

# Identity Puzzles

## Talking Sex in Education

by Margot Francis

*Cet article nous donne un aperçu des recherches récentes sur les différentes façons dont la sexualité a été comprise*



Gail Geltner, "A View from the Patriarchy," 1989.

*dans une sélection de moments historique. L'auteure nous parle aussi des problèmes reliés à une éducation anti-hétérosexiste dans des contextes multi-raciaux.*

The idea that sexual orientation is something one is "born with" now has the status of dogma in most anti-heterosexism educational work. Naturally, the fact that many lesbians and gay men actually "feel that

way" certainly makes this argument more plausible. In addition, this line has the public relations edge. A core fear at the root of homophobia is the idea that being gay or lesbian is somehow contagious. Thus the notion that sexual identity is inborn has allowed civil rights advocates to argue that education about lesbian and gay issues poses no threat, and that gay communities should not be subject to moral condemnation and legal sanction.

However, the experience of many queer activists suggests this doesn't stand up to research about those who are "coming out" in the 1990s. Further, many have serious doubts about the strategic usefulness of an approach which essentially argues that "we can't help being this way!" In addition, the dogma doesn't stand up to historical and cross-cultural scrutiny.

The following article will provide a quick overview of recent research regarding the different ways sexuality has been understood in a variety of historical moments, and examine issues related to anti-heterosexism education in multi-racial contexts. I hope these reflections will contribute to the project of thinking in more complex and thoughtful ways about notions of sexuality, gender, and desire; and, about the risking of the self that is the ground of all political action.

**Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Stead shared the same bed ...**

The majority of new research on sexuality indicates that the idea that homosexuality and heterosexuality are mutually exclusive opposites is a stunningly recent creation.<sup>1</sup> George Chauncey, one of the foremost historians in this area, argues that between 1850 and 1940 all-male "bachelor subcultures" played a significant role in the lives of urban Italian, Irish, African-American, and Anglo-Ameri-

can men. Focusing on New York City, Chauncey highlights that although many men went on to marry, about 40 per cent of men over 15 were unmarried at any given time.

In white, middle-class culture, romantic friendships between men were both common and accepted for the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. Ideas about gender played a key role in the conceptual frameworks which made these relationships possible. In both middle-class and working-class contexts "normal" men could, and did, engage in casual sexual activity with other men without regarding themselves—or being regarded by others—as gay, so long as they did not take the "feminine" position in the sex act. However, by the late nineteenth century bourgeois men began using sexual self-control as one crucial element in the attempt to distinguish themselves from the working classes. Anthony Rotundo, who has studied the diaries of dozens of nineteenth-century men, argues that young men frequently slept together and felt free to express passionate love for each other. Drawing on Rotundo, Chauncey writes,

these ardent relationships were "common" and "socially acceptable." Devoted male friends opened letters to each other with greetings like "Lovely Boy" and "Dearly Beloved"; they kissed and caressed one another; and, as in the case of Joshua Stead and the bachelor lawyer Abraham Lincoln, they sometimes shared the same bed for years. Some men explicitly commented that they felt the same sort of love for both men and women. "All I know," wrote one man quoted by Rotundo, "is that there are three persons in this world whom I have loved, and those are, Julia, John and Anthony. Dear be-

loved trio." It was only in the late nineteenth century that such love for other men became suspect, as men began to worry that it contained an unwholesome, distinctly homosexual element. (120)

While Rotundo argues, correctly, that these men cannot be classified as "homosexual" as no such concept existed in their culture, he neverthe-

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less persists in calling them "heterosexual." However, one side of this dichotomy relies on the other. As Jonathan Katz has argued in *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, normal men and women only began to become *heterosexual* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when they started to make their normalcy contingent on renouncing such intimacies. This process proceeded at a different pace in different contexts, and was dependent on gender, class, and race, among other things.

Evidence of the instability of sexual categories can also be found in the first large-scale survey of women's sexuality, published in 1929. Written by Katherine Bement Davis, the study was titled *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women* and represented women's sexuality across the homosexual-heterosexual divide. As Davis reports:

Slightly over 50% of a group of [1,200 single] women ... state that they have experienced intense emotional relations with other women, and that in slightly more than half these cases, or 26% of the entire group, the experience has been accompanied by overt physical practices, [identified in the questionnaire

as "mutual masturbation, contact of the genital organs, or other physical expressions generally recognized as sexual in character."] (277)

In the group of 1,000 married women, 30 per cent had had intense emotional relations with other women, and in half of this group, that is 15 per cent of the total, these relations were accompanied by "physical practices" (298).

Davis's sample consisted predominantly of white, middle-class college women. Her results generated extensive criticisms, but she chose to stand by the veracity of her figures.

Commenting on the controversy in her introduction she notes,

others have felt that college women are being slandered and that those who replied are not representative of college women as a whole, but are, to an extent at least, those whose experiences are abnormal.... Our own judgment would be that the figures given ... may be taken as a minimum for the group studied.... (xiv)

As the reaction to these figures suggests, they alone are significant enough to disrupt dichotomous assumptions about the exclusive and contradictory nature of heterosexual and homosexual desire.

While it is impossible to determine just how widespread the sexual practices documented in Davis and Chauncey's research actually were, Alfred Kinsey's studies, published in 1948 but compiled in the 1930s and 1940s, do provide a fuller picture. Kinsey himself intended his work to be used to demonstrate the extent of various kinds of sexual behaviour, rather than the incidence of particular kinds of "identity." In his research, fully one-quarter of his male respondents acknowledged having had "more

than incidental homosexual experience or reactions" for at least three years between the ages of 16 and 55 (Chauncey 70).

In addition, Kinsey's own remarks

indicate that many of the men he interviewed believed their sexual activity with other men did not mean they were homosexual so long as they restricted that behaviour to the "masculine role." (Chauncey 71).

In women, Kinsey found that 19 per cent of the women he interviewed had had "overt lesbian relationships" (Irvine 54).

What are we to make of the instability evident in these accounts? I would argue that late twentieth-century notions of sexuality as dichotomous "identities" provides little of the nuance and complexity necessary for understanding ideas about sexuality, gender, power, experimentation, friendship, and intimacy evident here.

### **Constructing pedagogy, constructing sex**

Anti-heterosexism education *can* make use of this rich mine of historical investigation. To this end, the research by Davis and Chauncey might be used to serve as an example, not of coming out as something/someone, but as puzzles and un-settlings for the ways we can think about sexuality, gender, and the self. Can we then use this analysis to illustrate how particular historical moments, and particular locations, including our own, may make certain forms of desire, friendship, exploration, and intimacy possible, at the same time, as they preclude others?

Social construction theory argues that the "fact" that a certain percentage of the population engage in same-sex practices in the 1990s does not mean that the same percentage did so 50 years ago when Kinsey conducted his research, or 170 years ago when Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Stead shared their bed. One of the consid-

erable ironies implied in this research is that the post-gay liberation, identity-based culture of the 1980s and 1990s, may well constitute a context in which it is more difficult for some individuals to explore same-sex desires than the turn-of-the-century period documented by Chauncey and Davis. As Davis implies and Chauncey concludes, if sexuality is culturally organized and subject to change, then the prewar sexual culture may have made it easier for some women and men to engage in same-sex relationships when these did not mark them as a "homosexual."

Thus the historical tension evident in this data is indicative of that scary movement from sexual practice to "deviant" sexual identity. Does the current historical moment suggest that a reverse strategy might be in order, in which we begin to shift the emphasis from identities to practices? One indication of the usefulness of such an approach can be found in the cultural politics surrounding HIV and AIDS. In this context, the talk of "risk groups" instead of "risk behaviours" has already had life and death implications. While most "heterosexuals" continue not to employ safer-sex practices with their partners—the definition of the category "heterosexual" remains a problem. As data collected in a 1990 study of HIV-positive men suggests, of the 129 men who reported having sex with both men and women since 1978, 30 per cent self-identified as homosexual, 34 per cent as bisexual, and 36 per cent as heterosexual. Further, white men whose behaviour was bisexual were more likely to identify as homosexual, whereas Black and Chicano men were more likely to identify as bisexual and heterosexual, respectively (Teilman, Carball, and Hendriks 28). Once again we see the problems with "identity." While in most parts of Canada and the United States young adults demonstrate sufficient knowledge about HIV and AIDS—few consistently practice safer sex.<sup>2</sup> It is "other people" who develop AIDS, and those "others" are associated not with the performance of specific acts, but with

specific "identities" or "subcultures."

However, the usefulness of an educational practice which questions notions of "identity" can be seen not just in relationship to AIDS, but also in the broader cultural discussions about sex. I would argue that a shift in emphasis from "identities" to "practices" may open up options for desire, intimacy, friendship, and exploration beyond that which is possible within unitary notions of the self. In addition, this starting point is better suited to acknowledging that sexuality is constructed in profoundly different ways in different cultural and geographic sites. Two stories from more recent pedagogical experiences will illustrate this point.

From 1994 until 1997 I was employed as a teaching assistant for the "Introduction to Women's Studies" course at the University of Toronto. During the fall of 1996, on the week where we were to talk about "Lesbianism and Bisexuality" I told my students a story from Dutch sociologist Ingrid Foekn in order to illustrate how very different meanings can be attached to similar acts.

Benin, West Africa. The year is 1976. Two women get chatting on a bus. One is a local woman, the other a European. Towards the end of their journey the African invites the other

about being a lesbian.

Astonished, the African women answers that it is quite usual for her to let a friend comfort her in this way. (Baird 4)<sup>3</sup>

In the discussion which followed a student who had recently immigrated to Canada from Nigeria commented that, indeed, women and men in Nigeria do comfort each other this way, but few would identify these activities with terms "lesbian" or "gay."

Also in the fall of 1996, Lynne Fernie, the director of the National Film Board's recent production *School's Out* about lesbian and gay youth, previewed the video with a Toronto secondary school audience. In the discussion which followed a student who was originally from India, but had come to Canada via several years stay in the Middle East, suggested that movies like *School's Out* should also talk about non-western perspectives of sexualities. He argued that in some places in the Middle East the high bride price often made it difficult for men to get married. In this context, men often had same-sex relationships. However, the lens through which these were understood was fundamentally different from western notions of "identity" implied in the terms "lesbian" or "gay."

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to stay with her large family. That night they sleep together in one bed.

They talk for a while, then, responding to each other's gestures, they make love. The next morning the European woman asks her new friend whether she often has such experiences with other women, and how she feels

In the multi-racial context of most large North American cities these stories are far from uncommon. Yet the pedagogical strategies used by most anti-heterosexism educators usually fail to consider how sexuality might be thought about in contexts which are not homogeneously white and "western." As Didi Khayatt has argued, our failure to think about these

contradictions can lead to an erasure of new (to many in the west) frameworks for thinking about sexuality, gender, and the self. As she elaborates,

The West's global intellectual hegemony leads us to suppose that everyone everywhere understands exactly what we mean by the sexual categories that identify homoerotic behaviour, as evidenced by the number of books and articles which attempt to discuss "homosexuality" on an international level, and in doing so, subsume all homoerotic activities under one rubric. This tendency renders different notions of same-sex activities invisible. However, it is important to recognize that it is not merely a difference in words that we are discussing, nor is it just particular meanings of corresponding terms. It is a distinctive conceptualization, different in theory as well as in substance, and thus could be said to refer to a different reality.... Not only do such sexual categories exclude the experiences of men and women of the "Third World," but the terms seem to be insufficient to capture the myriad differences in sexual expression. (Khayatt 10-11)

While educational strategies may include the language of "identity" they must, at the same time, extend an invitation to examine the problems inherent in this process. For it is only through making the messy contradictions of our various histories and locations visible, that we will have constructed a pedagogy that does justice to any of our sexualities.

If sexual categories are both inevitable, and inevitably troubling, I would argue that we must *wear* these notions of "identity" lightly, so they do not contain us, or contain the work of understanding desire. To do this we must not erase the profound differences and contradictions found in historical texts, or in educational

contexts, but instead mine them. For it is only in so doing that our pedagogy can re-construct the passions which have made up both our movements and our lives.

*A version of this article will appear in "Safely Out: A Collaborative Approach to Challenging Homophobia in the Educational System," to be produced by the Equity Studies Centre, Toronto Board of Education.*

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<sup>1</sup>For a fuller examination of the material which follows see Francis.

<sup>2</sup>For Canadian figures see Ornstein (50). For information on the United States see Patton (109).

<sup>3</sup>This story was told by Dutch sociologist Ingrid Foeken about her own experience in Africa at the "Which Homosexuality?" International Conference on Lesbian and Gay Studies" in Amsterdam, Holland, in 1987. It is documented by Baird in *New Internationalist*. This issue of *NI* continues to be an excellent popular education tool for classroom use and can be ordered from the *NI* office in Toronto, Canada.

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## ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

### Sacred Places

If all you have is  
one rock amid sand or snow,  
that rock is a god.

*Elisavietta Ritchie's poetry collections include: The Arc of the Storm, Elegy for the Other Woman, Wild Garlic, Raking the Snow, and Tightening the Circle Over Eel Country.*