

“Taught” and Propaedeutic Sexualities: Some Observations

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“An audience which awaits a discussion on sex- and this includes even those who profess a certain sophistication in such matters- usually reminds me of a youngster who knows there are some cookies in the pantry, and who is contemplating a raid. He knows there is something in the pantry which is of interest- he feels a sense of anticipation regarding the adventure, mixed with some apprehensiveness- there is something naughty about the situation, which inspires guilt- but he reassures himself that there are only cookies, and that cookies actually were made to be eaten; and after all, what’s fundamentally wrong about eating cookies?” (Piker, Ph., 1947, The psychiatrist looks at sex offences, *Journal of Social Hygiene* 33,8:392-7, at p392)

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Abstract:

Departing from a large cross-cultural review effort (2002-5), this paper will situate contemporary pedagogical discourses of sexuality in the West using a broad anthropological scope. This is aided by introducing and elaborating a disciplinary reading of the concept of sexual ‘curriculum’. ‘Sexual curricula’ or careers here are understood as confluences of local, reciprocally implicated disciplinary ethnotheories integrating notions of *chronology* (a logic of sequentiality, timing and chronic segmentation), *content* (ontology, teleology, deontology; substance, purpose, trope), and *governance* (age/phase stratification, inauguration, *poesis*). An analysis of discursive routines reveals a number of rhetorical instances that appear to serve as pedagogical restraints on erotic agency and plurality. This invites a critical reflection on the ethnohistorical problems and deep ambiguity of sex as ‘educated’. For instance, Western society takes a ‘tolerance’ crusade, ‘education’ contemporarily being informed by ideas about ‘healthy’, atraumatic, and ‘unhurried’ ‘developments’. These ramifications are progressively informing a post-1970s anti-deconstructionist bulwark, partly academic, re-privileging the normal, the universal, the essential, the necessary, the global, the real, the inevitable, and the appropriate. It is suggested that experimental ethnography might open up ways to resist and contest biomedical and psychological regimentation of pedagogical rationales of emergent sexualities.

I.

To ramify the pedagogical status of today's post-industrial, high modern, and consumer sexualities seems to be a preposterous ambition because of the self-consciously pluralist aesthetic through which they have come to be theorised in late 20th century. This is not to say, however, that educationalists can not profit from an ethnohistorical localisation of their praxis. With 'localisation' I do not want to convey a realist message of sexualities as stable centres around and about which cultural practices and attitudes change and err: the substrates of sex education as seen in a comprehensive cartographic approach (Janssen, 2002-5, I) are unitary nor uniform. As for the Occidental status quo, I guess it is fair to begin with the observation that healthy genders, bodies and identities have become paradigmatic products in several ways, and that their education is usually identified as a salient aspect of, critical arena, or ultimate framework for gender/body/identity development and its politicisation (at least for its politicisers). 'Western' sex curricula, then, are commonly related to their substrate (variably: sexuality, health behaviour vs. risk behaviour, relations, intimacies) in three metaphors. One is **partiality**, according to which Curriculum is *a part* of autobiographical sexuality, for instance as a 'necessary' or 'essential' or 'absent' plot in the chapter of its 'final' inauguration). Another would be **spatiality**: Curriculum is *a locus* of sexual politics, and *a site* for its academic digestion or activist intervention. A last metaphor is **perspective**: Curriculum is *a way of looking at*, operationalising and understanding sexualities. What I want to argue today is that these cultural tropes articulate the various ways of discursive subjugation of 'pre-adult' bodies that halts a deconstruction of curriculum as a key mode of control.

This *curricular control* appears to be 'cultural' (hence, relevant to anthropologists) in three ways. First, curriculum regiments eventual bodies to their culturally legitimate biographical

themes, plots, tropes, and genres. Secondly, curriculum both denotes and connotes a social stratification the rigidity and legitimacy of which is accomplished through cultures of negotiation. Thirdly, hegemonic curriculum disciplines ‘Other’, foreign, subaltern pedagogies. I want to suggest that in an increasingly *deconstructionist* society, the expectation (and perhaps: policy) should be that all mentioned tropes are being problematised before, during, and after their implementation. Hence the *curricularised child* will ask: *What part?*, *What space?* and *What perspective?* sex education takes. The immediacy of this foreseeable crisis I propose can be assessed using a critical ethnographic approach to body curricula in postmodern settings, to situate bodies *in* curricula, *as* curricula and *against* curricula (and, perhaps, *post* curricula). This entails not the hegemonic centralisation of curricular themes themselves (gender, health, erotic orientation) but instead their developmental fit and necessity, their appropriate timing, their stratifying properties. Studying curriculum critically requires specific attention for epistemological and methodical manoeuvres necessary to expose and deconstruct the *chronometric grid* by which such research is implicated. For instance, Debbie Epstein (1998) discussed what she calls a ‘least adult’ option necessitated by her small-scale ethnographic study of gender and sexuality in a primary school, while Mary Jane Kehily described her research experiences as that of a ‘grown-up girl’ (2004, p. 368).

2.

I mean to address the finding that in contemporary societies education-controlled timing of sexuality is ubiquitously experienced as an important concern, but also the (paradoxical) observation that concerns for social and personal productivity (inherent in the notion of psychosexual development) has reached paradigmatic proportions. In the U.S. this amounts to a peculiar schism between adult sexuality’s daily managerialism (e.g. Tyler, 2004) and a concurrent anti-interventionalist *pedagogy of delay*. To put it this way: what can be construed

as ‘adult’ sexualities seem to have become *eventualist*, and what can be construed as ‘developmental’ sexualities are increasingly imagined as ideally *uneventful* (abstinent, non-traumatic, nulligravida). In fact—as far as sexualities go we might speak of a *pedagogical anti-eventualism*. As for a quick contrast: Nkole (Uganda) mothers are ‘very anxious to observe penile erections of their sons to assure themselves that the little ones are potent. Should erections be absent on several mornings, not only the mother but also the father will begin to search for a remedy’ (Mushanga, 1973, p. 181). This brings us to the problem of sex education as a curriculum: its *politics of eventuality*. For instance, in unselfconsciously functionalist sex education materials, the concept of ‘playful sex’ is chronologically disciplined as a *necessary* childhood event, then as an *essential* adolescent event, and ultimately as a *componential* (or *pathetic* or *succeeded* or *therapeutic*) adult event.

The above example hints at a cultural tendency to reduce sexual eventualities to their propagandised trajectorial status. My argument, then, feeds into an enlarging corpus of materials that imagines post-modern states of curricula (e.g. MacDonald, 2003) and post-curricular states. However, sexual intimacy has largely been absent from critical curriculum studies, even from Foucaultian applications on educational research (briefly reviewed in Peters, 2004; cf. Janssen, 2004). What, then, should our object of focus be?

3.

A disciplinary reading of late 20th century ‘sex education’ is nothing new of course (Thorogood, 1992, 2000. Cf. Middleton, 1998; Johnson, 1996; Monk, 1998; Harrison and Hillier, 1999; Irvine, 2000) though cross-cultural applications are merely emerging (consider Herdt, 2004). However, few authors have centralised the issue of *curricular bodies* as such, that is to say, apart from tuning in on specific content features in specific curricula (which one might summarise as being preoccupied with student/teacher genders, sexual orientations and

reproductive/pleasure bodies). Any political reading of sex education, of course, requires a sensible definitional appropriation. Anthropologically, sexual body ‘curricula’ or ‘careers’ can be understood as <<confluences of local, reciprocally implicated disciplinary ethnotheories integrating notions of social *chronology* (a logic of sequentiality, timing and chronic segmentation), *substrate* (ontology, teleology, deontology; substance, purpose, trope), and *governance* (age/phase stratification, inauguration, *poesis*)>>. I specifically want to stress the productivity in seeing that these notions feed into each other. With this inclusive definition, we can ask *what the scenario of curricular sex education entails in our society*. In short: what factors are being construed as legitimate modifiers of sexual chronology?

Here we might note that we are dealing with a historically atypical institute of mandatory, formal and predominantly textual (if oral) coverage, nestled within economically strained and obligatory scholastic trajectories, informing a very much individual-centred, consumerist and increasingly radical information paradigm. This paradigm plots, domesticates and naturalizes sex acts against teachable backgrounds of identities, orientations, and life styles (rarely however against much more radical backgrounds like ethnohistorical diversity in sex acts). Virginity loss, for instance, continues to be as a salient and relatively stable marker in personal trajectories, not because they still mobilize a community of stakeholders in affiliation schemes, but because they are potential traumas to vulnerable subjects. Subjectivities, in this orthodoxy, are not *produced* by change and experience, rather they *resist* such eventualities. This insight can be had by contrasting the Western case with many sub-Saharan ‘sex ed’ scenes whose sexualities are historically taught in much more affirmative, personalised, integrated, comprehensive, pragmatic, and managerial ways. Here, the ultrastructures of age-identified sex are *acts*, less the subjective platforms, psychologies, or the degrees of maturity that would contain them.

Western sex education's institutional primacy is usually associated with *a lack of ritualised chronology*, or even with a chronological aesthetic that is *anti-ritualist*. A-personal institutionalism can be allied to the *anti-trauma propaganda* of a psychotherapeutic, legislative and neopolitical regimentation of sex, in terms of 'appropriateness', 'consent', 'choice', 'personal integrity', and 'responsibility'. (I haste to note, however, that one encounters a curious reritualisation in the case of U.S. so-addressed *virginity pledges*.) Thus the 'politics of timing' within sex education discourses have usually been restricted to the chronological sub/ordination of culturally salient social milestone events (e.g., 'sexarche', pregnancy) to culturally salient forms of institutional immersion, participation and affiliation (schooling, consumer culture, marriage, love), or to alleged psychoneuroendocrinological realities (e.g., puberty, adrenarche).

From this perspective of competing regimental chronologies, we can distinguish three current genres of pedagogical commentary: Lamentation, Medicalisation, and Radical Deconstruction. *Moral lamentation* is a form of *rationalised nostalgia* in which reified and institutionalised age strata are privileged over allegedly shifting (as in Elkind, 1981), blurring and ambiguous 'new' chronologies. Some 'natural' sexual chronology is understood as being corrupted by an 'unnatural' one. Usually this takes the form of *institution critique* (privileging one, e.g., what can be construed as 'traditional', chronology over what can be construed as a competing one, of which either may be regarded as hegemonic). Or, most uncompromisingly, lamentation may function as *culture critique*. For instance, Cook and Kaiser (2004) observe the production of a 'new' sexologically specific age category (the *tween*), as 'a market semantic space [...] on the continuum of age-based goods and meanings'. Thus the authors analyse demonstrative and consumer sexualities as divorced from prospectus and telos, subject to a process of 'anticipatory enculturation'. In an even more dystopian, Marxist register, Hymowitz (2001) observed a cultural process of *teening* in which, it is argued,

childhood is ‘undermined’ and ‘endangered’ by encroaching stereotypes of adolescence¹. Thus in our lamentationist plot, through a capitalist logic chronological ambivalences are created and sustained (cf. Rohder, 2002). I would say that while to lament this does not strike me as very productive, the observation does.

As for the medicalisation option, Plummer’s summarizes the ‘telling’ of 20th century American sex adequately as ‘suffering, surviving, surpassing’. Sexual histories have come to constitute the happy-again end-consumer of the psychomedical machinery around what it variably advertises as deprived, endangered and entitled sexual subjectivity. Pre-adult psychosexual trauma, *par excellence*, is incessantly ‘enhanced’ and elaborated through diverse forms of academic digestion and pedagogical performance, which for a large part tend to feed rather than deconstruct the bulwarks and axioms of therapeutism. The crucial sites for this deployment of *disciplinary biography*, as in most biopolitical schemes, are of course that of enculturated and socialised (whichever fits the discursive move) bodies, be they abused, harassed, sexualised, surgically gendered, neutered, eroticised, silenced, unheard, forgotten, misrepresented, neglected, or ‘at risk’ bodies.

With the cult of Self and agency in the technocratic postmodern West, one would expect a hegemony of our last cultural option, which would entail a radical deconstruction of institutional, legal, and biomedical chronologies that currently form the ultrastructure of pedagogical organisation. In an emergent auto/biographical society (Plummer, 2001:ch.4) one imagines that (sexual) lives are less fulfillments of master chronologies, and more notable for their chronological peculiarity. The reverse however is seen in sexuality land: a militant ethic of biographical *developmentalisation*, and also of societal age stratification. Especially notable in U.S. clinics, journalism, schools, courtrooms, *blogs*, how might this be situated historically?

4.

As Foucault (1999) taught, we have gone from incest taboo to epistemophilic incest (cf. Bell, 1995), generally: from taboo to discourse. After Foucault's sovereign and disciplinary societies, Deleuze continues, we are entering post-disciplinary post-normative worlds, and we might want to acknowledge the militancy in which pre-adult bodies can be and are being policed in terms of their (increasingly virtual) logistics and infrastructural opportunities. According to Deleuze (1990), the new pedagogical tales are tales of control, passwords, continual training (*formation permanente*), and continuous monitoring (*contrôle continu*). This takes us into the world of porn-blocking software, V-chips (Kunkel et al., 2002), and public library terminals (Wardak, 2004). This is a 'new' political landscape (cf. Tien, 1994) inviting reflection on children's action radius, spaces and spatial principles, access restriction, firewalls, browsing, dangerous hyperlinks, ratings, filters, logging, blocking, reporting. We now have browsers, lurkers, moderators, previewers, parental advisory boards, programmers, and cyberpredators that populate webs of exchange. The *eventual subject* here is defined by *curricular entry*, by automated and computerised age checks, phrase based algorithms, logged key strokes, and age-delimited user privileges, while the cyberpedagogue is not a normalist but a bidirectional gatekeeper.

As Cruikshank (2004) concurs, we have progressed from a norm-based society to a neopolitical society that controls by mobilizing efforts against the pluralisation of norms. In any case, transgression of age boundaries mobilizes and scandalizes as travesty of gender barriers once did. This then situates the problem of sexual curricula in information societies today: the *normative curriculum* is challenged, surpassed, and deconstructed by the new, *infrastructural paradigm* of what remains of 'developing sexualities': their logistics, sites of access, and the neopolitical gatekeeping schemes they invite. At any rate this *new dialectic* is

far removed from the structuralist chronology of preliminal, liminal and postliminal sex acts, and increasingly departs from the norm-based chronometric regimentation of enduring identities, exclusive orientations, and local bodyhoods.

5.

The problem of post-modern sex education is that in a society characterised by a radical deconstructionist focus on gender, and a continued gender paradigm for its sexuality activism, paradoxically avoids ‘curriculum’ in its agenda. That is to say, gender is an organiser of a taken-for-granted, *implied*, and *expected development*, the deconstruction of which proves far more problematic. Busy deconstructing curricula for their gender bias, ‘voice’, and ethno-specificity, critical pedagogues have largely abstained from deconstructing sex Curricula *as such*. Sex educationalists however might take into account the need, the coming centrality, and the changing setting of sexual development’s deconstruction, especially against the contemporary background of an otherwise productive deconstructionist pedagogy of children’s bodies, identities, and mobility (cf. Janssen, *under review*). In an ethnotheoretical vein, one might ask, how are curricula being rationalised as local instruments of containment? A promising entry to this problem can be found in Talburt (2004a,b) who argues that one should denaturalize ‘narrative segments that produce ethnography’s and subjects’ desires for trajectories with a beginning and a destination’. A critical sexology of youth indeed needs to consider the possibility and relevance of looking critically at the kinds and forms of ‘development’ as they circulate through the welfare apparatus, action fronts, education libraries, ‘awareness’ curricula, and postmodern media. I would also argue that it increasingly requires classificatory ‘children’ to do the critical looking themselves. My central argument is, what we see in contemporary critical and deconstructionist pedagogy should be anticipated, welcomed, and invited as a child’s own performance *today*. How are they buying

the too-early/too-late binaries of sociological surveys (Cotton et al., 2004)? How problematic are virginities, for instance: might elementary transitions within the sexual sphere take place from not-doings not to other doings, but to other, more elaborate not-doings (as in the prize-winning read of Mullaney, 2001)? How can you pedagogically address complex forms of not-doing without further complicating them? Can you? A critical analysis of body curricula indeed entails reflection on children as potential self-developmentalists (as hinted at by Kelle, 2001). What in fact are body curricula made of, how are they narrated, accomplished, performed, contested (Janssen, 2005)?

If anything, an ethnological digestion of indigenous forms of sexual pedagogy (Janssen, 2003, II) shows that sexual curricula are instances of negotiated local culture. When I say ‘negotiated’ I mean to say that children have consistently been shown to piece together, ignore, resist, and rework formal curricula as *chronometric* and *chronologic* straightjackets. The fact that we would locate this task in pedagogical postmodernity rather than in other indigenous settings is for a part correct (however inviting analysis), for another it might embody a methodological artefact of ethnography.

To summarise: if not to the benefit of social conformity, structural solidity and re/productive paradigms, on what political basis are contemporary sexual/erotic bodies *curricularised*? How for instance, might we elaborate and implement a ‘queer theory of age stratification’ (Angelides, 2004)? In terms of gender as a political mobiliser having entered the stage of post-saturation, are curricula our new bulwarks/projects/centres/bullies?

Notes

^[1] Interestingly, Manning (1995) referenced an alleged *teening* of culture as a whole.

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