“Queer Studies in Education: Some Research Portraits”

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Keynote Address

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I’ll be organizing my keynote presentation into three parts. First I’d like to offer a brief overview of some of the main directions within critical sexuality studies. Starting out with such an overview is important for understanding how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) studies research in education draws on some of the central tenets from these main directions within critical sexuality studies. In short, queer studies research in education is situated within a broader set of intellectual contexts. In the second section of my presentation, I’d like to sketch some of the main ideas associated with queer theory. As a critical theoretical methodology, queer theory has been extensively utilized in various ways within much LGBT and queer studies research in education. And finally, in the third section of my presentation, I’d like to provide a few “research portraits” of some of the specific theoretical and empirical work being done at the intersection of queer studies and education. My hope is that my presentation will provide a constellation of critical vocabularies that will add to the dialogue about some of the possible intersections between LGBTQ studies and music education.

Part 1: Critical Sexuality Studies:

To begin, it should be noted that the word, “critical,” within the phrase “critical sexuality studies,” highlights an epistemological orientation that is concerned, generally speaking, with issues of power, privilege, and oppression. In other words, critical sexuality studies “refers to critical analyses of the existing organization and social meaning of sexuality and sexual identities, rather than merely descriptive accounts of doing sex” (Beasley, 2005, p. 117). In short, questions of power are a focal point.

Chris Beasley (2005), in her publication Gender & Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers, identifies five main theoretical directions or trajectories within critical sexuality studies. These are: (1) Emancipatory or Liberationist; (2) Sexuality (Singular) Difference or Gay and Lesbian Identity Politics; (3)
Multiple Differences; (4) Social Constructionism; and (5) Postmodern Sexuality Studies. I will briefly discuss each of these trajectories, making some connections along the way to questions of schooling and education.

Within the “emancipatory” trajectory, Beasley highlights one strand that she calls “liberal human rights.” In short, sentiments of liberal human rights can be described as discourses that emphasize “anti-discrimination” and “assimilationism.” Such sentiments have a long history and can be identified in various forms. For example, anti-discrimination sentiments “can be found in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sympathetic medical, legal, psychological and sexological discussions of sexual pathologies/deviance (usually undertaken by sympathetic heterosexuals) and in organizations like the ‘homophile movement’ which advocated homosexual assimilation into full citizenship” (Beasley, 2005, p. 121). In some instances, anti-discrimination discourse is not necessarily “pro-homosexual” but instead supports the notion of anti-discrimination, and therefore of tolerance, because of the idea that homosexuals are seen, too, as “members of the universal ‘Human’” (Beasley, 2005, p. 121). I would venture to say that this way of thinking—that is, promoting tolerance without advocating a pro-gay stance—is a version of anti-discrimination that can still be seen operating within many school settings today. It is also a version that can be found in some strands of Christian discourse, as, for example, when one hears the phrase, “love the sinner, not the sin.” In other instances, one can find an anti-discrimination positions that are also pro-gay. And such positions can, as well, be found in school settings today—or, at least there are attempts both within LGBT educational scholarship and within school policies to advocate simultaneously both an anti-discrimination and pro-gay position. A good example of this dual view can be seen in Debra Chasnoff and Helen Cohen’s (1996) now-classic documentary and often utilized pedagogical tool, It’s Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School.

The institutionalization of notions of liberal human rights in school contexts should come as no surprise; that is, within society writ large, mainstream LGBT politics primarily advocates anti-discrimination, as well as notions of assimilationism—e.g., the current efforts to repeal the U.S. military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and to legalize gay marriage). In this way, whether we are talking specifically about schools or about society more generally, “liberal assimilationism is still pursued in popularist heterosexual attempts to support homosexual ‘rights’ and indeed arguably continues to be
the public face of same-sex politics,” even if this position is no longer in the theoretical and scholarly vanguard within contemporary critical sexuality studies (Beasley, 2005, p. 121).

The second trajectory Beasley identifies within critical sexuality studies is what she terms “sexuality (singular) difference” or put another way, “gay and lesbian identity politics.” Scholarly writings associated with this trajectory can be seen as “drawing upon an ‘ethnic minority’ model of homosexuality [where homosexuality is] increasingly associated with particular easily identifiable characteristics, ‘types’ of people, and distinct communities” (Beasley, 2005, p.123). One way to understand writings arising out of this trajectory is that they are a response to and critique of the first trajectory, liberal assimilationism. In other words, rather than calling for assimilation, there is an attempt in some of these writings to configure gay culture, community, and identity as positively distinct from, and in some cases, superior to “heteronormative heterosexual” society. As with identity politics in general, gay and lesbian identity politics can be seen as a precursor to an emphasis on multiculturalism in American society in general, as well as to the development of LGBT multicultural curricula at all levels of education.

In the third trajectory, “multiple differences,” Beasley identifies writings that stress differences within sexual categories, which challenge “the neat homogeneity assumed by gay and lesbian identity politics” (Beasley, 2005, p. 123). Indeed, in these writings, other identity categories—such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, geography, age, etc.—are highlighted in order to stress that sexual identities and lived experiences are constructed and impacted by any number of other social categories. In addition, the multiple differences trajectory even challenges the heterosexual/homosexual binary assumed by the phrase gay and lesbian identity politics. For instance, within the context of a discussion of transgender identity, “if a female-to-male (FTM) transgendered person is attracted to women, does this sexual identity register as heterosexual and/or as lesbian?” (Beasley, 2005, p. 124). This third trajectory within critical sexuality studies has significant implications for how we take up LGBT issues in educational locations. For example, whose LGBT identities, culture, community, and politics will inform curriculum development?
“Social constructionism,” the fourth trajectory Beasley identifies, rejects the notion that sexual identities—such as gay or straight—represent innate biological essential qualities. Rather, scholars such as philosopher Michel Foucault and historian and sociologist Jeffrey Weeks argue that sexual identities are “socially constructed.” Sexual identities and sexual cultures are shaped, in other words, by social and historical forces; they have histories. As Beasley (2005) puts it: “it is now widely accepted in Sexuality Studies that the notion of sexuality and sexual identities as being a matter of unchanging, untouched nature—nature ‘in the raw’—is a modernist myth” (p. 146). In my mind, the idea that sexuality and sexual identities, as well as various sexual cultures, are socially constructed has enormous implications for how we think about and respond to LGBT issues within the context and concerns of schooling and education. Indeed, if the institution of schooling is not “naturally heteronormative” but rather is constructed and maintained to be that way, then how might we undo the culture of hegemonic heterosexuality that is often the source of anguish and pain for so many LGBT students and teachers—as well as for many heterosexuals?

Finally, the last trajectory Beasley identifies within critical sexuality studies is “queer theory,” a more radical version of social constructionism. In the next section of my presentation I will explain this position in much more detail. For now, simply put, queer theory has been characterized as a position that refuses identity categories all together; it is a position that rejects “identity categorization per se” (Beasley, 2005, p. 125). As with the other trajectories discussed above, queer theory’s theoretical insights and political implications can be brought to bear on schooling and LGBT issues. For example, if identities are socially constructed as “hierarchical binaries,” then would doing away with identities generate a more equitable school environment for all students? To answer this question, we will need to delve deeper into understanding some of queer theory’s main ideas, the subject of the next section of my presentation.

Part 2: Queer Theory:

Queer theory has emerged from, has been impacted by, and has contributed to several intellectual locations within the academy. By this I mean three things. First, queer theory arises out of a broader set of intellectual movements in academia, most notably poststructuralism and postmodernism, and has contributed conceptually to these movements as well. Second, queer theory draws from and
develops certain ideas and concepts within the overall field of sexuality studies. And third, queer theoretical work can be found across a number of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including in the field of education, and, hence, has impacted disciplinary knowledge production. Taking into account these three points, then, it can be said that queer theory is marked by an ongoing intellectual history. Thus, while queer theory continues to evolve theoretically and politically, thereby defying any singular static definition, there are certain meanings and practices that can be connected to it, however temporary, both as a critical methodology and as a gender and sexual politics. In this way, queer theory “does function in specific—albeit complex and somewhat ambiguous—ways in particular contexts, and in relation to particular issues” (Sullivan, 2003, pp. v–vi). From this perspective, queer theory is not an empty or floating signifier. Rather, “in the face of a resolved and insistent unknowability, it remains clear that queer [theory] means”’ (Sullivan, 2003, p. 47).

At a broad analytical level, queer theory aims to engage in an antinormative knowledge project. What this means is that queer theory offers a deconstructive critique of normalizing ways of knowing and of being, especially, though not exclusively, regarding such identity categories as sexuality and gender. In order to approach its antinormative project, queer theory pursues the critical strategy of denaturalization—that is, of showing how gender and sexual identities, such as gay or straight, are not natural, transhistorical categories, but rather are thoroughly socially constructed within particular cultural and historical contexts and are constructed as hierarchical binaries (i.e., within relations of power). In short, to denaturalize sexual identities is to argue that such identities have histories. Within such a critical framework, sexual identities are no longer assumed to be natural, biological facts but rather understood as formed “in the course of human history and culture” (Oksala, 2007, p. 11); in this way, sexuality “is not an essentially personal attribute but an available cultural category—and that it is the effect of power rather than simply its object” (Jagose, 1997, p. 79). The idea, then, that sexuality is a construct is itself a queer notion, because such a view challenges common-sense assumptions that sexuality, sexual identities, and sexual practices are simply natural.

Queer theory’s denaturalizing, rather than naturalizing, of (sexual and gender) identity categories offers profound challenges to, yet potentially liberating insights for, questions of epistemology (i.e., how we understand and are able to think about sexual identity), ontology (i.e., how
we live out our sexual identity) and politics (i.e., how we define, as well as engage in, progressive sexual politics). Drawing from the broader poststructuralist insight that the subject is the outcome of discourse (i.e., discourse constructs subject positions), thus offering a critique of a humanist subject that is prior to culture, work in queer theory necessarily challenges both the notion of a unitary sexual identity (e.g., that one is either gay or straight) and of natural sexual identities. Such a challenge means that sexual identity is framed as unstable/fluid and incoherent because it is situated within the power plays of systems of signification rather than within a language of biological determinism. French philosopher Michel Foucault’s (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, for example, offered the influential claim that the homosexual was not a name that referred to a natural kind of being. Rather, he argued that such an identity category was constructed by, and thus emerged out of, nineteenth-century scientific and medical discourses that required the specification of individuals in order to regulate and persecute peripheral sexualities and practices (Oksala, 2007). Foucault’s denaturalizing project of showing how the homosexual was discursively constituted as a species of being (Foucault, 1978, p. 43) has positioned his work as a highly influential precursor to contemporary queer theory and has radicalized epistemologically how we understand what sexual identity is and from where it emerges.

Accompanying its challenge to the notion of a natural and unitary sexual identity is queer theory’s rejection of binary sex, gender and sexuality models—i.e., male/female, masculinity/femininity, straight/gay—by highlighting the instability and fluidity within each of these binaries, as well as by problematizing the heteronormative trajectory between them. An example of a classic text for such an analysis, that I often use with my own students, is Alain Berliner’s (1997) film, *Ma Vie en Rose* (English translation: *My Life in Pink*). In this story the protagonist, seven-year-old Ludovic Fabre, is a biological male who lives out his gender identity as a female. In addition, at one point in the story he blends the categories girl and boy by announcing to his parents that he is a “girl-boy.” Furthermore, he wants to marry his male friend, Jerome, yet because Ludovic situates his own understanding of his sexuality based on his gender identity rather than his biological sex, he considers his attraction to Jerome as an expression of his heterosexuality. *Ma Vie en Rose*, then, can be read as an exemplar of some of queer theory’s main tenets/critical strategies: (1) the denaturalization of identity categories; (2) the rejection of gender and sexual binaries; and (3) the problematizing of the socially constructed dominant heterosexual trajectory of male to masculinity to heterosexual desire. In this way, queer theory, by
focusing on what is excluded or devalued within a heteronormative economy, illuminates ontologically the possibilities for living out our gender and sexual identities and practices that move beyond, or present challenges to, hegemonic socially prescribed ways of being.

It is this particular focus on the numerous ways that the links between categories of bodily sex (male/female), gender (masculine/feminine), and sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual) are mixed up or queered within the broader context of a heteronormative social order that postmodern feminist Judith Butler, in her landmark (1990) text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, suggests can provide the basis for, and contours of, a “queer politics.” In short, Butler advocates *pastiche*—“that is, an imitation which involves a medley of identity forms and hence mocks any notion of an inner truth or original core self” (Beasley, 2005, p. 107). In other words, rather than draw on naturalized identity categories such as woman or gay as the basis for a political program, a queer politics opts for displacing these naturalized identity categories by way of proliferating identities and identity categories that mix up or crisscross the traditional assumptions regarding the supposed inevitable links between biological sex, gender, and sexuality—and in this way underscores the non-natural and non-eternal character of all identities. In terms of strategy, then, a queer politics “focuses on hybridity or ambiguity, on body, gender, and sexuality crossings” (Beasley, 2005, p. 109). Having now sketched some of the main ideas of critical sexuality studies and queer theory, for the last section of my presentation I outline four themed “research portraits” that provide a cross-section of contemporary queer studies scholarship in education. The research highlighted in each of the portraits below draws on, in various ways, some of the main ideas and concepts associated with critical sexuality studies and queer theory.

**Part 3: Queer Studies in Education: Some Portraits of Recent Research:**

The research portraits below are organized around four themes: (1) heteronormativity in education; (2) children doing gender; (3) the fag discourse in high schools; and (4) queer masculinities in education.

**Portrait 1: Heteronormativity in Education:**
Simply put, heteronormativity is an institutionalized ideology that positions heterosexuality, heterosexual identity, and heterosexual sexual practices as normal, natural, and universal. As a form of hegemony, heteronormativity or sometimes called “heteronormative heterosexuality” must continually reproduce itself in order to maintain its hegemony over non-normative sexual identities and practices. As with other institutions in American society, the institution of education consciously and unconsciously, willfully and unwittingly, reproduces the ideology of heteronormativity in both macro and micro ways. A significant chunk of research in queer studies in education attempts to illuminate how heteronormativity unfolds in various educational contexts. One way that recent research has attempted to illuminate the workings of heteronormativity is by conducting qualitative studies that focus on how gay and lesbian teachers negotiate or manage their identities in the heterosexualized space of the school culture. The titles of two recent studies are illustrative: “Surviving in the Trenches: A Narrative Inquiry into Queer Teachers’ Experiences and Identity” by Hidehiro Endo et al. and “Lesbian Teachers’ Identity, Power and the Public/Private Boundary” by Naomi Rudoe. Both studies take up the issue of the complexity of how, in heteronormative educational environments, queer teachers must manage their sexual identity in relation to their teacher identity. In Rudoe’s study, for example, she conducted interviews with six lesbian teachers in London secondary schools. Her study showed how her sample group of lesbian teachers negotiated their non-normative sexual identity by placing importance on a “good teacher” identity and by emphasizing professionalism.

Utilizing various forms of popular culture as objects of critical analysis has also been highly useful for queer studies scholars in education who want to illuminate the entrenched force of heteronormativity in the school culture. The following two article titles exemplify this approach: Jennifer Esposito’s “We’re Here, We’re Queer, but We’re Just like Heterosexuals: A Cultural Studies Analysis of Lesbian Themed Children’s Books” and Eric Richardson’s “Using a Film to Challenge Heteronormativity: South African Teachers ‘Get Real’ in Working with LGB Youth.” Richardson’s use of the phrase “get real” in the subtitle of his essay is a direct reference to the 1998 coming-of-age film, Get Real. Coming out narratives, especially those that take place in educational contexts, have been highly effective in illustrating the damaging force of heteronormativity. In the film, two high school boys fall in love but must keep it a secret from the school community, in large part because one of the teens is a popular athlete and is terrified that being seen as gay will not only destroy his image as a high school jock,
especially among his ostensibly straight male friends, but also could potentially lose his parents’ supporting him through college. The film eloquently highlights the difficulties of coming out in a heteronormative school environment and shows how heteronormativity impacts both sexual and gender identity formation.

One final way that I’d like to highlight the topic of heteronormativity in education is by examining the issue within the context of teacher education research. Sam Stiegler’s article is illustrative. His article title is: “Queer Youth as Teachers: Dismantling Silence of Queer Issues in a Teacher Education Program Committed to Social Justice.” Stiegler’s interview-based essay is situated within the context of a teacher training program committed to teaching for social justice. However, he found that even in such a critically-oriented teacher training program, heteronormativity was so entrenched that issues of homophobia and heterosexism were neglected. In light of such a “defining absence,” Stiegler’s study explores how the silence around queer issues during their teacher training experience had an impact on how queer teachers fared later on as actual in-service teachers.

**Portrait 2: Children Doing Gender:**

One of the key concepts that queer theory critically engages is that of identity, especially gender and sexual identity, and this focus is a major theme that runs through much of the elementary educational research that utilizes queer theory as a framework for analysis. In particular, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity has been drawn on to disrupt normative assumptions that children’s gendered behaviors, especially as these take place within the context of social relations with peers, are a consequence of their biological sex. Within this normative viewpoint, gender expressions are seen as arising out of a natural and foundational cause. Masculine behaviors (i.e., expressions), for example, are understood as the result of a foundational masculine sex. By contrast, Butler argues that the idea of a foundational masculine or female sex is the result of the never-ending citation and reiteration of normative masculine and feminine ideals under duress, that is, “within a highly rigid and regulatory frame” (Butler 1990, p. 33). The effect, for Butler, is twofold: First, the repeated acts of normative gender expressions produce the illusion of discrete, natural, and stable gendered categories of biological sex—i.e., male and female—which in turn are seen as the cause of gender behavior and identity expression. Second, within Butler’s critical frame, the effect of naturalizing gendered categories of biological sex as complementary, further functions to naturalize (and normalize) heterosexuality as the
proper form of sexual identity and desire, so for Butler “gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality” (Jagose, 1997, p. 83).

Within the context of knowledge production about the complexities and contradictions of identity formation at the elementary school level, one finds qualitative studies—e.g., ethnographies and case studies—that explore how children create, take up, and sustain gender identities. For example, Mindy Blaise (2005), in her publication Playing It Straight: Uncovering Gender Discourses in the Early Childhood Classroom, provides a post-developmental qualitative study that illuminates how children are constructing gender and heterosexual discourses in the early childhood classroom. By utilizing feminist poststructuralism and queer theory methodologies, Blaise’s research, as well as other similar studies, demonstrates that children take an active part in doing gender (Blaise, 2005). That is, drawing from the poststructuralist insight that discourse constitutes subjectivity, children’s gender identity constructions, including the construction of meanings about (im)proper femininities and masculinities, are shown to be mediated by discourses that children bring with them (i.e., embody) to school from their everyday worlds, as well as those they negotiate in response to the gender discourses that have been institutionalized and made available to them within the various facets of the school culture (e.g., the curriculum or during playtime in an imagination box).

**Portrait 3: The Fag Discourse in High Schools:**

C. J. Pascoe (2005), in her publication “‘Dude, You’re a Fag’: Adolescent Masculinity and the Fag Discourse,” also utilizes poststructuralist perspectives, as well as theoretical insights from queer theory, critical masculinity studies, and sociology. Pascoe’s study significantly recasts the meaning and deployment of the fag epithet within homophobic social interactions, mostly among adolescent males in high school settings. Her study shows how straight-identified male teens use the fag epithet with each other as a way to regulate masculine gender identity constructions. As she notes:

> It is precisely [the] specter of penetrated masculinity that functions as a regulatory mechanism of gender for contemporary American adolescent boys. I argue that the “fag” position is an “abject” position and, as such, is a “threatening specter” constituting contemporary American adolescent masculinity. The fag discourse is the interactional process through which boys name and repudiate this
abjected identity. Rather than analyzing the fag as an identity for homosexual boys, I examine uses of the discourse that imply that any boy can become a fag, regardless of his actual desire or self-perceived sexual orientation.

Drawing on the poststructuralist insight that discourse is constitutive of identity, and queer theory’s ideas about gender and sexual identity fluidity, Pascoe’s study brilliantly illustrates how the “fag position” is far from being a static identity that is only attached to gay boys. Rather, her study reveals how any boy can become a fag; this is why Pascoe uses the phrase the “fag discourse.” The fag discourse, then, is often hurled from straight boy to straight boy, like a hot potato, and “this fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism,” especially in relation to the construction of masculinity (Pascoe, 2005, p. 330). For this reason, Pascoe’s study reveals that the fag discourse, when hurled from one boy to another, always has gendered meanings, even if it may or may not have sexual connotations.

**Portrait 4: Queer Masculinities in Education:**

For the last portrait, I’d like to highlight my forthcoming publication, titled: *Queer Masculinities: A Critical Reader in Education*. *Queer Masculinities* explores the complex and often contradictory intersections among the three categories announced in the title of the book: queer, masculinity, and education. A collection of original essays written by a leading group of international scholars of gender and sexuality studies in education, the aim of the book is to promote dialogue and debate on the understudied and under-theorized topic of queer masculinities and education. Collectively the essays critically examine the meanings and practices of queer masculinities across three spheres of education: at the K-12 level, at the collegiate level, and within popular culture as cultural pedagogy. The entries range from social science-style empirical research to humanities-style text interpretation, and variously draw upon and contribute to theoretical reflections in gender studies, queer theory, and critical masculinity studies, as well as in educational theory, pedagogy, and research. As a form of gender and sexual politics, the collection opens up the theoretical and political potential of queer(ing) masculinity within educational contexts. Two chapter examples I include here are Wayne Martino’s “Queering Masculinities in Male Teachers’ Lives” and Grant Peterson and Eric Anderson’s “Queering Masculine Peer Culture: Softening Gender Performances on the University Dance Floor.”
Martino’s essay, an empirical and theoretical study, explores how one male teacher candidate engages in a critical process of “negotiating identity” in relation to challenging structures of hegemonic hetero-masculinity in the school culture. More specifically, Martino focuses on how one straight-identified male teacher education student reflects on, and disidentifies with, hegemonic heterosexual masculinity by way of a complex process of cultivating embodied queer masculinity within, and against, the heteronormative context of schooling. In this way, Martino’s case study raises important questions about the relationship between the politics of identity formation and critical pedagogical practice. In addition, the specific discussion of practices of queer identification in his study is theorized within the broader project of “queering heterosexuality” in educational locations as a form of gender and sexual politics.

Peterson and Anderson’s essay provides an intellectual and cultural history of the present on the topic of queer masculinity: What historical shifts have occurred—e.g., socially and economically—that have engendered “today’s new cultural formations of gender and sexual categories [and practices],” and specifically that have made possible the “homosexualization of heterosexual men” (i.e., have facilitated the rise of particular subject formations of queer masculinity among straight guys)? A mirror of today’s broader cultural trends regarding the transformative potential of embodied queer masculinity by self-identifying straight men, the authors, drawing from gender, queer, and performance theories, argue that the specific site of the university dance floor of masculine peer culture illuminates that many straight-identified men are flirting with queerness in public spaces, including on the university dance floor, and that this phenomenon speaks to the ongoing shifting meanings and practices of gender and sexuality, and their complex intersections, in the 21st century.
Works Cited:


