***“Woman on the Edge of Time”: Queering Normativities of Race, Gender and Sex***

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Abstract

While teaching about diversity in educational preparation and leadership programs has been a topic of avid attention, “diversity” remains an add-on feature in much university curriculum. This was certainly not the intent or hope of feminist and race theory scholars whose work raises challenges not only for examining power and inequities in educational systems but also has the potential for a radical rethinking of those very systems, knowledges, structures and practices. So what happened to the epistemological and pedagogical promises of these theories? This paper explores this question and suggests that engagement with Queer Theory is necessary to potentially shift knowledge production in educational preparation classrooms. A pedagogical example—learning to see, rethink and queer (hetero)normativities through reading a fictional novel, Marge Piercy’s (1976) *Woman on the Edge of Time*—is provided as a working exemplar of what queering of normativities might look like in theory and practice in a university classroom.

In 1990, Eve Sedgwick boldly pronounced: ‘An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition’ (p. 1). In this way, Sedgwick argues, talking about sex—identifying sexual binaries and relationships, asking how these came to be and who benefits—provides a lens of analysis that provides insights on discourses and projects of modernity such as patriarchy, racisms, science, and colonialism. Thus normativity in this paper refers not only to hetero-normativity but links normativities of heterosexuality with patriarchy and epistemological racisms (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007).

Queering then marks the epistemological and discursive work of rethinking and unthinking, learning and unlearning, to as Deborah Britzman (1995, p. 153) notes, ‘undress the drag of normal’ in all its various tropes. If we are indeed living amidst all the “posts” of our time—postmodernsim, poststructuralism, postfoundationalism, post-Marxism, postfeminism, postrace, postcolonialism—what are we left with? How can we talk about the persistence of “difference” and inequitable outcomes in a post-era where ‘new master-narratives have taken over’ (Braidotti, 2005, p. 169)? And although these new master-narratives look familiar, a ‘return of different forms of determinism’ (Braidotti 2005, p. 169) make them even more insidious to see, name and trace especially in educational classrooms. Simultaneously current narratives inflate, deny and reify ‘difference’ making it difficult to recognize and re-imagine otherwise.

Faced with this frustration, I have turned to the use of novels, specifically feminist utopian/dystopian/science fiction novels to provide students and myself places to think differently from and queer conceptions and ideologies of gender and gender roles, race, sex, sexuality, reproduction, family structure, class, societal organization, education and governance. Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* has been particularly impactful. Piercy’s book, broadly a feminist utopian science fiction novel, is useful because she provides a critique of present day understandings and structures by presenting them as a parody when viewed through the eyes of a woman who visits a future time/world in which none of our recognizable identity categories exist. Piercy provides rich descriptions and detailed text about how this future egalitarian world is constructed so that the present day reader is challenged to think and imagine differently. She also presents a dystopian alternative to the egalitarian future—one based upon individualistic greed and consumption that consistently feels too close to our present world.

The use of a fiction novel allows readers to engage in complex discussions of the systems and discourses that define us all without feeling the awkwardness of misspeaking or offending someone else. Piercy’s book allows “a reading that *produces* rather than *protects*” (Spivak 1976, p. lxxv) and is effective in supporting a queer pedagogy that seeks to name, trace and unmask the (hetero)normativities of everyday events raising new questions and ways of thinking about educational epistemologies, discourses, policies and practices.

References

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