

SEXUALITIES IN EDUCATION

A READER



**EDITED BY
ERICA R. MEINERS
AND THERESE QUINN**

Love, Labor, and Learning

Yours in the Struggle

THERESE QUINN & ERICA R. MEINERS

Certainly, it is important for the growing child to know his own body as it is to know arithmetic.

ELLA FLAGG YOUNG, 1913¹

Love, Labor and Learning: Yours in the Struggle

Ella Flagg Young's life and work are inspirations for *Sexualities in Education: A Reader*. A progressive educator and curricular innovator, Young was the first woman elected as president of the National Education Association and to serve as superintendant of a major public school system—Chicago's (Smith, 1979; Moran, 1996; Blount, 1998). As a teacher and administrator Young established a range of new opportunities, including field trips, vocational education, and teachers' councils, and in 1913, after gaining the support of prominent Chicagoans such as Jane Addams, she initiated the nation's first sex education program (Moran, 1996).

Young, a suffragist who promoted a vision of democratic schooling in which students and teachers shared real power, is an apt representative for sexualities education, embodying the presence and absence that is still a hallmark of the field (Smith, 1979). For example, Young put sex on the official map of public schools, but her following ouster encouraged teachers to “sneak’ the subject in first and ask permission later” (Moran, 1996, p. 509). As a feminist and a woman who shared her life with another woman, Laura Brayton, for thirty years, perhaps Young understood the politics of visibility, and how, by naming the centrality of sex, she also put sexualities in the picture.

We invoke Young to highlight themes that are critical to this book: the necessity of intersectional approaches to desire, sexualities, and education; the feminist landscape that supports these dialogs; the queer core of all sexuality work inside and outside classrooms; and finally, the centrality of labor to these discussions.

First, Young's life reminds us that, in a sense, it is always a queer time in the United States.

Uncontrollable sexualities and gender identifications continue to preoccupy those in power. As this book goes to press in spring of 2011 the United States' federal government has gingerly decided it will not defend the constitutionality of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA); Congress has provided a process for the repeal of the military's ban—*Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT)*—on out lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) men and women; and national attention has focused on queer youth suicides and the school-based “bullying” acts that triggered certain high profile tragedies. Each of these accomplishments is incomplete—DOMA is still being enforced, if not defended; queers are still being ejected from the military; and young people are still targeted for harassment and violence in schools. And defining anti-bullying legislation and the repeal of DADT as “queer successes” makes it easy to overlook other movements bubbling and swirling across the country that center gender and sexuality.

For example, states are pushing to limit women's access to reproductive rights through the refusal of government funds for abortions, support for physicians who, counter to the ethical obligations of their profession, want to “opt-out” of providing any medical procedure to which they are opposed, and through new restrictions on women seeking abortions: 24-hour waiting periods, mandatory counseling, and more. In schools, abstinence-based sex education is still the federal mandate, and teachers are under widespread assault for their “incompetence” and “laziness” while schools are privatized, weakening rights and protections for out LGBTQ educators. Also affecting our view is the knowledge that DADT was repealed the same day that a potential pathway for undocumented youth, the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act was denied. And, last but not least, 58% of our discretionary federal budget is spent on support for a permanent war economy (National Priorities Project, 2011).

In this context, we are skeptical of the LGBTQ “successes” that media and politicians alike encourage us to celebrate and reminded again of the importance of working through an intersectional lens. For us, as for the 1977 Combahee River Collective, oppressions are not neatly divisible.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression. (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977, p. 267)

For the Combahee River Collective, white supremacy is not an adequate frame to name the oppression of Black women. Gender is not simply a problem for women nor is naming white supremacy a central analytic tool only for communities of color. Similarly, for us, it is important to challenge what gets framed as queer issues—to ask, for example, why bullying and pride, but not inflated war budgets or reproductive rights?

Just as suffrage was integral to Young's accomplishments, feminism frames our intersectional analysis and our political educational work. As we survey this educational moment and consider sexualities in particular, feminist tools and perspectives seem needed now, more than ever. For one thing, teaching is always in gender trouble. Still a racialized, heteronormative and feminized field, public education is now being rapidly deskilled and deprofessionalized as teachers are de-unionized and identified as at the root cause of everything from obesity to falling test scores, and their preparation programs are devalued and replaced with a few weeks of summer training. This political assault is possible because teaching *is* women's work.

Also, even as moderate support develops in some school districts and specific schools to address

LGBTQ sexualities and lives, abstinence-based sex education is still the federal policy. Despite the clear value of an analysis of education that includes gender and power, feminist frameworks have never been particularly visible in teacher “training” programs. Yet, feminism, to steal a quote from bell hooks, is for everybody, and we concur with Ella Flagg Young, especially for teachers.

When we survey the work included in this Reader we are pleased that commitment to feminist intersectionality is visible throughout, but we also note what is not as evident in the table of contents as we would have liked. Where is the substantive work on empire? Why is this project so North American centered? It seems now that standpoint epistemology ruled the day—what we solicited reflected our visions, affiliations, and investments, and those of each section’s editor. This is, of course, a limitation of all work and a challenge that is partially mitigated by embracing collaborations. Partnering with others pushes us to critically reflect on our assumptions, assertions and actions. We selected people to work with because we were comfortable with and had learned from their analyses and ways of working, and also, because they often offered fresh views that incited, excited and expanded our own.

And we freely admit: this book is queer-centric—queer and other norm-critical perspectives have posed some of the most interesting and urgent questions about sexualities in education and are key here. Often overlooked forms and practices such as art and the ephemera of organizing, poetry, personal essays, and non-academic work also punctuate this collection, illuminating the important place of varied voices and modes of expression in movements for justice and education and inviting us to name the passion that drives our learning and fuels movements. For example, this project includes a page of political notes authored by Harvey Milk and new poetry by queer youth, images from classic films by Barbara Hammer and Isaac Julien and narratives and mission statements by contemporary Chicago artist Coya Paz and youth organizers Gender JUST. These and other excerpts from cultural and political queer and creative lives are interspersed with chapters that offer more theoretical examinations of the complexities of sexualities and schools across the United States, with gestures to their manifestations outside our national borders.

Ella Flagg Young’s dedication to improving the working conditions of teachers also reminds us to be transparent about our labor. An unexpected yet formative theme during this book’s production was the relationship between authors and publishers. We recognize that many publishers, and particularly independent ones that focus on queer and feminist work, are struggling for cash and support. But these were not the presses that requested hefty reprint fees. Eileen from The Federation of Feminist Women’s Health Centers, which holds the rights to *A New View of a Woman’s Body*, just asked us to “send what you can.” In contrast, some works that we considered influential in our own practices and thinking are not included in this Reader because the requested fees were so high and the authors did not own their copyrights. For example, Kenji Yoshino generously agreed to allow us to excerpt his popular and not lengthy 2006 *New York Times* article, “The Pressure to Cover,” but the cost per word totaled over \$1,000; as a result, Yoshino’s essay is absent here, but we encourage readers to look for it elsewhere.

In the end, we found ourselves writing checks for \$50 or \$100 for poets and filmmakers who were just as willing to donate their work and haggling unsuccessfully with presses affiliated with wealthy private universities to reduce their publication fees. Like teachers everywhere who supply their art rooms and fill their bookshelves, we paid from our own pockets for this book’s permissions, cover art, and more. This is the norm in many occupations now—workers subsidizing, invisibly, parasitic employers. Our participation in this economy reproduces these asymmetrical and problematic constructions and valuations of art and knowledge. There is no neutral ground.

The world of publishing continues to be remade, offering moments of generative chaos and opportunities for radical interventions. With the advent of new technologies, we wonder if publishing companies are even needed anymore. What presses offer—resources, marketing, even copyediting and layout—has diminished so significantly over the years, that their primary contribution is reputation capital, a shell of legitimacy and stature, demarcations that are already available for purchase. We explicate the material conditions of our work because, like Young’s support of teacher’s unions, economic and political contexts shape labor: materiality matters. Young spent her life negotiating education policy *and* practice, curriculum *and* teacher’s rights and did not distinguish one venue as more important to building stronger schools. This is queer educational justice work; it rejects norms that constrain, working across categories to get the job done.

Putting aside our anxieties and self-criticisms about the limitations of all projects and this Reader in particular, we are buoyed by the model of Young’s tenacious commitment to staying in the struggle for the long haul. Persistence was a central theme in Young’s life; she wasn’t sent to school until she was eleven, but continued seeking formal education over decades, and earned a doctorate at age 55 (Smith, 1979). And she was just as resolute in her efforts on behalf of teachers and students. Persistence, tenacity and pleasure are also resonant themes in this Reader, creating a trajectory that links the work of Eve Sedgwick and Catherine Lugg to the newer scholarship of Jillian Ford and Angel Rubiel Gonzalez and connects the provocative pro-feminist pleasure art created by Jeanette May and young radical women to the riotous collectives that produced the transgendered advocacy guide, the TransAlly Card, for local political education. Through snapshots of justice struggles within sexualities and education, these contributors embody the fierceness of Young’s loyalties to rigorous and local organizing over the long haul. We offer this Reader as a contribution to that project.

Notes

1. Quoted in Moran, 1996, p. 481.

References

- Blount, J. (1998). *Destined to rule the schools: Women and the superintendency 1873–1995*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Combahee River Collective. (1983). The Combahee River Collective Statement. In B. Smith (Ed.) *Home girls*. New York, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.
- Moran, J. (1996, September). “Modernism gone mad”: Sex education comes to Chicago, 1913. *The Journal of American History*, 83(2), 481–513.
- National Priorities Project. (2011). Federal Discretionary and Mandatory Spending. Retrieved May 9, 2011, from <http://nationalpriorities.org/resources/federal-budget-101/budget-briefs/federal-discretionary-and-mandatory-spending/>
- Smith, J. (1979). *Ella Flagg Young: Portrait of a leader*. Ames, IA: Educational Studies Press and the Iowa State University Research Foundation.
- Yoshino, K. (2006, January 15). The Pressure to cover. *The New York Times*. Retrieved April 3, 2011, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/15/magazine/15gays.html>