementation of sex education aimed at producing responsible democratic citizens threaten the very principles upon which they are supposedly based. In the second part of the essay, I share aspects of ethnographic research on GSAs that focuses on how youth challenge the institutional barriers to their recognition, helping to situate the policies/practices of sex education in the cultural context that is overlooked. By way of conclusion, I call for a more finely developed phenomenology of desire to inform educational theory and practice aimed at achieving social justice.

#### DOMINANT DISCOURSES OF DESIRE: "HAVE SEX AND DIE"

When asked to reflect on how their experiences in sex education classes in high school informed their understanding of gender and sexuality, undergraduate students in my Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies class responded with similar scenarios of scare tactics used to reinforce notions of individual responsibility that depicted sexual desire as dangerous and needing to be repressed. The first student to comment raised her hand and said "my school did not do abstinence-only sex education, but our teacher told us 'have sex and die' and meant it. She told us that sex leads to HIV, STIs, unwanted pregnancy, and social stigma, and repeated, 'have sex and die.'" Another student reported that she was also from a school that did not have an abstinence only policy but her introduction to sex education consisted of a teacher passing around a cauliflower and imploring female students to take a good look at what their genitals could look like if they engaged in sexual activity.

These student narratives substantiate Fine's claim that public schools have rejected the task of sexual dialogue and critique in what is called sex education. Those who resist a critical approach to sex education present their views as based on rationality and a concern with protecting the young. "For such opponents, sex education raises questions of promoting promiscuity and immorality, and of undermining family values."<sup>8</sup> Fine reveals the hypocrisy at work in the controversies surrounding the implementation of sex education and critically assesses major discourses of desire in public education that associate adolescent sexuality with victimization and danger. Within sex education curricula, she notes, one finds "authorized suppression of a discourse of female

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sexual desire,” “promotion of a discourse of female sexual victimization,” and “the explicit privileging of heterosexuality over other forms of sexuality.”<sup>9</sup> Dominant discourses of desire in education function, she says, to silence and suppress dialogue on female sexual subjectivity and desire. Coding females as potential victims of male sexuality and failing to adequately address the problems of teenage pregnancy, sexual violence, and school drop outs, these discourses continue to obscure any possibilities to explore female sexual agency and occlude necessary dialogue and critique of contemporary gender and sexual arrangements. Yet, Fine emphasizes, traditional conceptions of what it means to be female (self-sacrificing and passive) are perilous to the educational, economic, and sexual development of young women. Evidence suggests that women who lack a sense of social or sexual entitlement are disproportionately at risk for unwanted pregnancy and dropping out. The absence of a formal discourse of (female) desire jeopardizes the very life options of the adolescents that the critics of sex education claim to protect.

Attesting to the ways in which policies around sex education “reinscribe a very particular conception of femininity and female sexuality,”<sup>10</sup> Mayo documents how the racially inflected welfare “reform” policies and federally funded abstinence education “oppose normative sex and responsibility with representations of single, Black teenage mothers and irresponsibility,” and shows how “policies use this dualism to undergird sex education.”<sup>11</sup> She uncovers the contradictions in the curricula which fail to address social factors encouraging teen pregnancies, invoking instead an individualistic narrative that stresses personal choice and responsibility. Failing to engage students in discussion about the social elements of desire and sexuality, students are taught that desire is a personal choice but a dangerous one, desire is something to be harnessed and controlled, brought under the right of reason imposed from above. Students are encouraged to leave their lived passionate relations and embodied realities behind, so that they might find the steps to success through abstinence and if need be “secondary virginity.”<sup>12</sup> Not only is desire here conceived as something individual and idiosyncratic (even as it is mobilized publicly), but without information and strategies to encourage the development of reciprocal intersubjective relations needed to ensure protection from STDs and HIV and unwanted pregnancy, educational spaces that deal with sexuality become dangerously problematic, implicated in the rise of the very social problems they are invoked to correct.

For more than two decades, the federal government has consistently funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs despite a lack of research proving their effectiveness.<sup>13</sup> In fact, funding for these programs has grown exponentially since 1996.<sup>14</sup> Under Title V, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services allocates \$50 million in federal funds each year to the states, and California is the only state never to have applied for these funds.<sup>15</sup> Although the abstinence-programs that are provided once this funding reaches

a school vary, there are common characteristics among them; the most obvious similarity is the curricula that are chosen. Unfortunately, many of them rely on fear and shame, include false and misleading information about contraception and abortion, and ignore the needs of LGBTQ people.<sup>16</sup> And while the current state of affairs with regard to the implementation of sex education is rather dismal, there are indeed spaces of resistance.<sup>17</sup>

Aiming to articulate the contours of how youth view desire, sex, and sexuality informally in connection with the formal curriculum, Measor argues that our interest in the provision of appropriate sex education for young people can be developed only if we know more about adolescent sexuality and the attitudes of young people. Not surprisingly, she documents that young people do not get most of their information on desire, sex, and sexuality from professional educators. Boys and girls cited friends as the major avenue whereby information and dialogue about desire, sex and sexuality was fostered though the sources of their discussion differed greatly. While boys turned to pornography for insight, girls in general looked to magazines like *Seventeen* or *Cosmopolitan* to find out what it is really all about. Measor lauds the family as a warm and confiding place for girls to find out about “sexual matters in contrast to the cold and impersonal approach of school sex education.”<sup>18</sup> She critiques the family for not providing boys with enough guidance, thereby reinforcing the patriarchal assumption that boys are responsible for knowing what it is all about on their own. Yet, there is a resounding silence on her part about how while the family might be a safe haven for straight girls who are not critical of gender arrangements, for those who are or who want to be, the family may not be of any help at all.

While Measor makes the very important point that to develop appropriate sex education for young people we need to know how they negotiate meaning and understanding of these issues in informal cultures of their own making, she offers little insight into where these spaces are, how they are formed, and by whom. Most importantly, however, she overlooks the youth population that questions and decodes the ways in which desire is encoded under the regime of hetero-normativity. Gerald Unks, for example, argues that high schools “may be the most homophobic institutions in American society,”<sup>19</sup> where the very existence of homosexuality is consistently denied outside the context of discussion of AIDS. Pointing out that the entire student body suffers by being denied access to all of the subjects in the school curriculum simply because the school allows heterosexism to go unanswered, both Unks and Mayo stress that legal mandates for schools to protect minority youth do not involve incorporating discussion about homosexuality in the curricula.

Instead, schools adopt policies forbidding “hate speech,” aiming to prevent the ongoing harassment of minority youth through “a tolerance that dare not speak its name in the curricula.”<sup>20</sup> Such school codes, Mayo

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demonstrates, “maintain relations of dominance by shifting the focus on structural inequities to matters of social interaction.”<sup>21</sup> The codes of conduct “sidestep the material inequities and install instead a civil place where the difficulties of inequality purportedly do not matter as much as they do in other spaces. Uncivil speech becomes the site of inequalities and thus the place where policy directs attention.”<sup>22</sup> By making discrimination against sexual minorities against the rules, but not part of the curricula, she stresses, schools fail to engage in substantial discussion of why homophobia is so prevalent and what it means to be a sexual minority. Official silence continues doing the work of homophobic harassment by trivializing the experiences of LGBTQ youth and minimizing representation of sexual minority issues. And yet, Foucault reminds us, where there is power, there is resistance.

#### COUNTERDISCOURSE: GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCES (GSAs) AND THE UNSAID

Empirical research on the ways in which students negotiate the contradictory messages they receive about desire in general, and sexual desire in particular, from educational institutions, popular culture, friends, family, etc., further exemplifies the way that the educational policies in place to protect principles of civility and democracy are, in practice, in violation of them. Desiring recognition, critical dialogue, and collective action, GSA students congregate on a weekly basis providing us with much needed insight about the cultural context and lived realities that is denied by the formal curricula. They demonstrate how recognition of and dialogue about the multiplicity of desire can and does inspire students to assume responsibility, disproving conservative claims that talk about sex and sexuality leads to promiscuity and immorality.

Over the course of the last two academic years, I have been involved in conducting ethnographic research on GSA students in two high schools in Champaign, Illinois. Approaching participant observations and group interviews from a poststructural, feminist perspective that seeks not to speak *for* the subjects of the research but for myself and *with* them,<sup>23</sup> I recognize that “representation is always in crisis.”<sup>24</sup> And yet, I believe, as Leslie Bloom points out that “interpreting gender, sexuality, and sexual desires in the lives of respondents is crucial as a means to make visible the ways that the social constructions of intelligibility and unintelligibility are lived,”<sup>25</sup> as I attempt to challenge the authority of an ethnographer’s voice, based on my belief that there is no transparency between the real and the representation, I want to emphasize that my analysis offers only a partial interpretation; I encourage readers to think about alternative ways of reading the data presented; I plan to return to it through the lenses of different theoretical frameworks in the future so that I might develop a new interpretation of the interpretation that follows.

The dynamics of the two groups I observed were so different that it is surprising to notice that they are less than ten miles apart. One group seemed to

be integrated more in terms of race and ethnicity while the other one was predominantly white. Racially dominant students in both groups used more discursive space than the racially marginalized. And not surprisingly, the group that was more racially diverse seemed to include more division along class lines than the predominately white and middle class group. Yet both groups spent more time discussing how to prevent hatred and homophobia in the hallways despite the fact that one school was markedly less discriminatory than the other one.<sup>26</sup> While in one group the loudest and most dominant voice was that of well-intentioned adults, the most resounding sound in the other came from the curiously flirtatious giggles of straight girls, serving as a reminder that even as we celebrate the student activism and concern for social justice exhibited in these clubs, we need to notice the dynamics of power operative within them.

Grappling with institutional and social disavowal of the multiplicity of desire and its productive role in identity formation, GSA kids forge alliance across the boundaries of race, class, gender, and national divides. Probing desire in ways formal contexts foreclose, one student states, “The main thing I am interested about is whether or not people feel desire is strictly biological, environmental, or a combination of both.” Rather than assuming heterosexuality and a lack of female sexual subjectivity to be given, students gather each week aiming to interrogate the issue of desire and critique the resounding silence that abounds in their classes, families, and the popular imaginary on the issues that seem to matter to them most. GSA goers want to discuss various forms of desire and sexuality and to what “extent sexual identity makes up their real identity.” Local GSA goers are critical of the information and lack thereof they receive through their sex education classes. As one student put it, “In our school a lot is not considered in sex ed”; another elaborates, “Even though we have started (yes started, we just started and it’s *April*) to talk about sex, I don’t feel that we’re doing enough. We’ve talked about why we should be abstinent but we haven’t talked about oral, anal, or digital sex at all!” And attesting to the silence on *female* sexuality she continues, “Freshman year we talked about condoms and diaphragms but the teacher didn’t demonstrate OR show diaphragms.”

When the conversation starts to center on how GSAs can help to fill in the gaps these youth experience in their schools, homes, and classrooms, we get a glimpse at what seems to be implicit or underlying attempts to recognize the ways in which power is implicated in the representations of desire they are presented with. Questions these kids have for one another that illuminate this include: “Why is a ‘defined’ sexual orientation important to you? Do you find yourself attracted to both genders and have a reason for picking one over the other, or are you solely attracted to one gender? Does your sexual identity only take attraction/sexual desire into account or does it involve religious/moral/practical reasons as well? Have you ever experimented or been

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open to a different sort of relationship?” Seeking to collectively decode desire another student states, “I’m very undefined sexually and I’d like to talk to people who are self-defined more strictly. I want to know about other people’s definitions of gay/queer/etc.” These questions emphasize that students are concerned to understand the multiple possibilities of desire that they live out on a daily basis, indicative of how sex education curricula fail to incorporate student experience and awareness. We get a glimpse into the cultural context that is denied in the formal spaces of education.

Attesting to the importance of spaces youth create informally, Richard Barry documents that young people use after school and other youth clubs “as an area of vibrant critique of the institutions around them,” elaborating that “this critique affected what they called themselves when asked to place themselves in a box for categorization.”<sup>27</sup> I think it important to note, however, that though these questions were indeed posed, there was never time enough to begin to answer or discuss them in detail. It was only at the end of the year that they were asked and the time allotted for the meeting was used up in the formulation of the questions they felt they needed to grapple with. While GSAs do indeed provide kids with “alternative venues” where in they might escape the pressures of a homophobic and sexist society, there are structural problems that seem to prevent these spaces from reaching their true potential. A student reports, “our school is not really a discriminatory school but we treat that like it’s our biggest issue.” A gay identified male elaborates, “There is no gay conversation!! Many times it’s ignored completely. More open discussion is needed.” It is interesting to see, moreover, how the sexual subjectivity of girls and female desires are missing in the formal discourse but important to consider the ways in which it is heterosexual female desire that comes to dominate the space of the after school youth groups I’ve attended. It seems that male heterosexuality trumps and depends upon the exile of female sexual subjectivity in formal curriculum but this very subjectivity seems to trump that of those challenging hetero-normativity in the alternative spaces. Privileges of age, sexuality, race and ethnicity are fully operative in these “safe havens” outside but not of the dominant culture.

RECONFIGURING DISCOURSES OF DESIRE:  
A CALL TO PHILOSOPHERS OF EDUCATION

Putting aspects of dominant discourses of desire in education in conversation with the counterdiscourses underscores how representations of desire in both discourses presume desire as foundational to ethics and responsibility. But depictions of desire as negative, dangerous and irresponsible in the formal curriculum undermine its positive role in the development of reciprocal interpersonal relationships, dehumanizing the students and failing to engage their capacities for critical thinking and responsible action. Why is desire encoded as something to fear and repress? On what is the assumption that discussion of desire and sexuality leads to promiscuity and immorality

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based? And where are the voices of philosophers of education on this issue? It would seem that nowhere in the formal curriculum is there space to discuss just what desire is, what sex is, or how sexuality and desire are constitutive of identities. Ethnographic research on counterdiscourses provides insight into the ways in which the “Foucauldian frenzy of talking sex under the guise of not talking sex,”<sup>28</sup> produces productive refusals and persistent alterations of sexual meanings that serve as reminders that students are actively engaged in the articulation of their identities, despite curricular attempts to discount it. Time and space to collectively discuss desire as constitutive of identities and central to the creation of reciprocal intersubjective relations is diminished in both discourses due to the ongoing struggle to deny or render intelligible multiple forms of desire.

While the question of desire has been central to philosophers, theologians, politicians, and advertisers for centuries, just what desire is, how it has been theorized in the history of philosophy *and* in our contemporary institutions of learning has received relatively short shrift in philosophy of education, or so it seems to me. Too seldom is desire interrogated as a powerful (and seemingly invisible) effect of power or in relation to sexualities and sexual identities. Granted, those concerned with multicultural education and liberal pluralism will name sexuality in their lists that describe how we come from different social positions based on race, class, gender, religion etc., but there is little illumination on the structure of desire or the production and recognition of certain forms of sexual desire over others. It seems to me that a more finely developed phenomenology of desire, aiming to articulate its productive role in developing agency and a sense of social and global responsibility, could not only inform policy debate over the provision of sex education and the development of anti-bias multicultural pedagogies, but also contribute to the making of a socially responsible democratic citizenry.

#### NOTES

1. See for example, Michelle Fine, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire,” in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, eds. A. Darder, M. Baltodando, and R. Torres (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003), Deborah Tolman, “Doing Desire: Adolescent girls’ Struggles for/with Sexuality” in *Feminist Frontiers*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., eds. Laurel Richardson, Verta A. Taylor and Nancy Whittier (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004); Cris Mayo, “Bound and Gagged: Sex Education, Secondary Virginity, and the Welfare Reform Act,” in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1998*, ed. Steven Tozer (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), 309–317, and Lynda Measor, “Young People’s Views on Sex Education: Gender, Information, and Knowledge” *Sex Education* 4, no. 2 (2004) 153–166, 161.
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2. For a Foucauldian account of how desire becomes a site of regulatory power and resistance see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
  3. Gay Straight Alliances are after school clubs created by students struggling for recognition of diverse sexual identities.
  4. Dewey's charge that educational practices that fail to engage student experience are miseducative should be kept in mind throughout. See John Dewey, *Experience and Education: The 60th Anniversary Edition* (West Lafayette: Kappa Delta Pi, 1998).
  5. Plato, *The Republic*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
  6. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
  7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press, 1969).
  8. Fine, "Sexuality," 296.
  9. Fine, "Sexuality," 297.
  10. Mayo, "Gagged and Bound," 309.
  11. Mayo, "Gagged and Bound," 309.
  12. Mayo, "Gagged and Bound," 309.
  13. Lois Weis, "Learning to Speak Out in an Abstinence Based Sex Education Group: Gender and Race Work in an Urban Magnet School," in *Construction Sites: Excavating Race, Class, and Gender Among Urban Youth*, eds. Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2000).
  14. Currently, the federal government invests in three separate funding streams devoted to abstinence-only-until-marriage programs: The Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), which in addition to providing support for pregnant and parenting teens was established to promote "chastity" and "self-discipline," Title V Welfare Reform Act, and The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Act (TANF), better known as "welfare reform," was signed into law in 1996. Welfare reform included Title V of the Social Security Act which established a new funding stream to provide grants to states for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. See <http://www.siecus.org/about/index.html>.
  15. See <http://www.siecus.org/policy/states/index.html> for a comprehensive list of how funds were allocated to the states in 2003 and 2004.
  16. For information on commonly used curricula, visit [http://www.siecus.org/policy/in\\_their\\_own\\_words.pdf](http://www.siecus.org/policy/in_their_own_words.pdf).
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17. See Weis, “Learning to Speak Out” for an example of how in the midst of an abstinence based program, space has been carved out to promote deconstruction of taken for granted assumptions about race and gender (but not sexuality).
  18. Lynda Measor, “Young People’s Views on Sex Education,” 153–166, 161.
  19. Gerald Unks, “Thinking about the Gay Teen,” in Darder, Baltodando, and Torres, eds., *The Critical Pedagogy Reader* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003), 323.
  20. Cris Mayo, “The Tolerance that Dare Not Speak Its Name,” in *Democratic Dialogue In Education: Troubling Speech Disturbing Silence*, ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 36.
  21. Mayo, “The Tolerance that Dare Not Speak Its Name,” 35.
  22. Mayo, “The Tolerance that Dare Not Speak Its Name,” 35.
  23. R. Ruth Linden, *Making Stories, Making Selves: Feminist Reflections on the Holocaust* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), ix.
  24. Deborah Britzman, “‘The Question of Belief’: Writing Poststructural Ethnography,” in *Working The Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*, ed. Elizabeth St. Pierre and Wanda Pillow (New York: Routledge, 2000), 30.
  25. Leslie Bloom, “Interpreting Interpretation: Gender, Sexuality and the Practice of not Reading Straight,” *Qualitative Studies in Education* 12, no. 4 (1999): 331–346.
  26. The students in one school reported more incidents of harassment and unaddressed homophobia than the other one. The quotes to follow come from field work conducted in the two schools in 2003; I’ve highlighted the occasions when questions about desire and identity came up though most of their conversations centered on their struggle to end discrimination.
  27. Richard Barry, “Sheltered ‘Children’: The Self-Creation of a Safe Space by Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Students” in *Construction Sites*, eds. Weis and Fine, 86.
  28. Mayo, “Gagged and Bound,” 314.
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