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The rather mundane question, “What are you working on?” is one academics ask each other, involving routinely the discussion of a problem, a course of study, and the sketching out of some theory. It is when I name the theory that some of these conversations get awkward. When I pronounce “Queer Theory” more than a few times, it is as if the listener cannot believe her or his ears, it is as if I had spoken in another language. One difficulty that borders these conversations is that for many of my colleagues, questions of gay and lesbian thought are, well, not given any thought. But this, after all is part of my problematic, that is, accounting for the relations between a thought and what it cannot think.

Why is it unthinkable to work with gay and lesbian writing when one thinks about experiences like friendship, community, research methodology, curriculum theorizing, and educational theory? Can gay and lesbian theories become relevant not just for those who identify as gay or lesbian but for those who do not? What sort of difference would it make for everyone in a classroom if gay and lesbian writing were set loose from confirmations of homophobia, the afterthoughts of inclusion, or the special event? What is required for gay and lesbian scholarship and demands for civil rights to exceed its current ghettoized and minor identity? More interestingly, what if gay and lesbian theories were understood as offering a way to rethink the very grounds of knowledge and pedagogy in education? Conceptually speaking, what is required to refuse the unremarked and obdurately unremarkable straight educational curriculum?

At first glance, these problems may seem situated solely in the small spaces of classrooms and educational studies. The stakes, however, are raised when the absence of gay and lesbian theorizing in education is set in tension with crucial cultural and historical changes that concern the constitution of bodies of knowledge and knowledge of bodies. Throughout this essay, I will be working through some of these issues, but by way of introduction, I want to reference briefly two distinct yet often collapsed political experiences that defy the certitude and indeed the very possibility of education. One is the global pandemic known as AIDS, what Paula Treichler has termed “an epidemic of signification” in her analysis of how discourses meant to contain the pandemic as understandable work as contagion.1 But just as significantly, while the pandemic known as AIDS references more about the transposition of bodies, geographies, and identities than, say, their capacity to assert stable boundaries, the problem is, as Paul Morrison insists, that “the cultural logic

that structures the epidemic tends toward the opposite."
It is precisely this
centripetal force, a cultural insistence to put back into place boundaries at all costs,
that education is obligated to exceed. The pandemic known as AIDS makes radically
insufficient the categories education has historically offered.

The other political experience I bring to bear on education is gay and lesbian
demands for civil rights, for the redefinition of family, for public economies of
affection and representations, and for the right to an everyday not organized by
violence, exclusion, medicalization, criminalization, and erasure. More specifically,
gay and lesbian demands for civil rights call into question the stability and funda-
mentalist grounds of categories like masculinity, femininity, sexuality, citizenship,
nation, culture, literacy, consent, legality, and so forth, categories that are quite
central to the ways in which education organizes knowledge of bodies and bodies of
knowledge. This movement might also be constituted as an “epidemic of significa-
tion,” if what is understood by the phrasing is that these demands force redefinitions
of what counts as anyone’s sociality, just as they already shape how communities
choose to be communities according themselves and others, whether understood or
not, what Emmanuel Levinas terms “the dignity of intelligibility.”

To work within the terms of gay and lesbian theories, then, allows for the
consideration of two kinds of pedagogical stakes. One has to do with thinking
ethically about what discourses of difference, choice, and visibility mean in class-
rooms, in pedagogy, and in how education can be thought about. Another has to do
with thinking through structures of disavowal within education, or the refusals —
whether curricular, social, or pedagogical — to engage a traumatic perception that
produces the subject of difference as a disruption, as the outside to normalcy. Given
these stakes — a sort of universalizing discourse that I will explore a bit later in this
paper — what does education need to learn from the pandemic known as AIDS and
from the political demands of those who live at or beyond the sexual limits? In these
contexts, I wonder, echoing Gayatri Spivak, “What is it to learn and to unlearn?”

Throughout this essay, and in this rather long introduction, I want to raise some
issues allowed when Queer Theory is brought into tension with education in general
and pedagogy in its specificity. The questions I raise about the possibility of
articulating pedagogies that call into question the conceptual geography of normal-
ization — what the writer and director, Tina Landau, describes in her play 1969 as
“the vast map of normalcy” — require something larger than simply an acknowledg-
ment of gay and lesbian subjects in educational studies. At the very least, what is
required is an ethical project that begins to engage difference as the grounds of
politicality and community.

I think of Queer Theory as provoking terms of engagement that work both to recuperate and to exceed the stereotypes that contain and dismiss gay and lesbian subjects. But as a doubled gesture, Queer Theory signifies improper subjects and improper theories, even as it questions the very grounds of identity and theory.\(^5\) Queer Theory occupies a difficult space between the signifier and the signified, where something queer happens to the signified — to history and to bodies — and something queer happens to the signifier — to language and to representation. Whether one hears Queer Theory as figurative or as literal, as a provision or as a condition, may depend on what can be imagined when “queer” is brought to bear upon “theory” and when “theory” is brought to bear upon “queer.” The term is defiant but can be heard as accusatory. But the “queer,” like the “theory,” in Queer Theory does not depend on the identity of the theorist or the one who engages with it. Rather the queer in Queer Theory anticipates the precariousness of the signified: the limits within its conventions and rules, and the ways in which these various conventions and rules incite subversive performances, citations, and inconveniences. The name, as D.A. Miller suggests, is “not a name, but the continual elision of one…[that disrupts] a system of connotation.”\(^6\)

Now, in these first conversations, some of my colleagues ask why such a disparaging term (as they hear it, if not for the ears they imagine) should be claimed. Some consider it as too angry — too oppositional — for what they imagine as the General Public. These folks assume that teachers would never be able to pronounce such a term at school. They wonder if another term could be employed, one more easily exchanged, one that does not boomerang between the utterance and the utterer. Others view it as a new centricity, an attempt to reverse the binary of hetero/homo and to valorize, for a while, the latter term. For still others, it is not polite to call anything queer. Those who seem uncomfortable think the term queer as a noun or an identity. But the queer and the theory in Queer Theory signify actions, not actors. It can be thought of as a verb, or as a citational relation that signifies more than the signifier.

My point in rehearsing these conversations and the various social anxieties produced there is not to posit a case of what Warner calls, “Fear of a queer planet.”\(^7\) In fact, Queer Theory is an attempt to move away from psychological explanations like homophobia, which individualizes heterosexual fear of and loathing toward gay and lesbian subjects at the expense of examining how heterosexuality becomes normalized as natural. The subject of Queer Theory is more impertinent and more labile. Queer Theory offers methods of critiques to mark the repetitions of normalcy as a structure and as a pedagogy. Whether defining normalcy as an approximation of

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5. The double gesture Queer Theory attempts concerns its refusal of an essentialist position on identity and its calling into question its own theoretical conditions of possibility. William Haver engages this contradiction: “precisely because [Queer Theory] does not reject the historically and culturally specific normative predicates of ‘queer,’ and indeed because ‘queer’ here is a parodic affirmation of our overdetermined inscriptions as ‘queers,’ it is theoretical”; William Haver, “Review of Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,” Educational Studies 24, no. 3 [Fall 1993]: 247.


limits and mastery, or as renunciations, as the refusal of difference itself, Queer Theory insists on posing the production of normalization as a problem of culture and of thought. In its positivity, Queer Theory offers methods of imagining difference on its own terms: as eros, as desire, as the grounds of politicality. It is a particular articulation that returns us to practices of bodies and to bodies of practices.

Queer Theory offers education techniques to make sense of and remark upon what it dismisses or cannot bear to know. This theory insists, using psychoanalytic method, that the relationship between knowledge and ignorance is neither oppositional nor binary. Rather they mutually implicate each other, structuring and enforcing particular forms of knowledge and forms of ignorance. In this way ignorance is analyzed as an effect of knowledge, indeed, as its limit, and not as an originary or innocent state. Perhaps the more curious insistence is the study of what hegemonic discourses of normalcy cannot bear to know. Queer Theory can think of resistance as not outside of the subject of knowledge or the knowledge of subjects, but rather as constitutive of knowledge and its subjects.

Protests about the usefulness and provisionality of bringing the term queer to bear upon theory is part of the conversation in the theory itself. But perhaps it is more useful to think of competing Queer Theories, being refashioned in academic fields such as sociology, literary and cultural criticism, education and, within cultural practices like video production, reading popular culture, and the reconceptualization of memory. Another fashioning of queer is performed in political street activism.
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[with groups such as Queer Nation, ACT-UP, Queer Kids, The Lesbian Avengers, and so on]. In commenting upon the use of queer to connote a style of politics, Warner posits that queer is “thoroughly embedded in modern Anglo-American culture and does not translate easily....As a politically unstable term...‘queer’ dates from the Bush-Thatcher-Mulroney era.”10 As used in street activism and cultural production, queer politics is meant to disturb and to provoke pleasure.

In an academic context, Judith Butler’s essay, “Critically Queer,” examines how the term queer has been used to mobilize hatred and repressive legislation against gays and lesbians. Discourses, of course, have a history and the history of the term “queer” is one that both enables and disables an everyday. Butler’s questioning of the term is worth exploring as a reply to the kinds of discomforts expressed by some colleagues in education: “How is it that the apparently injurious effects of discourse become the painful resources by which a resignifying practice is wrought?....[H]ow is it that the abjected come to make their claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?”11 But along with this question, I want to hold the hope that in resignifying the signifier queer, in attempting to grab hold of meanings that refuse to be held because the term signifies first and foremost a social relation and not a sheer positivity — that is, a problem with conceptual orders injuring bodies — one might work with the provision queer without recourse to ontological debate. One might suspect the very limits of intelligibility that allow some ontological claims to be more natural than others.

In this essay, then, I am trying to imagine specific techniques of Queer Theory and what these might offer to the rethinking of pedagogy and the rethinking of knowledge. To do so I will be following Queer Theory’s insistence upon three methods: the study of limits, the study of ignorance, and the study of reading practices. Each method requires an impertinent performance: an interest in thinking against the thought of one’s conceptual foundations; an interest in studying the skeletons of learning and teaching that haunt one’s responses, anxieties, and categorical imperatives; and a persistent concern with whether pedagogical relations can allow more room to maneuver in thinking the unthought of education. I am trying, then, to imagine Queer Theory along the lines of what Sue Golding calls technique: “a ‘route,’ a mapping, an impossible geography — impossible not because it does not exist, but because it exists and does not exist exactly at the same time.”12 Moreover, following the advice of Lee Edelman, this essay refuses to secure Queer Theory to a fixed content, to a set of guidelines one might apply to automatize a queer logic, and to a stable and singular body of knowledge that supposes a medicalized or minor identity. Rather, my discussion of Queer Theory is an attempt to articulate a thought of a method rather than a pronouncement of content, to bring to pedagogical spaces consideration of what Edelman terms “unstable differential relations.”13

ON THE STUDY OF LIMITS

The study of limits is, in a sense, a problem of where thought stops, a problem of thinkability. It begins with the question, “what makes something thinkable?” as opposed to explaining how someone thinks. The strategy attempts to get at the unmarked criteria that work to dismiss as irrelevant or valorize as relevant a particular mode of thought, field of study, or insistence upon the real. It is meant to move beyond essentialist/constructivist debates that have been necessary to re-thinking questions of social difference, identity risks, and politics, but that tend to stall in stories of origin, arguments of causality, and explanations of conditions. To engage the limit of thought — where thought stops, what it cannot bear to know, what it must shut out to think as it does — allows consideration into the cultural conditions that, as Butler writes, make bodies matter; not as sheer positivity, but as social historical relations, forms of citation that signify more than individuals or communities need or want.14

As a method, questions of thinkability that question the grounds of thought follow from what Michel Foucault examines as “structures of intelligibility,” or regimes of truth that regulate — in a given history — the thinkable, the recognizable, the limits, and the transgressions discursively codified through legal, medical, and educational structures.15 But these limits, in order to be recognized as limits, require the presence of the dismissed, the unworthy, the irrelevant. In educational discourse, for example, one requires the individual who lacks self-esteem in order for the category of self-esteem to be installed into the body. In discourses of science, the homosexual as an identity is required for the heterosexual as an identity to enter the stage of history. The dynamic, however, turns back on itself. Angus McLaren’s study of the Eugenics Movement in Canada, for example, details the historical shift from the governmental preoccupation with defining and containing deviancy through institutionalization and immigration law to the fashioning of normalcy in compulsory education through such progressive measures as the introduction of school nursing, social hygiene movements, sex education, and pedagogies directed at white racial improvement.16 A similar shift is noted by Foucault in his introductory volume on sexuality.17

Given that exclusion sets the limits of inclusion and hence constitutes both the included and the excluded, we might turn to Eve Sedgwick’s discussion of two forms of discourse — minoritizing and universalizing — as a method of implication. Whereas minoritizing discourses close down — to the small space of minor subjects — the question of whether a particular experience is relevant or not, universalizing

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discourses begin with a view of identity as a category of social relations, or to return again to Edelman’s formulation, as “unstable differential relations.” A universalizing discourse attempts both to study these relations and the refusals to recognize the relational, and to provide techniques that might pose as a problem the differential responses to a condition, experience, or technique. Eve Sedgwick offers the following question that works to interpellate the addressee of whatever positionality: “In whose lives is homo/heterosexual definition an issue of continuing centrality and difficulty?” With this question, we are back to the everyday as both a conceptual and a material space, a space where, as Gary Wickham and Bill Haver argue, violence against queers is installed...in that ideological “lived relation” termed “daily life” itself, as well as in the objectification, thematization and valorization of everydayness [as in “family values,” for example].

As a study of limits, Queer Theory proposes to examine differential responses to the conditions of identities on terms that place as a problem the production of normalcy and on terms that confound the intelligibility that produces the normal as the proper subject. These are bothersome and unapologetic imperatives, explicitly transgressive, perverse, and political: transgressive in their attention to the regulations, repressions, and effects of binary categorical conditions such as the public and the private, the inside and the outside, the normal and the queer, and the ordinary and the disruptive; perverse in their turn against the proper and their claim of deviancy as a site of interest; and political because as a method, queer theory attempts to conceptualize strategies that confound — through the very refusal of subjects to properly normalize themselves — the logic of institutional laws and the social practices that sustain these laws as normal and natural.

With these imperatives, Queer Theory constitutes normalcy as a conceptual order that refuses to imagine the very possibility of the Other precisely because the production of otherness as the outside is central to its own self-recognition. This orientation to normalcy as the pernicious production of such binaries as self/other and inside/outside may be quite significant to the conceptualization of education if part of that conceptualization is concerned with studying what students and teachers cannot bear to know. Within contexts of education, the pointing to normalcy as exorbitant production allows one to consider simultaneously “the unstable differential relations” between those who transgress the normal and those whose labor is to be recognized as normal. At the same time, difference can then be constituted, following Jonathan Rutherford, “as a motif for that uprooting of certainty. It represents an experience of change, transformations, and hybridity, in vogue because it acts as a focus for all those complementary fears, anxieties, confusions, and arguments that accompany change.”

In Queer Theory, then, talk about identity has moved well beyond the old formulas of accepting experience as telling and transparent and as supposing that role models are the transitional object to self-esteem. Something far less comforting is being put into place: Identity is examined as a discursive effect of the social and as constituted through identifications. Douglas Crimp, in his essay on AIDS activists and the question of making a political community, makes this shift clear:

Identification is, of course, identification with an other, which means that identity is never identical to itself. This alienation from the self it constructs...does not mean simply that any proclamation of identity will only be partial, that it will be exceeded by other aspects of identity, but rather that identity is always a relation, never simply a positivity...Perhaps we can begin to rethink identity politics as politics of relational identities formed through political identifications that constantly remake those identities.22

This conceptualization of identity as made possible through identifications allows a way to think through the limits of curricular reform if curriculum is thought of as offering some grounds for identity by way of identifications. It is an orientation that requires curriculum to be thought of as a problem of ethics, if the grounds of curriculum are understood as offering students and teachers the stuff of identifications and hence the possibility of exceeding selves through new modes of sociality. In this way the problem of curriculum becomes one of proliferating identifications, not closing them down.

But in thinking beyond the limits of curriculum, more is required than simply a plea to add marginalized voices to an already overpopulated site. Inclusion, or the belief that one discourse can make room for those it must exclude, can only produce, as Butler puts it, “that theoretical gesture of pathos in which exclusions are simply affirmed as sad necessities of signification.”23 The case of how gay and lesbian studies has been treated in a sentimental education that attempts to be anti-homophobic serves as my example of where arguments for inclusion produce the very exclusions they are meant to cure. Part of the tension is that in discourses of inclusion, there tend to be only two pedagogical strategies: provisions of information and techniques for attitudinal change.24 These two strategies are emblematic of the limitations produced when gay and lesbian subjects are reduced to the problem of remedying homophobia, a conceptualization that stalls within a humanist psychological discourse of individual fear of homosexuality as abject contagion and shuts out an examination of how the very term homophobia as a discourse centers heterosexuality as the normal.

The normal view on techniques of attitudinal change via provisions of information is that one should attempt to recover authentic images of gays and lesbians and introduce them into the curriculum with the hope that representations — in the form of tidy role models — can serve as a double remedy: on the one hand for hostility toward social difference for those who cannot imagine difference, and, on the other, for the lack of self esteem in those who are imagined as having no self. But this formula cannot address the very problems — “the unstable differential relations”

23. Butler, Bodies that Matter, 53.
24. See Patton, Inventing AIDS.
and the different forms of ignorance — that are unleashed when students and teachers are confronted with gay and lesbian representations. Many in education who work in their classes with gay and lesbian representations have argued that normal techniques of attitudinal change via provisions of information cannot address the problem of identification: how affective investments in identity as a means through which the self and the other can be secured actually work to dismiss gay and lesbian perspectives. Additionally, these cultural representations cannot be reduced to correct information about gay and lesbians. Imaginative works have a very different and unwieldy function, and treating fiction — or indeed, any representation — as if it were a realistic mirror is already to shut out the work of the unconscious. Pedagogical thought must begin to acknowledge that receiving knowledge is a problem for the learner and the teacher, particularly when the knowledge one already possesses or is possessed by works as an entitlement to one’s ignorance or when the knowledge encountered cannot be incorporated because it disrupts how the self might imagine itself and others. These dynamics, quite familiar in contexts where multiculturalism is constituted as a special interest, are not resistance to knowledge. Rather, it is knowledge that is a form of resistance.

The problem is that this liberal desire for recovery and authenticity, when it takes the form of inclusion in the curriculum (perhaps as an add-on, certainly in the form of a special event) attempts two contradictory maneuvers. On the one hand, the strategy constructs an innocently ignorant general public. Here, I want to signal how the normal of the normative order produces itself as unmarked sameness and as synonymous with the everyday, even as it must produce otherness as a condition for its own recognition. For those who cannot imagine what difference difference makes in the field of curriculum, the hope is that the truth of the minority might persuade the normative folks to welcome the diversity of others and, in allowing the presence of the other, maybe to transform — at the level of these very transferable feelings — their racist, sexist, and heterocentric attitudes. But how, exactly, is identification with another to occur if one is only required to tolerate and thereby confirm one’s self as generous? In other words, what has actually changed within the ethical imperatives of one’s identity? On the other hand, this strangely estranged story of difference requires the presence of those already deemed subaltern. Here, the recovery being referenced is the recovery of what the norm supposes these different folks lack, namely the self-esteem of the same. The installation of the need for self-esteem works to individuate the sufferer from what the same can only imagine as the tyranny of the historical and the social. In this way, identification is still impossible, for what exactly does one identify with here if the grounds of identification — history, culture, sociality — are already deemed irrelevant?

These liberal hopes, these various narratives of affirmation that are lived, however differently, are about the production of sameness and, oddly, of marking its limits. The problem is that the lived effects of inclusion are a more obdurate version of sameness and a more polite version of otherness. David Theo Goldberg puts it this way: “The commitment to tolerance turns only on modernity’s ‘natural inclination’ to intolerance; acceptance of otherness presupposes as it once necessitates the ‘delegitimation of the other.’” Pedagogies of inclusion, then, do not facilitate the proliferation of identifications necessary to rethinking and refashioning identity as more than a limit of attitude. In an odd turn of events, curricula that purport to be inclusive may actually work to produce new forms of exclusivity if the only subject positions offered are the tolerant normal and the tolerated subaltern.

On the Study of Ignorance

The study of the limits of educational strategies does not, however, get at the twists and turns of pedagogical attempts or the experiences of the detours of discourse. Such detours — call it the lived everyday — are queer spaces that Samuel Delany, in his study of street and straight rhetoric on the subject of AIDS, imagines as “the margin between claims of truth and the claims of textuality [a space where] all discursive structures are formed.” How are pedagogical discourses lived within such a space? And, what of the queer turns where discourse no longer makes sense? In thinking about these questions, I offer two stories of ignorance. The first is drawn from the work of Cindy Patton, who analyzes how U.S. governmental provisions of information both construct and eliminate subjects. The specific crisis of education Patton addresses is how AIDS education becomes organized when there is no direct relation between acquiring the facts about viral transmission and fashioning safer sexual practices. Patton questions some central assumptions of education: that good knowledge leads to good conduct and that receiving information is no problem for the learner.

Patton examines how purportedly inclusive governmental campaigns of information actually work to produce the basis of exclusion, discrimination, social policing, and moral panic. The facts are actually addressed to two audiences: the general public who might get the virus and the risky communities who spread the virus. She argues that the general public is positioned as having the right to know whereas communities who are imagined as at risk of transmitting the virus have the obligation to know not to spread the virus and to confess their relation to HIV status. Precisely because such discourse claims are tied to varying contexts of self-knowledge, or identity, all that can be produced are identities that are either innocent or guilty. The general public is thus constructed as innocent bystanders who, with facts in hand, might be able to protect themselves. The belief is that this information discourse, in and of itself, is anti-discriminatory: If safety can be constituted as the

28. Patton, Inventing AIDS.
capacity to be outside the epidemic because one possesses information, then there is nothing to fear. With nothing to fear the general public has no reason to discriminate and is safely positioned within the realm of rationality. This self-protective gesture shuts out any thought of identity as an ethical relation.

Such dynamics of subjection become even more elaborate in recent safer sex AIDS campaigns of "No One is Safe." While ostensibly producing inclusivity, at the level of social effects new forms of exclusivity are being discursively produced. In Patton's words:

Far from breaking down the sharp dichotomy between "risk groups" and the "general public," the rhetoric of "no one is safe" produced a policing of identity borders as well as community borders: "no one is safe" because you can't tell who is queer.29

The safer sex campaign "No One Is Safe" supposes queerness as the social virus and heterosexuality as being at risk. What can happen to anyone is that anyone can be queer. Two kinds of social policing, then, are provoked. The normal must suspect both the self and the other. And in a queer turn, one might consider that far from being an originary state, the normal, too, requires a surveillance and pedagogy. But while, as Patton suggests, the campaign works to set in motion a policing of identity borders, something anxious is also produced. In part, this campaign unleashed the unthinkable: no place of safety, no stable comparisons, and the struggle with the fear of being mistaken, of not knowing or being known. Sometimes, something queer happens when the categories of Us and Them scramble for articulation.

A second story of ignorance, the flip side of "no one is safe," is described by Sedgwick as it is lived in a graduate seminar composed of men and women reading gay and lesbian literature. Sedgwick reports her own discomfort in the course: Originally, she and the women of the seminar attributed the discomfort "to some obliquity in the classroom relations between [the women] and the men. But by the end of the semester it seemed clear that we were in the grip of some much more intimate And this had to do with the differences among and within women.

In discussing gay and lesbian literature, readers — from whatever position — were confronted with their own self-knowledge. They were, at the same time, subjected to someone else's control, even while they scrambled to become tied down to their own identity. This description harkens back to Foucault's troubling formulation of the subject: subject to the control of others and tied to self-knowledge.31 In Sedgwick's words:

Through a process that began, but only began, with the perception of some differences among our mostly explicitly, often somewhat uncrystallized sexual self-definition, it appeared that each woman in the class possessed or might, rather, feel we were possessed by an ability to make one or more of the other women radically doubt the authority of her own self-definition as a woman, as a feminist, as a positional subject of a particular sexuality.32

29. Ibid., 28.
32. Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 61.
The problem was not that no one was safe because, in this case, one could tell who was queer. Rather, telling queerness in the context of identity politics seemed to set up new forms of authority and new hierarchies of knowledge and identity that called into question old forms of authority, namely categories like “woman,” “feminist,” and “sex.” At the same time, newly inverted forms of Us and Them emerged from reading gay and lesbian texts, and consequently the boundaries of the inside and the outside were maintained. Evidently, many of the students might have read gay and lesbian literature as a vicarious means to learn something about the other or perhaps for the other to affirm their otherness. And yet when a discussion ensued about the texts themselves, the unremarked reading practices of these individuals actually worked to shut down identifications because they read as if to confirm or to catalogue identities. No one was safe not just because anyone can be called queer, but because something queer can happen to anyone.

Now Patton’s reading of governmental AIDS information discourses shows how the normal subject-presumed-to-know and the deviant subject-obligated-to-confess became discursively produced. Both positions require boundary policing although such policing works differentially and demands different degrees of subjection. But these networks of power — discursively lived at the level of bodies and disciplined by normative educational practices — depend upon an insistence of stable and hence predictable identities that can then be contained. This, of course, is the authorship of normalization. Then we have Sedgwick’s description of her seminar, where differences within, say, the category of woman disrupt the impossible promise of sameness, the promise of a community whose very basis depends upon subjects who presume, but cannot know, the same. In Sedgwick’s seminar, the identity hierarchy is upset, although epistemological privilege as the grounds of knowledge is still dependent upon the fashioning of bodies into stable identities whose knowledge is thought to spring from identity. In both kinds of examples, then, the categorical interpellation of identity stalls the very possibility of doing more with identity, namely fashioning — through the social — political practices that, as Giorgio Agamben suggests, allow for “the idea of an inessential commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence.” It is this allowance that makes room for ethical possibilities.

These two instances point out divergent directions provoked by the same problem, namely the social effects of identity when identity claims take on an aura of verisimilitude and hence are taken as if they can exist outside of the very history and differential relations that provoke such claims, and their attendant feelings in the first place. But if a pedagogical project is to move beyond the repetition of identity, in which the only two subject positions allowed when identity is enacted are those of self versus other, then pedagogy itself — the production of knowledge, ignorance, and subjects who presume to know — must rethink its methods of how to read that queer space where such discursivity occurs, namely strategies that can acknowledge the “margins between the claims of truth and the claims of textuality.”


ON THE STUDY OF READING PRACTICES

Shoshana Felman’s exploration of the pedagogical practices of Jacques Lacan’s re-reading of Freud offers a way to rethink reading practices beyond the impulse to reduce identity to a repetition of sameness. Felman’s interests in techniques of thinking the limits, thinking beyond one’s means, are like those of queer theory. She notes three analytic practices: practices of reading for alterity; practices of engaging in dialogue with the self as the self reads; and practices of theorizing how one reads. While I will briefly outline these techniques, they will be elaborated by re-reading some of the issues raised earlier by my reading of Patton and Sedgwick.

Reading for alterity begins with an acknowledgment of difference as the grounds of identity. One begins, not by constructing resemblances with the text or with another, but as Felman writes, “the reading necessarily passes through the Other, and in the Other, reads not identity (other or the same), but difference and self-difference.”35 For interpretations to exceed the impulse to normalize meaning and certify the self, reading must begin with an acknowledgment of difference as identity and not reduce interpretation to a confirmation of identity. The question a reader might ask is: Who am I becoming through the interpretive claims I make upon another and upon myself? The exploration becomes one of analysis of the signifier, not the signified, and hence an analysis of where meaning breaks down for the reader. Reading, then, as an interpretive performance may be a means to untie self-knowledge from itself if the self can be examined as split between recognition and misrecognition, and if one can expose that queer space between what is taken as the real and the afterthought of recognition.

A second reading practice is provoked in dialogue. Here, Felman borrows Freud’s recognition of dialogue as a “structuring condition of possibility.”36 To read is automatically to make a dialogic relation between a self and a text. The reader, then, is obligated to ask, “What is it that I am responding to?” The text and the self perform differential replies, perhaps in the form of a question, perhaps an argument, perhaps a refusal. In acknowledging this relation — reading as provoking a dialogue — reading practices begin with the supposition of difference, division, and negotiation. When reading practices are privileged over the intentions of the author or the reader, the concern becomes one of thinking through the structures of textuality as opposed to the attributes of the biography. This makes possible the disruption of the interpreter and the interpreted hierarchy. To displace the subject, then, is to insist upon the dialogic of implication, not the problem of application.

Finally, as a practice, reading provokes a theory of reading, not just a reworking of meaning. How one reads, matters. In Felman’s words, “There is a constitutive belatedness of the theory over the practice, the theory always trying to catch up with what it was that the practice, or the reading, was really doing.”37 Such belatedness, where the recognition of how one reads drags behind the investment in the

36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 24.
immediacy of gathering meanings or getting meaning straight, might allow the reader to theorize the limits of her or his practices, or what she or he cannot bear to know.

If the interest is in how subjection is made from any body and in what reading practices have to do with confinement, then the limits of both AIDS education described by Patton and the hierarchies of identity that Sedgwick worries over, might be exceeded. There might be a decision on the part of those positioned as outside of the AIDS pandemic to refuse the proffered grounds of innocence and rationality — and hence to refuse to identify as a member of the general public. What might become suspect are the categorical imperatives and attendant inequalities produced within this campaign. Then, no one is safe from these governmental campaigns. As for Sedgwick’s seminar, where the grounds of identity are still confined to mastery and certitude, there might be a decision to refuse these very grounds. Reading might then be one of theorizing reading as always about risking the self, about confronting one’s own theory of reading, and about theorizing difference without gathering the grounds of subjection. Then, thinking itself, in such classroom spaces, might take the risk of refusing to secure thought and of exposing the danger in the curious insistence of positing foundational claims at all costs. Then no one is safe because the very construct of safety places at risk difference as uncertainty, as indeterminacy, as incompatibility. The problem, then, becomes one of working out ethical relations and not asserting identity hierarchies.

These reading practices point to the fact that there are no innocent, normal, or unmeditated readings and that the representations drawn upon to maintain a narrative or a self as normal, as deviant, as thinkable, are social effects of how discourses of normalization are lived and refused. Given these Queer Theories, identities and the self-knowledge that render them intelligible and unintelligible suggest more about the social effects of the political than they do about essential selves. Reading practices might well read all categories as unstable, all experiences as constructed, all reality as having to be imagined, all knowledge as provoking uncertainties, misrecognitions, ignorance, and silences. The point is that part of what is at stake when discourses of difference, choice, and visibility are at stake is the capacity of the educational apparatus and its pedagogies to exceed their own readings, to stop reading straight.

In my work on pedagogy, what I want to call my queer pedagogy, I am attempting to exceed such binary oppositions as the tolerant and the tolerated and the oppressed and the oppressor yet still hold onto an analysis of social difference that can account for how structural dynamics of subordination and subjection work at the level of the


historical, the conceptual, the social, and the psychic. At the same time, my interest is in unsettling the sediments of what one imagines when one imagines normalcy, what one imagines when one imagines difference. I wonder whether identity categories will be helpful in this work if identity depends upon the production of sameness and otherness, a dynamic that anchors modes of subjection. And I am thinking that maybe, given the desire that knowledge of difference should make a difference in how social subjects conduct themselves and in how sociality might be imagined and lived so that anyone can live there, new questions must be addressed: questions concerning what education, knowledge, and identity have to do with fashioning structures of thinkability and the limits of thought; and questions concerning what education has to do with the possibilities of proliferating identifications and critiques that exceed identity, yet still hold onto the understanding of identity as a state of emergency. Such desires are partly made from my identifications with Queer Theory as a method.

These identifications I take as the beginnings of a queer pedagogy, one that refuses normal practices and practices of normalcy, one that begins with an ethical concern for one’s own reading practices, one that is interested in exploring what one cannot bear to know, one interested in the imagining of a sociality unhinged from the dominant conceptual order. In the queer pedagogy I am attempting, “the inessentially common” is built from the possibility that reading the world is always already about risking the self, and about the attempt to exceed the injuries of discourse so that all bodies matter.

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