Interrupting Heteronormativity:
Toward a Queer Curriculum Theory

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ABSTRACT
In this article, we inquire into ways that heteronormativity might be interrupted. Working from the premise that discussions of curriculum are not only sexualized, but heterosexualized, we argue that studies of sexuality must become intertwined with all questions of curricular relations. The writing is developed around two recent investigations: one that involved gay, lesbian, and transgendered teachers; and one that emerged from work with teachers, parents, and elementary school children. Through interpretations of specific responses to literary texts given by these adults and children, we seek to demonstrate how queer theory has paralleled and might be used to inform curriculum theory. In particular, we argue that curriculum has an obligation to interrupt heteronormative thinking—not only to promote social justice, but to broaden possibilities for perceiving, interpreting, and representing experience. We suggest that this obligation might be accomplished through the development of heterotopic forms—ones that interrupt familiar patterns of thinking.

In the first volume of his History of Sexuality, Foucault explains how Western culture has fashioned an entangled relationship between knowledge and sex. Following Foucault, Sedgwick has further explained that because sexuality has been expressive of both identity and knowledge, it has become the centering force of the heterosexism and of the generalized and pervasive homophobia that continues to exist. This homophobia is difficult to unravel because, as Britzman explains, “every sexual identity is an unstable, shifting, and volatile construct, a contradictory and unfinalized social relation.”

Understanding sexuality as a relational construct underpins recent work in queer theory. As a form of cultural study, queer theory acknowledges the polyvalent ways in which desire is culturally produced, experienced, and expressed. As Morton suggests, “Queer theory is seen as making an advance...
by opening up a new space for the subject of desire, a space in which sexuality becomes primary. Following Sedgwick, this means universalizing sexuality as an analytic category. Elaborated by Britzman, this process begins by interrupting commonsense understandings of what constitutes sex, sexuality, pleasure, desire, and the relationships among these and the technologies for learning about and enacting their differences.

Bridged to the work of curriculum theory, queer theory asks that the forms of curriculum and the relations of pedagogy be appropriated as sites to interpret the particularities of the perceived differences among persons, not merely among categories of persons. “Queer” is not meant as a signifier that represents gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered identities. Rather, “queer” functions as a marker representing interpretive work that refuses what Halley has called “the heterosexual bribe”—that is, the cultural rewards afforded those whose public performances of self are contained within that narrow band of behaviors considered proper to a heterosexual identity. In so doing, the possibilities for what might count as knowledge are broadened—not just knowledge about sexuality, but knowledge about how forms of desire are inextricable from processes of perception, cognition, and interpretation. Queer theory does not ask that pedagogy become sexualized, but that it excavate and interpret the way it already is sexualized—and, furthermore, that it begin to interpret the way that it is explicitly heterosexualized. Moreover, rather than defining queer identities in strict reference to particular bodily acts and aberrant or quirky lifestyles, queer theory asks that the continued construction of narratives supporting that unruly category “heterosexual” be constantly interrupted and renarrated.

In this article, we refer to our involvement in two research projects to enter into a critical inquiry of what queer theory might offer curriculum theory. Both projects were developed around shared readings of literary texts. One project involved a group of gay, lesbian, and transgendered teachers; another project involved teachers and children in grades 5 and 6. Positioning ourselves in the wake of feminist theories that have identified gender as an analytic category in curriculum studies, we follow the work of queer theorists whose explicit aim is to do the same with sexuality. Rather than understanding the study of sexuality as something that is parallel to studies of curriculum, we believe that studies of sexuality must become intertwined with all questions relating to the study of curricular relations.

IDENTIFICATIONS

Elspeth Probyn argues that childhood must not be considered as a prototype of adulthood. Our experience working in communities with those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered supports Probyn’s contention, suggesting to us that there really is no more common ground among the experience of queer adults’ childhoods than among any others. There are, as Sedgwick argues, queer kids who do not become queer adults and kids who were not queer that do. This has led us to believe that
autobiographical and biographical work that attempts to create interpreted bridges between currently lived identities and memories of experience may, paradoxically, support the belief that if one could control childhood experiences, one might be able to create more predictable and suitable identities.

Although we acknowledge the importance of the “coming out of the closet” literature and the work it accomplishes, we worry that it continues to participate in the ongoing subjugation, through representation practices of differentiation, of those identities that do not identify as ones that are structured by opposite-sex desire. At the same time, we understand that these literatures function, in important ways, to unveil what Sedgwick has called the “open secret”—that is, to demonstrate there are identities other than those structured by opposite-sex desire that successfully exist, that contribute to the ongoing production of knowledge, and that do not depend upon particular bodily acts and particular forms of social organization for their existence. We wonder, however, about the continued examination of queer identities in the absence of critical inquiries into heterosexual ones. Although it is becoming increasingly clear to us that what constitutes experiences of heterosexuality are incredibly varied, there remains a generalized set of cultural myths about what constitutes the quintessential heterosexualized identity. As Foucault explains in his History of Sexuality, and as Barbara Gowdy brilliantly shows in her novel, Mister Sandman, heterosexual identities continually experience dissonance between lived experiences of pleasure and desire and culturally sanctioned expressions of heterosexuality. This means that, like those who identify as queer, heterosexual identities must exist in a particular “closet”—a well-defined and restrictive heterosexual closet. In our recent work, we have become particularly interested in not only learning about queer closets but, as well, about heterosexual closets and the unruly lines that articulate what it means to identify as heterosexual and what it means to identify as queer. To do so, we have developed some research practices that, we believe, create opportunities to learn about these usually transparent experiences.

In our current research into the relationship between sex and pedagogy, we use shared readings of literary texts as sites for critical inquiry. These reading activities require that readers form literary identifications with characters and situations that challenge and expand remembered and currently lived experiences. By working with our fellow reading researchers to interpret these literary identifications, moments of insight occur that often interrupt the transparent structures of our perceptions and our thinking. For us, these shared responses to literary texts create possibilities for an interesting “literary anthropology”—an interpretive activity where the relationships among memory, history, and experiences of subjectivity are made available for analysis.

In one research project, we invited eight gay, lesbian, and transgendered teachers to respond, during all-day meetings, to various works of literature. Although most of these literary texts were written by authors who identify as queer, and featured a number of characters who identify as such, our
purpose in reading them was not to consolidate or affirm our experiences as queer teachers but, rather, to wonder what we might learn by critically examining our experienced identifications to and interpretations of these texts. Because we all read the same texts, we predicted that our responses would be similar. Of course, this proved not to be the case.

In reading and responding to Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name,*17 for example, we discovered that no two members of our group identified similarly. Not only were the responses noticeably structured by learned gender differences, they were also clearly influenced by the members’ racial and ethnic backgrounds (all members were Caucasian, whereas the characters depicted in this book are, for the most part, Caribbean American). As well, because none of us had had histories of “coming out” as queer in the fifties and sixties in urban America, there was tremendous dissonance between group members’ remembered and reported lived experiences and those of the characters described in the book.

Some of the responses, particularly among several male members of the group, were puzzling, in that they seemed unable to acknowledge that anger and frustration was very much part of the experience of women depicted in the book. As Jim explained:

I just don’t understand why the main character is always so angry. Surely, things were not as bad for women as is suggested. Even if they were, I think that maybe some of what she is experiencing she is bringing on herself.

Here it became clear that, although some male members of the group expressed the need for “queers to unite” under the banner of same-sex identification, many of their responses were structured by a profound and largely unnoticed (by them) misogyny. The women in the group, however, did notice, and, for them, these responses confirmed past experiences with gay men. As Jan explained:

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised by some of the things I hear from the men in the group. I mean, that’s one of the reasons that lesbians must have their own communities. Gay men can be just as sexist as straight men.

While one might think, based on these sexist interpretations, that male members of our group might rally round a reading of a novel that depicts gay male experience, this did not prove to be so. In reading Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story,*18 for example, there was less literary identification among the men in our group with the main character than we expected. For some members, the book interrupted certainties about what constituted the experience of gay children. Confirming Probyn’s theorizing, our discussion of the book made it clear that the trajectory of sexual identification in adulthood could not be predicted by one’s childhood experiences. As John explained:
I grew up in a small, farming community. Not only can I not identify with what the character in this novel has experienced, I can’t remember thinking about sex in the ways he did. It’s not just because things are different in Canada and the United States, or that things are different in rural and urban locations. It has more to do with a different understanding of what was and is sexually interesting and pleasurable to me. I can’t identify with what this character finds sexually arousing, even though we both call ourselves gay.

This curious blend of identifying/not identifying continued in our reading and discussion of Pat Califia’s story, “The Surprise Party,” where we learned that personally familiar erotic identifications can become surprised by literary identifications. This story, which depicts group sex among a lesbian and several gay men, prompted strong erotic identifications among most group members. As Karla explained:

After reading this story, I had some vivid dreams that included sex of the kind the characters had. I find that I’m both drawn to these new fantasies and I’m repulsed by them. Mostly, I’m curious about how unexpected my responses were to the story. I didn’t think that I could become interested in that kind of sex.

What do these responses to literary fictions suggest about the relationships between expressed and experienced identities, forms of sociality, and experiences of pleasure and desire? Although it is obvious that humans experience events of identification and of pleasure that are not necessarily understood as proper heterosexual conduct, the various technologies of regulation around gender and sexuality force open secrets about what constitutes both identification and pleasure. And, although “the closet” is usually understood as the place where queer identities simultaneously hide and make themselves comprehensible to themselves, following Sedgwick and Britzman, we suggest that the closet’s boundaries must be understood to include the polymorphous ways in which identification and pleasure are produced. If sexuality is understood as a category of experience that emerges from various and overlapping technologies of self-formation and reformation, then the cultural mythologies around what constitutes the category of “heterosexual” must be called into question.

This idea is elaborated by Fuss who argues that sexuality should be understood as one of the intertwining valences of what constitutes the experience of identity and the activity of identification. Subjectivity is not so much a matter of how one acts if one is this or that identity but, rather, how one becomes (and comes to be known as) this or that identity. Eschewing causal relationships between identities and identifications, Fuss points to the need to come to more complex understandings about, for the human species at least, what it might mean to be male or female, queer or straight.

It must be remembered that, as Foucault has shown, it is only recently that sexuality has been primarily associated with a particular kind of identification called “sexual orientation”—which, in turn, is complexly linked with attraction to same or opposite sex. Sex, in this usage, is synonymous
with the distinction made between male and female and, hence, has become understood as gender. But, of course, sex is also understood as that which is chromosomally determined. And so, sex announces both acts and bodies that act. Sexuality is generally used to signify the larger experience of the way in which sex and one’s identified sex collapse to form a particular way of expressing physical pleasure or, we might say, participation in an agreed-upon set of sexualized event structures.

What would happen if sex and sexuality were not understood as discrete actions of particular male and/or female identities but, rather, as sets of social relations that produce physical, emotional, and psychic pleasures? And what if one’s identification with one form of attraction/desire over another were understood to coevolve with the constantly shifting relations that comprise all aspects of human subjectivity, including those experiences we have come to call sex?

The responses of members of our reading group to works of literary fiction point to the complex ways in which gendered identities and sexualities are complexly formed and reformed through ongoing acts of remembered and fantasized acts of relationality. Not only does this suggest the inextricability of knowledge about oneself and knowledge about one’s sexuality (and their polymorphous possibilities), it further suggests what Foucault and Sedgwick have insisted about the perceived and interpreted identities of human subjects: They shift along with the specific topography of experience. This does not mean to suggest that sexuality is chosen or that it may be altered by changing one’s circumstances or one’s mind about things. Rather, it suggests that there is a complex and ever-evolving relationship between the biological and the phenomenological, a relationship that always shifts with context over the course of one’s lifetime. One’s sexuality, from this perspective, is always structured by the various narratives and experiences of gender, race, ethnicity, access to resources, physical capacities, and so on. At the same time, one’s experienced sexuality, in part, functions to restructure those things that participate in its own creation. Experiencing same-sex attraction or opposite-sex attraction—or both—or neither—is both informed by and informs one’s perceptions, identification and representation practices, and interpretations.

Our work in the Queer Teachers Study Group continually challenged us to revise and reinterpret our understandings of the complex ways in which sexuality was structured and experienced. Although we continued to believe that these collaborative experiences would both affirm and help us to better understand our common experience of identifying as queer, we found ourselves continually surprised at the very different ways in which we became positioned by our literary identifications. Most important, these surprising responses interrupted, for us, certainties about what might constitute a queer identity. As Sedgwick suggests, “People are different from one another.” Lives are not lived as stereotypes or as categories. As became evident over the two years of our shared work, the particular identifications each of us made could not be confined to what might constitute the quintessential queer identity. In fact, it seemed that, rather
than finding convergence on the basis of our explicit queerness, we continued to locate points of radical difference among ourselves. Lived and experienced identities, as reported in the group—particularly as these were disclosed in response to involvement with works of literature—suggested to us that Sedgwick is correct in her contention:

[T]he sister or brother, the best friend, the classmate, the parent, the child, the lover, the ex—our families, loves and enmities alike, not to mention the strange relations of our work, play, and activism, prove that even people who share all or most of our own positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species.24

Most surprising to us, then, was not so much that our literary identifications revealed identities that interrupted our understanding of who we imagined ourselves to be, but that these identifications suggested that we needed to refuse to believe that we could use identifying signifiers such as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “transgendered” as if we knew precisely what they meant. Further, we needed to understand the complex ways in which cultural mythologies about sexuality/identity collected within these categorical signifiers and, most importantly, of the experiences that we had that existed, rather untidily, outside these signifiers. Acknowledging the ways in which identities and sexualities were complexly situated within remembered, lived, and fantasized experiences and expressions meant rejecting the minoritizing view that “queer” could become a signifier that captures the various identities of those who do not identify as heterosexual. Instead, it helped us to understand “queer” as a collecting signifier for the notion that, just as knowledge cannot be in control of itself, experiences of sex and expressions of sexuality cannot be in control of themselves. They are always more than can be captured by the language used to describe them.

What might these interpretations contribute to an understanding of schooled readings and the identities that participate in them?

STIRRINGS

As part of a larger research project with a group of teachers from a small urban inner-city school, we took part in a two-month teaching project with one teacher and her grade 5/6 class. This teaching unit was developed around readings and responses to Lois Lowry’s book, The Giver.25 Decidely Orwellian, this novel presents the reader with a futuristic society where all historical memory is lost to the general population and is retained by one person, designated the “receiver of memories,” whose task it is to use this knowledge, when necessary, to advise political leaders. The general population exists in state-controlled and regulated family units comprised of two adults, one male and one female, and one or two adopted children. Reproduction is accomplished by “birth mothers,” and the biological origin of the children is not known by the parents. Sexual feelings, or “stir-
rings," are forbidden—and, when they arise in adolescent children, they are quickly extinguished with daily doses of medication. The onset of stirrings is detected by parents through the daily practice of “dream telling,” which is a required activity for all members of each family unit. The principal character in the novel is Jonah, who, like all twelve-year-olds in the community, has been assigned his life’s work—in his case, the very honorable position as the new “receiver of memories.” In preparation for his new role, Jonah must meet with the current “receiver”—newly renamed the “giver”—who, by laying his hands on Jonah’s bare back transmits, in installments, all historical cultural memories, including memories of color, pain, and pleasures to which no other citizens have access.

In interesting ways this literary fiction demonstrates how knowledge about “things” cannot be dissociated from knowledge about historical forms and knowledge about oneself. As Jonah learns about the pain of war and the pleasures of seeing a color and riding a sleigh, for example, he becomes aware that his identity is changing. As well, new knowledge about how “unacceptable” babies are euthanized casts the identity of his father—“nurturer of babies”—in a new light. Although access to knowledge is exciting for Jonah, it is also exceedingly painful, as he is not only forced to reconsider what he knows, he is compelled to reinterpret past relations with his parents and other community members and to make new decisions about who he thinks he is. Additionally, because he has been directed to refuse the medication that controls his sexual feelings (his stirrings), he must now learn to understand the complex way in which desire and knowledge intertwine with experiences of identity.

Prior to reading the novel with the children, we participated in two reading group discussions: one with teachers from the school, and one with teachers from the school and a number of parents who also had read the book. The first discussion occurred as part of a planned research strategy to inquire into teachers’ understandings of the function of the literary imagination in school settings; the second discussion emerged from the teachers’ fears, voiced in the first discussion, that parents in this community would be offended if this particular novel were used as part of the elementary school curriculum.

The shared reading of this novel with teachers and parents of school-aged children created an opportunity for us to consider, with them, important issues related to the surveillance and regulation of knowledge and sexuality. Curiously, it was these discussions—ones that asked adults to interrupt the transparency of their current lived experiences—that prompted their strong desire for their children to become involved. Because the plot made explicit the relationship between identity and sexuality, it was generally believed that reading it with school-aged children would create situations such as those their parents and teachers had recently experienced in our discussion groups. This, of course, was quite surprising to us, as we were convinced, along with the teachers in this school, that parents would be reluctant to invite their children into reading experiences that might challenge common beliefs about the relationship between knowledge about
sex and knowledge about other matters. When later questioned about this, the parents suggested that, although they were uncomfortable with the prospect of their children becoming involved in the thinking sponsored by this novel, they felt that it was likely an important experience for them to have. Because they were not prepared to offer their children this experience at home, however, it was believed that it ought to be presented, within the context of literary study, at school.  

Although all of the two months of this teaching event was interesting, most fascinating to us were the focus group discussions involving several groups of the children, their teacher, and one of us (Sumara) that were conducted at the end of the project. Organized to create another critical space for continued inquiry into the ongoing interpretations that we and the children were making to our readings of *The Giver*, these discussions focused on the way in which particular knowledge generated complex changes in one’s experienced and expressed identity—and, further, in one’s perceptions and interpretations of others’ identities.

A key topic in our discussions was the suppression of “the stirrings.” Referring to her own experience of learning about sexuality, Gina suggested that information had not come directly from her parents, but through such media as books and videos that they provided for her. For Gina, discussion of the stirrings was uncomfortable because, as she explained, “My family’s really weird around that subject and now I think that I’m weird around it too.” Although it was clear to Gina that knowledge about sexuality was, in some way, part of the expressed identities of her parents and of herself, this knowledge always was mediated by the artifacts given to her by her parents in the absence of any discussion. And, although one might imagine that this pedagogical shortcoming might be overcome in school, it was clear during our discussion that, like at home, knowledge about sexual feelings was also mediated by forms—in this case, curriculum artifacts such as the “you’re growing up” films shown in health class. Because these curriculum artifacts were (as is typical of these forms) presented as information rather than as beginning places for critical inquiry into what might constitute experiences of sexuality and sex, Gina (and a number of her classmates) seemed unable to represent anything other than the usual cultural myths about sex and sexuality—particularly myths about what counts as sex (only intercourse, it seems) and as sexual partners (opposite sex only).

Margaret, on the other hand, although generally quiet and withdrawn in class during our work with *The Giver*, discussed sexuality at length in our focus group interview. Her knowledge seemed, in part, to have emerged from her family’s habit of “building up conversations around books”:

My mum, my brother, and I like to build up conversations around books. One of the things from this book we talked about was stirrings. We even told some of our own stirrings. Talking about them helps us to learn more about each other.

Margaret continued to reveal the complex way in which her knowing about her own and her parents’ sexualities was related to her knowing about
other matters—most specifically, matters about relations among her peers at school. When Trent, during the same interview, indicated that he did not understand the significance of stirrings with the confession, “I don’t have stirrings,” Margaret responded by explaining:

Don’t worry, you’ll have them soon. Girls usually get them before boys. Most of the girls in our class have stirrings, but hardly any of the boys do. I’m just starting to have stirrings.

The most interesting question emerging from this frank disclosure of “just starting to have stirrings” is not so much the disclosure but, rather, what we imagined was being disclosed. What, for Margaret, constitutes a sexual stirring? What, for that matter, constitutes a sexual stirring for anyone? Although it is clear that Margaret’s comment emerges, in part, from cultural myths about the advent of adolescence and the awakening of sexual desire, the question of what might constitute preadolescent stirrings is obscured. Trent’s comment, “I don’t have stirrings,” is perhaps the most helpful here, for it exposes a general ignorance that, as Sedgwick suggests, necessarily exists alongside any expression of knowledge:

Insofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge—a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth—these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth. 27

What ignorance is presented when Margaret suggests that she has stirrings and Trent suggests that he doesn’t have them? Following Britzman’s argument that sexuality education must become more interested in what structures the production of knowledge about sexuality (not just in providing information about sex), 28 we must wonder how curriculum might begin to insert itself into the tangled web of ignorance that currently exists in and around discourses about sexuality.

What was most fascinating to us about this matter-of-fact exchange of information about sexual feelings among these children was not so much that they were having it, but, rather, the cultural mythologies around what constituted a sexual feeling that were being reproduced in their narratives. Although there was considerable evidence to suggest that their sexuality education had been, at best, sporadic and flimsy, it was clear that they had formed very definite opinions about what constituted a sexual feeling, about when this feeling might occur, about which sex achieved these feelings first, and about how these feelings were to manifest themselves. And, although it may seem that it was the discussion in and around the stirrings that created the most interest for these readers, it became clear that this was, for them, rather mundane when read alongside various other specific events associated with the deliberate suppression of historical and cultural memory.
When adults (that is, parents and teachers) and young readers were pressed to describe what they imagined a stirring to be, or what kind of situation might create the experience of a stirring, predictable responses were given. Stirrings, it seemed, were always associated with feelings one imagines one might have when in the presence of a certain someone of the opposite sex, particularly if there were some promise of a specific sort of sexual activity—namely, intercourse. When asked whether stirrings could be, say, the pleasure of chocolate, a good book, or a roller coaster ride, both children and adults, although considering the possibilities, insisted on demarcating stirrings as something that was contained within a specific narrative of heterosexuality. Although passing mention was made by one of the parents that, of course, “there are those who do have sexual feelings for the same sex,” this was contextualized as an aberrant possibility.

Because neither the “giver of memories” nor Jonah (the new “receiver of memories”) was permitted to take the medication that suppressed sexual desire, the question of what they do with this desire emerged. Since biological reproduction occurred outside human acts of copulation, rendering it unnecessary for survival of the species, we wondered, with the children and the adults, how stirrings might weave their way through each of the character’s lived experiences. Most of the conversation around this topic was rather mundane, emphasizing discourses of suppression and redirection. Eleven-year-old Gina’s response, however, was most interesting:

I think that stirrings means something different for Jonah and the Giver because they have memories of other things. They can see other things—like color. And they know things that other people don’t know—like the stuff about the killing of old people and babies. So, I think that—I’m not sure why—that stirrings are different for them.

If, following Foucault, we believe that knowledge about sexuality becomes the primary link to all other knowledges, all other forms of knowing, then it seems that Gina’s intuition about different experiences of stirrings is profoundly correct. Learning to see differently, learning to see what not previously noticed, does not merely add a layer of information to what is already known. Rather, as an act of (re)cognition, the self that knows freshly understands itself differently and, as a consequence, understands the world differently. What might constitute a stirring for one who can see the color red might not for one who cannot. And, of course, as Sedgwick and Britzman have suggested, people are different and experience sex differently.

Stirrings, then, as Gina brilliantly interpreted, are not objects, but relations that depend upon particular forms of knowledge and interpretation. Given this understanding, we may question one of the most fundamental aspects of the plot of The Giver—the very possibility for sexual stirrings to even occur when historical and cultural memory is non-existent. If sexual stirrings emerges from the complex relations of memory, of presently lived experience, and of fantasy, could stirrings even occur without memory? If
so, what then does memory do to attraction and how is memory changed by continued experience?

These were some of the questions announced by the curriculum forms created by our shared readings of literary fiction with our Queer Teachers Study Group and of *The Giver* with adults and with school-aged children. While the specifics, of course, differed in our conversations with our Queer Teachers Study Group and with the ten- and eleven-year-old children, these interpretive sites became, for us, a curriculum that was noticeably altered. Our continued participation in and interpretation of these shared reading and interpretation activities events has helped us better understand how heteronormativity in educational settings might be interrupted.

**Interruptions**

Michael Warner uses the term “heteronormativity” to refer to the complex ways in which “Het[erosexual] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist.”31 “Normal” and “heterosexual” are understood as synonymous. This means that all social relations and all forms of thinking that exist with these relations are heteronormative. To put it crudely, heteronormativity creates a language that is “straight.” Living within heteronormative culture means learning to “see” straight, to “read” straight, to “think” straight.

These normalized forms, we have suggested, can be interrupted. As educators, it is possible to attend to Britzman’s interdiction to “stop reading straight.”32 Similar to Toni Morrison’s challenge to interrupt the Whiteness of the literary imagination,33 queer curriculum theorists and practitioners are interested in interrupting heteronormative thinking. Whereas this desire is, in part, impelled by the desire to eliminate the destructive homophobia and heterosexism that pervades all social forms, it is also spurred by the desire to create more interesting forms for thinking. If we believe that all forms of expression are intimately connected, then we must come to agree that heteronormative structures are limiting. Interrupting heteronormativity, then, becomes an important way to broaden perception, to complexify cognition, and to amplify the imagination of learners.

Whereas this article has been developed around a general interest in issues of culture and curriculum, it has been focused specifically on trying to understand the developing relationship between queer and curriculum theories. Not surprisingly, queer theorists have suggested that, as a necessary participant in cultural studies, queer theory has some work to do. This is aptly put by Warner who insists:

For academics, being interested in queer theory is a way to mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy, exude some rut, reimagine the public from and for which intellectuals write, dress, and perform. Nervous over the prospect of a well-
sanctioned and compartmentalized academic version of “lesbian and gay studies,” people want to make theory queer, not just to have a theory about queers.34

Although, as Warner suggests, the word “queer” has recently been used to collect studies of the relations among sexuality, perception, cognition, interpretation, and their attendant identities and practices, it is important to remember that there have been, for many years, curriculum theorists who have attended to these complex relations. Whereas these writers have not necessarily identified themselves as queer theorists or as interested in queer theory, they most certainly have attempted to “make theory queer” and to “mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy.”35 Following this important curriculum scholarship, we have attempted—in our research, our teaching, and our writing—to begin to understand what might constitute a queer curriculum theory. And, following Warner, we are not interested in promoting queer curriculum theory as a theory about queers but, rather, are interested in showing how all educators ought to become interested in the complex relationships among the various ways in which sexualities are organized and identified and in the many ways in which knowledge is produced and represented. The interpretations we have included in this article represent the ways in which some of our emergent theoretical understanding of what might characterize queer curriculum theory has informed our research, teaching, and thinking practices.

But, of course, this is not sufficient. Following Said,36 it is our conviction that the products of scholarly activity and thinking must, in some way, become represented in ways that are interesting and useful to others. This is always risky, for it means locating words that must, however imperfectly, begin to account for thinking that is, of course, never fully known or representable. Despite this, we conclude by offering our preliminary understandings of what, for us, constitutes queer curriculum theory. It is important to state that we do not list these as principles or characteristics or requisites but, instead, as placeholders that, we hope, will help to collect a deeper understanding of what it might mean to interrupt the heteronormative relations of curriculum. As we readily admit that these conceptual placeholders are, for us, tentative, we imagine that they might become useful beginning places for continued exploration of how the spaces of pedagogy can become more attentive to the complex relations of sex and knowledge.

First, we suggest that curriculum theory might continue to work toward a deeper understanding of the forms that curriculum can take so that sexuality is understood as a necessary companion to all knowing. The character of this sort of curriculum was announced by Britzman when she asked the provocative question, “What might it mean for educators to explore the dynamics of sexual subordination and sexual pleasure in ways that require the involvement of everyone?”37 We believe that the interpretive work accomplished by our Queer Teachers Study Group and the work done by teachers, parents, and elementary age children around shared readings of _The Giver_ accomplished some of this work. By attempting to
interpret the complex relations among knowledge, desire, and identities (and not just queer identities), these interpretive sites yielded complex understandings of the ways in which knowledge/ignorance, queer/straight, and male/female always are articulated in and through one another. Further, as we hope that some of our interpretations have shown, the continued wondering about how ignorance is always already a part of knowledge created situations where as researchers and teachers we were able to generate locations for the rearticulation of the lines of knowing and identity.

Second, we believe that rather than focusing on the elaboration and interpretation of queer identities, curriculum theory might begin to wonder about the unruly heterosexual closet and seek to render problematic the always known but usually invisible desires and pleasures that circulate throughout it. Curriculum forms that do this work are not those that ask persons to identify identifications that are aberrant to what is understood to be “proper” heterosexual conduct. Rather, they are forms that invite persons to participate in structures that create surprising (and often troubling) moments of contact and revelation.38 Particularly, they are curriculum forms that function to call into question the very existence of heterosexuality as a stable category.

Third, we suggest that curriculum theory ought to be more interested in understanding and interpreting differences among persons rather than noting differences among categories of persons. Whereas curriculum theory must continue to attend to queer identities, it must continue to wonder what circumstances lead to different identification experiences. And, although curriculum theory should continue to be concerned with the complex relations among past, present, and imagined experiences, it ought to reject the still-pervasive belief that events during childhood are prototypical for events in adulthood. Instead, curriculum theory might become more intrigued by the ways in which identities are topographically arranged and by the remarkable ways they continually shift.

Fourth, we believe that curriculum theory should continue to be curious about experiences of desire, of pleasure, and of sexuality. Most important, curriculum theory ought to wonder how human subjects might continue to interrupt common beliefs of what constitutes each of these experiences so that the necessary relationships among them might become better understood. When identity-and-identification is conceptualized as a complex relation, it becomes less surprising, for example, that one would experience an unexpected erotic pleasure, for in this formulation pleasure has less to do with the object of identification than with the way in which the identifications and identities are intertwined. This suggests that the forms known as curriculum might become less interested in reporting on existing knowledge and more interested in inquiring into the ways knowledge becomes available, the ways knowledge is structured, and the ways identities are continually formed through curriculum identifications.

Of course, these theoretical ruminations necessarily lead to the question of application: How might educators think about structuring curriculum that accomplishes some of this needed work?
We believe educators might begin by creating curriculum events that are “heterotopic.” As explained by Foucault, a heterotopia is an event structure in which things not usually associated with one another are juxtaposed, allowing language to become more elastic, more able to collect new interpretations and announce new possibilities. In our Queer Teachers Study Group, for example, heterotopic events occurred when readers’ remembered experiences were juxtaposed with their literary identifications. During readings of *The Giver* with elementary school children and adults, heterotopic event structures were created when science fiction illuminated the usually transparent structure of contemporary Western culture.

Although the creation of heterotopic forms does not depend upon the inclusion of engagements with literary texts, because these texts require that the reader become complicit in generating the literary experience, they often create possibilities where familiar structures that limit perception become available for interpretation. We are not suggesting that heteronormative thinking can become erased through literary engagement. Our experience in these research projects, however, suggests that it can become interrupted. Not only do these interruptions to heteronormative thinking assist in the important work of eliminating homophobia and heterosexism in society, but they also create some conditions for the human capacity for knowing and learning to become expanded.

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NOTES

1. The first part of the title (“Interrupting Heteronormativity”) deliberately parallels the title of Magda Lewis’s groundbreaking essay “Interrupting patriarchy: Politics, resistance, and transformation in the feminist classroom,” *Harvard Educational Review* 60 (Winter 1990), 259–268. We borrow her construction to make explicit the necessary relation between critical feminist work and queer theory. Most particularly, with this copied syntax, we acknowledge the complex and important ways in which our theorizing about pedagogy and our pedagogical practices have been influenced by this work.


7. Britzman, “What is this thing called love?”
8. Janet Halley, in her essay “The Construction of Heterosexuality” (in *Fear of a queer planet: Queer politics and social theory*, edited by Michael Warner, 82–102. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), explains the “heterosexual bribe” as the situation that occurs when the class “homosexual” becomes deviant by constructing it with reference to particular bodily acts—acts in which, presumably, not-homosexuals do not participate. Whereas homosexuals can be clearly defined by these bodily acts, the unruly class of “not-homosexuals,” because they are only defined as those who exist outside this regulated category, cannot. This has particularly priviliging consequences, for as Halley argues, “Both their epistemological privilege and their exemptions are contingent, however, on their continued silence about the heterogeneity and fabricatedness of their class—on their acceptance of what I have called the ‘bribe’” (p. 97).

12. Here we are specifically referring to those works that present autobiographical and biographical representations of the lived experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendersed persons.
22. Foucault, *The history of sexuality*.
24. Ibid.
26. It is worth noting that, in our view, this agreement for children to participate in such thinking had much to do with the fact that this pedagogy was to be
structured around a literary text. Although most literary theorizing now accepts that literary experience can be as influential as any experiences (see Iser’s *The fictive and the imaginary* and Sumara’s *Private readings in public*), this belief has not yet become commonplace among those experienced readers who continue to believe that knowledge produced through literary experience is not as influential as knowledge produced in other ways.

27. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the closet*, p. 8 (original emphasis).


29. Foucault, *The history of sexuality*.


37. Britzman, “What is this thing called love?”, p. 68.


40. We understand that not all literary forms have the potential to interrupt the familiarity of the reader’s experience. We do suggest, however, that because fiction requires that readers simultaneously identify with characters represented in the text and with memories of other lived experiences they have had, the experience of literary engagement has the potential to complicate, in productive ways, the reader’s world.

REFERENCES


