

# Queer Scholarly Activism: An Exploration of the Moral Imperative of Queering Pedagogy and Advocating Social Change

by

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As adult educators we are often faced with the choice of rigor or relevance; life at the junction of queer critical postmodern theory and queer activism as practice allows for the exercise of both (Hill, 2004).

Recently, I (Koschoreck) was contacted by the editor of the special issue of the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* to contribute an essay that would explore the construction of queer knowledge in an educational context. Believing that queering the curriculum and the pedagogies in the educational process is inexorably intertwined with the act of advocating for social justice, I sought to appreciate the multiple links between queer scholarship and queer activism. Rather than adopting a posture of all-knowing pontificator, however, I decided to invite three graduate students to embark with me on a conversational journey that might lead towards a clearer, more complex understanding of queer scholarly activism and its implications for pedagogy and practice.<sup>1</sup> I believe this dialogical approach to be substantially more beneficial in two regards. First, the conversation amongst the four of us has the advantage of offering a multi-perspectival approximation towards the development of these thoughts. Second, it is a queer practice indeed to offer in this conversation a leveling of the intellectual hierarchy amongst professors and students that tends to dominate so much of our scholarly productivity.

We decided to produce this conversation in a two-phase process. For the first phase, I suggested that each of us individually elaborate our views about the following questions:

- What thoughts come to mind when you think of queer scholarly activism? What is it?

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- How does queer scholarly activism inform your pedagogy? How does your pedagogy inform your activism?

It is of particular note that the reflections in this first phase often represented an attempt to clarify, to define the terms, and intellectually to struggle with the multifaceted meanings of queer scholarly activism.

Once we had completed this first assignment, we shared all of our texts with each other. For the second phase, I asked everyone to consider carefully all the writings of phase one and to reflect on our collaborative production. In particular, I suggested that we use the writings of phase one to encourage a further complexification of our ideas in order that we might collectively broaden our understandings.

It is our hope that through this structured dialogue we will add to the growing conversation amongst queer scholars and activists. Furthermore, it is our expressed desire to continue to queer the connections amongst scholarship, pedagogy, and social activism.

- *James W. Koschoreck*

## Conversation – Phase One

*Koschoreck.* During the fifteen years I prepared federal income tax returns as a Certified Public Accountant, I never once imagined that one day I would identify as a queer scholar activist. The move away from the normatively structured world of business and accountancy towards a career as an oppositional scholar and social dissident seemed at one time an unlikely occurrence. Yet somehow the intersectionality of these multiple identities has come to represent my journey as an educational leader in the academy.

These identities did not, of course, emerge simultaneously. I began to know myself as a scholar only from the mid-1990s. This is the point at which I came to an understanding that through research I could contribute to the growing bodies of knowledge in education. I have come to appreciate how the gathering and dissemination of evidence can be used to change the consciousness of humankind. The use of evidence, moreover, entails a moral and ethical responsibility to convey the truth—not the universal and absolute Truth, but the historical, contextual truth bound by time and place. This adherence to the truth through the use of carefully collected evidence is what differentiates scholarship from mere ideology (McNeal, 2009).

Truth is linked to epistemological perspective, and queer truth emerges from a view of the world that interrogates the taken-for-granted, heteronormative assumptions that dominate Western culture. The paths that lead to the adoption of a queer perspective are multiple and complex. Some know themselves or choose to be queer through social and cultural interactions with others; some discover the world of queer in the philosophical, sociological, and literary writings of authors who trouble essentialized notions of sexual identity.

As one who has moved between and across both normative and non-normative sexual identities, my journey into the queer occurred as I came to examine the writings of influential scholars of the 1990s. It was at these moments that I became convinced of the epistemological underpinnings that would guide my own scholarship. These assumptions are:

- that “an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 1);
- that “queerness constitutes not just a resistance to social norms or a negation of established values but a positive and creative construction of different ways of life” (Halperin, 1995, p. 80);
- and that “queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories” (Doty, 1993, p. xvii).

Queer scholarship, then, acknowledges these perspectives even as it seeks to gather the evidence that the heteronormative world order does violence to all persons living within it.

Valuable and intellectually rewarding though it may be to engage in the production of queer scholarship, for those of us who educate the educators it is simply not enough. We are in a field that demands that theory inform practice, that pedagogy reflect our epistemologies, and that we provide future teachers and educational leaders with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to address and transform the unjust inequities that continue to plague our societies.

Therein lies not only the possibility but the obligation for the queer scholar to be an activist. Whether through an *engaged pedagogy* that seeks to transform the way we do education in order to provide students “with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply” (hooks, 1994, p. 22); through using the evidence of our research beyond the ivory towers of the university in order to mobilize knowledge amongst the larger community (Levin, 2009); or through political engagement in the local, state, national, and/or international communities to effect change for social justice; these are the roles of the scholar activist.

*Meek.* Any discussion of queer scholarly activism faces the challenge of defining how exactly one practices the art of queering. In this particular discussion, I ask that we not take for granted our use of the term *queer*, which “is in itself an unstable term, one whose effectiveness depends upon it remaining unstable” (Carlin & DiGrazia, 2004, p. 198). Since *queer* has been theorized and operationalized differently by numerous academics and activists, I want to pose further questions about our use of *queer* in this article, and I hope our discussion will utilize rather than delimit the multiplicity and complexity of the term.

When addressing the topic of queer scholarly activism, are we being asked to focus on scholarly research that examines queer topics? If so, what counts as queer topics? Are queer topics limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and ally (LGBTQQIA) subjects? Or does our use

of *queer* also refer to a deconstruction of binary constructions and social norms? Does queer scholarly activism include discussions of pedagogy and curriculum that queer (verb form) traditional subjects and disciplines and make transparent the place of activism and self-actualization—as bell hooks (1994, p. 15) says—in learning? And, finally, is scholarly activism defined as queer working for a politics of inclusion and recognition for “queer” people within the liberal, democratic political process; and if so, who counts as queer? Or does this type of activism seek to “reframe, reclaim, and re-shape the world,” according to queer activist and writer Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (2008), through “struggles to transform gender, revolutionize sexuality, build community and family outside of traditional models, and dismantle all hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and ability” (p. 6)?

In my own research on queerness, I have observed a common theme, emerging from queer theory, the sociology of social movements, and post-structuralist feminist theory, and that is queer’s ability to destabilize long-held definitions and call into question the very act of defining something or someone definitively—especially when it comes to identity and identity politics. To queer is to highlight the unstable and multivalent nature of identity, language, culture, community; and Joshua Gamson (1995) describes the practice of queering as “an action logic” that can be a vital tool for various communities, activists, and scholars (p. 396). Indeed, queering any politic based on identity begins with the queer action of deconstructing identity categories to expose their transitory, context-specific, and simplistic construction; but a queer action logic is flexible enough to acknowledge both the pitfalls of identity politics and the important role identity-based communities can play in the lives of minoritized peoples. Therefore, an action logic of queerness need not overthrow identity-based organizing completely; rather, it charges queer scholars and activists to envision another strategy or framework that would serve more people and lessen or even eliminate the policing of identity boundaries. Guided by queer logic, the communities you are organizing and the political issues at hand might be totally re-imagined, and to me this falls more in line with the kind of “radical queer intervention” that Bernstein Sycamore (2008) describes. The desire to analyze why we need this new vision and what process we need to achieve it is, to me, the heart of queer scholarly activism.

The difficulty in teaching this type of queer scholarly activism is compounded by the fact that there are too few spaces in our society for education around social justice issues, coalition building, and conflict resolution in general. The task of carving out such spaces can be an obstacle in itself, especially if it’s in the classroom of a public institution. But creating these spaces within a curriculum, a neighborhood, or through media-based networks is a vital step in the process of forming any queer initiative. The pedagogy of queer scholarly activism, for me, involves a restructuring of the way we teach power, identity, and culture. Many people lack a basic background in studying social inequalities that are based on race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, gender identity, and ability. The chal-

lenge, then, is to help draw out people's cultural assumptions, collectively analyze various texts and art that elaborate on the experiences of minoritized people, and connect these experiences and ideas to the larger systems of oppression that reproduce power structures and that shape the dominant culture.

Whether this process happens in a classroom or a community center, it's important to pay attention to the model you are creating and begin with ground rules to nurture a safe space for people to communicate and become invested in this type of study and in the community you are co-creating. The educational journey from this point to looking at the effects of global capitalism requires this kind of reflection from everyone involved, and incorporating spaces for self-reflection is an important part of the process. I hope our discussion inspires us and our audience to articulate practices of queering pedagogy and sharing resources we utilize to insert issues of social justice in our queer curriculum.

*Campanello.* The purported division between scholarship and activism is shown to be, in actuality, a slippery public activation of desire when scholarship and activism are considered alongside *queer*. Indeed, Scholarship (or critical theory) as expressive of desire for or the fantasy of (transformed) social conditions and Activism as the "doing" of this transforming really can't decide who is the top and who is the bottom, or what *topness* and *bottomness* mean. As the bottom, does Scholarship provide the meaning for the top's (Activism's) action, or is providing meaning "a top thing," making Scholarship the top? As the top, does Activism "get things done," or is *ze*<sup>2</sup> inattentive to the communicative bottom, making it *seem* like something is accomplished?

For me, *queer* scholarly activism insists on the embodiment/spatiality and temporality of these questions through *queer*'s implied emphasis on queer sex and the "sweat and blood and pleasure and death" it entails (Golding, 1993, p. 212). Activism does not have the monopoly on bodies in space and time, nor does scholarship/theory on understanding them. In other words, the relationship between scholarship and activism is queer—these two kids are anything but (hetero/homo)-normative since, like the heterogeneous practices of queer sex, the tools *and* the trade *mean* things and *do* things heterogeneously and co-constitutively in time and space. So what guides queer scholarly activism? What is the point?

Judith Halberstam (2005) asserts that "queer refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (p. 6); however, as we've seen from the personification of Scholarship and Activism as partners engaging in public sex, the shifting limits of definitions such as top and bottom, thought and action, meaning and desire, and any definition of non-normativity, must be provisional and context-specific. The necessity of the context-specific and provisional underlies my pedagogy and yet is guided by *something else*. As I teach Introduction to Women's Studies, a course that can sometimes seem like Bad Things that Happen to Women (and Others), my goal is to facilitate students' encounters with notions of hegemony and interpellation and the constructedness of social reality and unequal power relations,

while underlining the fact that social constructionism (rather than determinism) enables ever-unfolding opportunities for resistance, transgression and *queering*, including all the instances when we unintentionally transgress and “pay for it.”

In her attempt to reimagine the “what ought to be” of “democratic possibility” following her radical reconsideration of geography and space-time, Sue Golding (1993) describes something similar to my approach:

There are several ways to approach these questions. And I will attempt only one. And that is to take seriously the logic of contingency (and with it, multiplicity; indeed, also, the politics of hegemony) as primary and irreducible relation to any truth-game.... If we push the implications of this logic as far as they will go—or at least further than what has been done up to now—a funny thing around ethics, political strategies and democratic possibilities begins to surface. Foucault characterized this odd little thing in one word: transgression. Bataille called it: the sacred. I want to call it: queer. And by re-inventing (or re covering) this word, I mean to bring with it the whole damn business of sweat and blood and pleasure and death; that is to say, all that is implied around transgressive, and sacred sex. (p. 210-11)

Golding’s emphasis on the spatiality, temporality and sociality “of sweat and blood and pleasure and death” complicates the experience of the social beyond the discursive or performative, as has often been the privileged purview of critical and queer theory. Godling’s logic is similar to Homi Bhaba’s (1994) argument for a rejection of the paradigm of cultural *diversity* which understands cultures as monolithic, unchanging and discrete in favor of a critical theory of cultural *difference*, or “the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*” (p. 56). Golding and Bhaba’s formulations explode the gridlock of social determinism and discrete meanings and identities, and this explosion is essential for a pedagogy that seeks to give space to an articulation of “what ought to be.”

*Mominee*. As an educated, athletic, heterosexual, middle class, able-bodied, Caucasian, male in his 30s, who was raised Catholic, speaks English, and is a naturalized citizen of the United States, I benefit immensely from the structures of power. For many years I have been riding a conveyer belt forward (Tatum, 2000), wearing my invisible knapsack of privileges (McIntosh, 1990), ignorant of my role as an oppressor (Freire, 1993). I was not overtly discriminatory, but I also did not actively deconstruct the oppressive frameworks around me. Only through experiencing stories of the other in literature, film, and the lives of my students, did I develop a critical awareness that the world is constructed in ways that intentionally advantage some and marginalize others (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001).

I am unlearning what I previously knew to be true and reconstructing a shared vision with others. By partnering with students in my Catholic high school classroom, we have become co-learners and co-teachers (Freire, 1993). In dialogue, we co-create and share knowledge, eradicating linear power over others and embracing a relational power structure of cooperation (hooks, 1994; Loomer, 1976). Through consciousness-raising, I have come to better understand my own biases,

and help students realize the patterns, which limit their potential growth. Those students of color, sexual minorities, and women who have been victimized by the system are very responsive to this “demythicalisation” process (Freire, 1993, p. 132). They are empowered to critically reflect and transform their futures

The writing of this article mirrors that process; dialogue through scholarship in praxis challenges me to step outside my comfort zone, and commit to the process of critical inquiry. Inside my classroom, where I teach ethics and social justice, I can more safely engage in critical analysis. I am insulated from parents and administrators who might feel threatened by such deconstruction. The entire process can be couched in Catholic social teaching, which promotes the dignity of people, demands distributive justice, and encourages society to be fashioned so all can participate and achieve the fullness of their humanity (The Holy See, 1997). Many students find the process refreshing, and those angered by it, have little power to challenge it. Educational institutions replicate the structures of power found outside the school setting (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001); not only do students often lack a voice in their education, but Catholic schools reinforce an extra layer of patriarchy and heterosexism. Challenges to those specific systems fight back with greater resistance. My local community already labels me an activist, but adding queer to the title directly threatens the social benefits I have been receiving. When asked to collaborate on this article, I had to decide if I was ready to “come out,” and identify myself as a queer scholar activist.

Ferretting out and overcoming alienation is the shared goal of feminists, critical-race theorists, Marxists, queer, and other critical theorists (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004). These movements have influenced one another, such that sexual identity is intimately tied to and exists in the context of race, gender, socioeconomic status (Rottman, 2006), and the liberation of each is dependent to some degree on the freeing of the other. Specifically, queer theory critically examines situations and texts searching for ways to liberate sexual minorities from the margins by deconstructing the relationships between sexuality, power, gender, and conceptions of normal and deviant, insider and outsider. It then reshapes these arrangements so all are equally included and valued (Dilley, 1999). But, in my local community, it is more acceptable to be a friend and advocate for people of color and the poor, than to be a friend and advocate of sexual-minorities. The queer person is not seen as normative, and the voice of queer activism is met with increased fear, hatred, and silence. Stepping out and consciously practicing queer theory removes some of the privileges in my invisible knapsack (McIntosh, 1990) and is a conscious choice to walk against the conveyor belt (Tatum, 2000). It places me in a vulnerable position, where I am less able to hide, and more able to relate to those on the margins.

## Conversation – Phase Two

*Koschoreck.* As I ponder the contributions of the first phase, I am struck by the unforeseen (read *queer*) turns of the conversation. Certainly, I would not have

envisaged at the outset “the personification of Scholarship and Activism as partners engaging in public sex” as an allegorical queering of the very topic we have proposed to discuss. And yet, it really gets quite to the point, doesn’t it? Through a refusal to ignore the lurid elements of action and desire that constitute a journey into the queer, Campanello performatively accomplishes the very queer task of deconstructing the alleged opposition between these two randy buddies/bodies. We, the readers, as *voyeurs* to this public thrashing about in their struggle for dominance are thrust orgasmically into the scene, incapable of remaining aloof as Scholarship and Activism alternately take control. Like the sweaty, panting witnesses of a public performance of the erotic in a sauna, we are reminded of our own complicity in the insistence of the struggle, knowing that if one or the other of the objects of our desire should succumb to the temptation of power, then our own interest in the intercourse between them would vanish.

In quite a different way, Meek conveys the same notion of the symbiotic relationship between pedagogy/scholarship and activism, claiming that it is the responsibility of *queer* to acknowledge and to dissect the complexities of gender and sexual identities even as it must act to advance the political agenda of creating a more socially just world. This is reminiscent of Turner’s (2000) contention that despite the “logical impossibility” (p. 91) of ending discrimination from within a minoritizing positionality, current pragmatic realities are such that the social activism that relies on identity politics may indeed be the optimal strategy for effecting real change. As he states:

Foucault argued for the historical specificity of the ostensibly universal identity categories that ground our politics, but these categories retain their centrality to our political practice regardless. The practices of liberalism exceed their justifications. Queer theorists and activists would try to resolve this dilemma by critiquing the rules of the debate and by elaborating the possibility of political alliances and actions that did not depend on the antecedent specification of an identity common to all potential activists (p. 91).

Nonetheless, this might advantage Activism over Scholarship, a state of affairs that I am certain Campanello would not abide. I suggest that it would behoove Scholarship simultaneously to engage in a reconfiguration of knowledge such that the universal categories that ground our understanding begin to lose their authority.

Mominee approaches the intellectual task from quite a different vantage point, exposing his “invisible knapsack of privileges” in such a way that we are able to behold the functioning of the *queer* in his own unlearning of previously held assumptions regarding the binary categories that serve to organize our ways of knowing in the West. He tackles the implications of throwing a bit of *queer* into his knapsack of privileges, and he invites us to consider the vulnerable positionality he now assumes. Ultimately, Mominee’s acknowledgement of his vulnerability reminds us that engaging in queer scholar activism makes us all susceptible to



the potential intellectual and physical acts of violence that accompany any interrogation of the heteronormative world order.

*Meek.* As a person who uses queer as a signifier of my sexuality, politics, gender identity, and community, and coming from a background in English, Creative Writing, and Women's Studies, I often take queer critical pedagogy and Interdisciplinarity for granted. The practice of drawing from various disciplines in teaching and research lends itself to queering one's scholarly activism, as an interdisciplinary perspective demands a scholar become comfortable as an academic outsider of sorts, with a critical eye trained to recognize the threads of hegemonic culture that bind together the very foundations of traditional disciplinary knowledge. Thus, the process of developing a queer pedagogy that incorporates texts and practices from numerous local and international scholars, activists, and artists—a pedagogy comfortable with bricolage and paradox—constitutes my own convergence of queer scholarship with multi-issue politics and revolutionary queer activism.

At heart, this critical queer pedagogy aims at analyzing and deconstructing power structures, including the separation of knowledge into disciplines, and thus queer signifies “not an identity, but a questioning stance, a cluster of methodologies that let us explore the taken for granted and the familiar from new vantage points,” as Piotnek (2006) has defined it (p. 2). *Queer* is not limited to functioning as an umbrella term for all non-normative sexual orientations and practices, nor is queer pedagogy satisfied by the simple add-and-stir techniques of multiculturalism or the similar logic of identity politics. Queer Studies, rooted in intersectional theory (Collins, 2000, 2004), would look very different from Gay and Lesbian Studies, but queerness does embody (with an emphasis on the body) an anti-normative, gender- and sex-centered perspective that is grounded in the knowledge that gender and sexuality are critical intersections of interlocking systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 29) and are thus fundamental to any social justice initiative. My own queer pedagogy therefore engages Doty's (1993) idea that “queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories” (p. xvii) and pushes it further to challenge and confuse the very act of categorizing, disembodiment, and institutionalizing.

Queering a classroom and a politic can therefore be an exciting but disorienting experience for many, and if we hope to engage every student in this process, we should be attuned to the difficulties people face when coming to terms with social inequalities and the resulting unearned privileges bestowed on individuals and groups. Thus, a central part of my queer pedagogy is reaching out to resistant students through a process of analyzing and acknowledging their own multiple identities since, as Mominee points out, the ability to declare one's multiple social positions, especially when privileged, can be a step towards recognizing how society itself is constructed. Educators are not exempt from this process either and must also highlight their own social positions in order to model the operationalization of Sandra Harding's (1991) standpoint theory. These practices can

be effective in any class, within any discipline, and we must make greater strides to encourage a queer critical pedagogy in every discipline—if indeed institutions maintain the disciplinary divides.

To this end, I also take for granted the sharing of personal narratives as vital to the learning process; and while maintaining a safe space for such sharing, a queer pedagogy must facilitate students connecting their experiences to larger societal and institutional power structures and discourses. Facilitating this includes defining concepts such as *discourse* and how it functions, and we should not assume that any such concepts are beyond our students, even in introductory level courses. In my experience, once a group defines and discusses the term *discourse*, it comes alive for them as we look at clips from the mainstream media and political pundits. The same goes for other theoretical concepts like hegemony, intersectionality, and internalized oppressions. Queering your curriculum and pedagogy often involves engaging with ideas that many would dismiss as high theory but which students can easily grasp and recognize in their everyday experiences.

My first attempts at a queer critical pedagogy were in my English Composition and Literature classes, where I learned the importance of creating a toolbox of resources from various disciplines to help analyze social constructs such as gender and monosexuality. Since then, I have been continuously compiling and experimenting with these resources, and I have found the most powerful tools for stimulating compassion and questioning are images from films, zines, music videos, and commercials. A film's transgender character can evoke a feeling of marginalization in one glance, and one image from a pop music video can illustrate cultural stereotypes that may seem somewhat abstract when described in essays. When it comes to discussing concepts as ingrained (but absurd) as structuring our social relations based on two sexes being opposite, students may not be able to imagine other possibilities until they engage with images of gender non-conforming people. By the end of my class of total immersion in queerness, I hope the images of traditional gender performances are seen for the drag that they are.

Mominee cites the influence of “experiencing stories of the other in literature, film, and the lives of my students” in helping develop his “critical awareness that the world is constructed in ways that intentionally advantages some and marginalizes others,” and since he describes himself as possessing the most privileged combination of identities in our culture, I find the process of his personal transformation extremely insightful. When teaching an Introduction to Gender and Sexuality course, my students have responded similarly to films such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Unveiled*, and *Fire*—all of which deal not only with gender and sexuality, but with issues of immigration, ethnicity, culture, and religion. To bolster students' experiences with these films, I equip them with essays that further explore these issues, ranging from Anne Fausto-Sterling's (2000) biological analysis of sex and gender in *Sexing the Body* to transgender theorist Leslie Feinberg's (1999) personal essay on being refused medical treatment because of ze's gender in “We Are All Works in Progress.” The diversity of media, art, personal

essays, and science-based texts that attest to the hegemonic grasp of certain ideologies can also offer possibilities for resistance, subversion, and coalition; and a queer critical pedagogy greatly depends on a toolbox of such eclectic resources.

*Campanello.* Since I identify as queer and have nonexclusive behaviors and attractions in terms of the assigned sex, gender identity, and gender expression of my potential or actual sex partners, I am intent upon complicating stabilized notions of queerness and identity in the classroom. In order to locate myself or render myself intelligible to others, I have had to be conscious of the gender and sexual taxonomies in various contexts. Thus, I am attuned to the stories that we tell ourselves and each other about who we are and how we relate to various communities and to white-supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchy.

The classroom is a place where expectations can be shifted and boundaries “queered” when considering the identity of the teacher and of students. I have found that my current way of approaching my queer identity in the classroom, which emphasizes identity as a process, has allowed me greater freedom in vulnerability, and the patience that I have had with myself in relation to my own identities has enabled me to be more patient with students as we grapple with interlocking oppressions and unearned privilege in Women’s Studies.

Scholars (Garber, 1994; Crawley & Broad, 2004) have explored the issue of being “out” in the classroom in a variety of ways. All of these interventions are important, but what I have found most useful when discussing my own queer identity in the classroom is to return to a few basic touchstone quotes that I use to frame the course’s engagement with identity:

Identity is always a relationship; that is, identification signals inclusion in a category or group—such as nation or a family or a race—but it also signals exclusion and difference from others. Our identities are not always voluntary or chosen by us. They may be forced upon us, or we may have severely limited options in describing or fashioning ourselves to fit into available groups or categories. (Grewal & Kaplan 2006, p. 149)

Identity formation is the result of a complex interplay among a range of factors: individual decisions and choices, particular life events, community recognition and expectations, societal categorization, classification and socialization, and key national or international events. It is an ongoing process. (Okazawa-Rey & Kirk, 2006, p. 61)

In the era of the coalition, when critiques of identity politics abound in Women’s Studies and elsewhere in the academy, I believe it is important to lay the groundwork for discussion among people with multiple identities by recognizing identity as a process for *everyone*, not just people who are part of oppressed groups, as well as the need to validate people’s complex relationship to their identities. As a teacher, I try to move beyond the “coming out” narrative to discuss the ways in which my own queer identity is “a process” in relation to “a range of factors,” and that I do not always choose all aspects of how my identity is perceived

or choose the fact that, due to heteronormativity, “coming out” is one way that I can be perceived as a person closer to myself. I try to construct a shared meta-narrative of how I feel students might be perceiving me as I share particular details and self-reflexively articulate for them what sorts of decisions I must make in the process of being myself around them. Throughout the term, I try to use specific examples from my life using this perspective on identity, and I hope that my students leave thinking not only that their teacher is queer, but that identity formation, including their own, is complex. This approach goes beyond individualizing myself in relation to the LGBT community, and instead, reveals that identity is processural for everyone, not just “Others.”

To illustrate, one of my students was very resistant to a passage in a text that critiqued the compulsory assimilation of ethnic and racial minorities in which the author described the prevailing feeling that minorities must become in her words, more “white.” My student took offense as a white person, stating that she felt that whiteness was being generalized in a negative way and then made some of the classic arguments about “reverse racism.” A fantastic conversation ensued in which she acknowledged her own unearned white privilege as we had been learning about in class but admitted she still felt uncomfortable about this particular use of “white.” I suggested we return to the two quotes about identity, and speculated that perhaps white people could begin to define whiteness differently (and that some already do), with whiteness not acting as the norm that all must assimilate to but, instead, as a socially constructed category whose members must work to account for unearned privilege and end oppression based on social categories. Suddenly the difficult conversation became more productive as white students discussed ways in which they could do some of this work, rather than focusing on their feelings of “reverse racism.”

*Mominee.* Theory motivates action, and this praxis can be expressed through scholarship, one form of activism. The relationship between scholarship and activism is multifaceted, but the end result is the same: the deconstruction of power structures surrounding gender and sexuality. Queer theory is one expression of critical pedagogy, which shares with other forms the goal of liberating marginalized populations from the oppressive structures in our society. Through scholarship and activism, I am working to liberate myself from the limits of sexism and heterosexism and to help my students uncover the limits of these belief structures in themselves and their community.

Kumashiro (2002) explains that most people do not want to be upset or discomforted; rather they want to stick to what they know. They desire to keep the status quo, and education encourages this way of thinking. The knowledge taught is assumed to be objective, impartial, and factual, though students learn only about certain groups and their perspectives, which serves to maintain the privilege of those groups and perspectives. Kumashiro takes a more constructivist view of knowledge and challenges educators and students to trouble the dominance of only certain types of knowledge. He asks students to critically reflect and question

implicit assumptions by adding new stories in the classroom and questioning why some voices are silenced in the first place. One must include the contradictory voices and flesh out the underlying assumptions and beliefs in a way that raises critical questions. Through this, we come to understand why we are more comfortable with some stories and types of knowledge and not with others.

Articles on queer theory are not accessible to some people, either because they are not academics or they will resist writings with the word queer in the title. When I was younger, I would not have read or watched a piece that challenged my assumptions about gender and sexuality. But I have had trusted friends and teachers introduce to me to alternative readings and new ways of understanding that exposed the ways in which my views perpetuated prejudice. I have come to embrace an alternative vision that recognizes the limits of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism; and I continue this journey today. Like my co-authors, I am helping my students begin to critically reflect on their assumptions and beliefs by exposing them to media, activities, and people that will queer their perspective. Most are willing to uncover hidden structures of oppression, and these are some of the resources I found helpful in my classroom and my life.

McNeil (1993) and Helminiak (2000) have written books critiquing the Catholic Church's teaching on sexual orientation and use a historical critical reading of the Bible to explain how it does not condemn homosexuality. The Dignity USA (n.d.) organization invites Catholics to work together for reforms within the Catholic Church and in society through education and working for social and legal change. For students who want to take the Bible literally, Erhman (2005), a former evangelical Christian, illustrates the limitations of this biblical perspective. In addition, the television series *30 Days* has an episode where a conservative, Midwestern, Christian, college graduate goes and lives with a gay man in the Castro district in San Francisco, California for 30 days. The show follows the young man's transformation as he questions his assumptions and recognizes the limits of his heterosexist beliefs (Cutler & McKinney, 2005). The story of Matthew Shepard in the film *The Laramie Project* also demonstrates the limits of heterosexism, which led to Matthew's beating and death in Laramie, Wyoming in 1998 for being gay (Carey, 2002). One can learn more about Matthews's story through the Matthew Shepard Foundation, created by his parents in his honor. The foundation's mission is to "replace hate with understanding, compassion, and acceptance" by eliminating hate, supporting gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) youth, and ensuring equality those in the GLBT community (Matthew Shepard Foundation, n.d.). The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (n.d.) shares that vision; it is an educational organization oriented to creating safe schools for all students. They provide research and materials to educators, policy makers, community leaders, and students to help them address homophobia and others forms of exclusion and harassment. GLSEN also offers suggestions on how to create Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), which are student lead groups that address the same objectives. These groups provide students an opportunity to create

friendships across sexuality and gender. Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG) (n.d.) has local chapters around the nation that encourage open dialogue and support for GLBT people, their families, and friends. Both PFLAG and GLSEN offer educational resources, advocacy programming, and ways to engage students and yourself in the pedagogy of crisis (Kumashiro, 2002).

Kumashiro (2002) writes that we often resist learning about how we contribute to oppression, because this may require us to change, and change is painful. We need to question our beliefs and the knowledge we have been given, by unlearning what we know. Our evolution toward inclusion involves overcoming our resistance to discomfort and deconstructing language and norms associated with gender and sexuality. As Meek and Campanello also illustrate, curriculums must have space within them to expose students to alternative voices and challenge them to read texts in new ways. As educational leaders, we walk with our students through the pedagogy of crisis by supporting their change efforts. For Kumashiro, change comes through the experience of seeing the “Other” as an equal. My growth was greatest when I met, read about (Heron, 1995), and experienced the stories of sexual minorities as no different than my story.

## Closing Thoughts and a Call to Action

Articulating our individual styles of queer scholarly activism demonstrated to us the importance of situated knowledges, as we each grounded our ideas and work in our particular embodiment of and experiences with multiple identities. If our practice of queering the classroom has taught us anything, it is that students are sincerely hungry for this type of education, for the chance to explore sex, gender, sexuality, identity, and intersectional systems of oppression within a framework of social justice. Koschoreck, for example, encourages this exploration through a “Transgressive Art Project” assignment in his graduate course on LGBTQ Issues in Education<sup>3</sup>, in which students create a collage that attempts to transgress a social norm particular to their communities and present it to the class with an explanation of their vision. Campanello takes her students on an investigation of identity that reveals it to be “an on-going process” and “the result of a complex interplay among a range of factors”; and Campanello and Meek co-designed a final assignment for their separate courses on Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, which asks students to identify a socio-political issue they will research and design an activist project that will allow them to address the issue in their community or even nationally. Mominee’s personal journey examining his own social position proves how an investigation of one’s cultural conditioning can help transform the privileged into the advocate. Co-creating a learning community with his students, Mominee seeks to inspire his students’ individual voices through a learning process that involves sharing resources for students to use as they continue their search for ways to enact social change, even within a Catholic

framework. We as educational leaders should not underestimate the power of such queer scholarly activism to transform our students and our society.

The youth of this generation are constantly receiving conflicting messages about sex, gender, and sexuality; but their educational system does little to nothing to actually address these vital aspects of their lives. Russell (2002) reminds us that as the dominant culture has allowed more public debate around sexuality, the dynamics and discourse of these messages have shifted, greatly impacting young people:

Contemporary sexual minority youth in the United States are growing up during the first period in history in which ‘gay issues’ have become prominent in the public consciousness. . . . Rarely do young people have opportunities to discuss controversial public issues at home or at school, even though media images and messages are present all around them. Instead, to develop spaces where these concerns can be acknowledged, many young people turn to the Internet or form GSAs in their schools. (p. 258)

But the highly charged and politicized public debates center around specifically “gay issues” and homosexuality, while discourses that include queer, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or unlabeled people’s experiences continue to be silenced and marginalized. The public debates around race and racism are similarly constructed, where the experiences of queer, disabled, and female-identified people of color often go unacknowledged in an era that some ignorantly (or wishfully) call “post-race.”

But most young people know better. They see the verbal and physical harassment of queer kids in their school hallways, and they witness the effects of class and racial inequalities on their peers. Their education, however, has failed to help them understand the structural foundations of these oppressions. In addition, many students can barely mask their fear and anxiety surrounding sex, and they recognize that their school’s abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are making them even more afraid and uninformed. Are educators so hemmed in by disciplinary boundaries and federal programs like No Child Left Behind that they are forced to skip lessons on compassion and the very things that students are most desperate to know—the real causes of social inequalities?

In the face of such an unethical educational system, many community leaders and educators have helped establish a national movement to increase youth empowerment programs, and national activist and educational organizations like Advocates for Youth and GLSEN are picking up where our schools leave off. But should we be satisfied with this system of supplemental education that surely misses many youth, especially those living in rural regions? Are we content with the institutional attempts to join the trend of addressing social justice through mandatory service learning programs and the various offices of multicultural student services? Are these programs really effective? Or do we need to radicalize and revitalize them? Can a queer scholarly-activist perspective help us envision

new spaces where intersectional theory can be operationalized through student-led activist initiatives, as exemplified by the pedagogy and assignments of these authors?

Unfortunately or not, the classroom still reigns supreme in our collective consciousness as the place where learning happens, and this article begs us to consider how we can embrace that fact and create in our classrooms a “subaltern counterpublic,” or an arena where students can “challenge, modify, and/or displace hegemonic elements of the means of interpretation and communication; [and] invent new forms of discourse for interpreting their needs” (cited in Sparks, 1997, p. 455). How can we radicalize our social justice curriculum and queer our critical pedagogy to examine unearned privilege and power in a supposedly post-race, post-feminist, globalized world? How can we continue to explode the divide between research and activism, between the disciplines of knowledge, between the classroom and the streets? When we do this, the students are engaged and challenged, and in our experiences, asking for more.

- Jane Bryan Meek

## Endnotes

- 1 James W. Koschoreck wishes to acknowledge that the idea for this structured conversation came from Jay D. Scribner of The University of Texas at Austin. As a doctoral student in the Educational Policy and Planning Program, he was invited by Dr. Scribner to participate in a similar writing experience. (See Scribner, López, Koschoreck, Mahitivanichcha, & Scheurich, 1999).
- 2 The gender-neutral pronoun “ze” is one of an array of modern inventions in English designed to eliminate the gender bias inherent in the language itself. The creation of these gender-neutral pronouns also represents an attempt to avoid the awkwardness of structures such as “s/he,” “she or he,” or the use of “they” as a singular pronoun.
- 3 Koschoreck adapted this assignment from the original found in the text, *Finding Out* (Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2009, p. 300).

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