

TEACHING AS A GAY MAN

Pedagogical Resistance or Public Spectacle?

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Americans serve themselves and their friends up as stories, laced with pathos and spiced with scandal, the dish piping hot on demand. A European *discloses* himself, if that word can be used to suggest a series of locks opening and shutting, the whole slow and cautious. For an American a confidence is an ice-breaker and we describe our grandmother's suicide with the same desire to appear amiable that a European employs in commenting on the unseasonably warm weather. We forget what we've told to whom, whereas Europeans tremble and go pale when they decide to reveal something personal. In Europe an avowal counts as a precious sign of commitment; in America it amounts to nothing more than a how-do-you-do.
—Edmund White, *The Farewell Symphony*

I am a thoroughly American teacher. My natural impatience, fueled by my early participation in the gay liberation movement and later by my work as an HIV/AIDS advocate, led me to teach as an openly gay man. A portion of my twenty-something graduate students, who are preparing to become teachers themselves, would rather I exercised European restraint and reserved such a disclosure for nonacademic settings. In their course evaluations they suggest that I have an "agenda" and that teaching is a "very personal experience for this instructor." Others interpret my coming out in class as an invitation to unlock their own histories and join me in exploring the intersections of our personal lives and professional commitments.

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Over the last decade feminist and postmodern critics have argued that all speakers—writers, teachers, researchers—must locate themselves on the rugged terrain of identity politics. Discarding notions of absolute truth and grand narrative, we are left only to name the multiple positions from which we speak. At the same time, sophisticated studies of narrative structure illumine the assumptions about gender and sexuality that thread their way through the literary canon as well as through our own stories. I am interested in the more mundane and practical implications of teaching as an openly gay man.

Although I tell a decidedly queer story, the questions it raises are relevant to all teachers and students: How is pedagogy changed when we dismantle the wall between private and professional experience? What risks do we take? What goals do we achieve when we open our lives to public inspection?

I first began to speak about being gay in class in 1985. Although I had been out of the closet for many years, the difficulty of making this particular announcement surprised me. Perhaps it was the pressure of teaching on a small, secluded college campus or the impact of AIDS on my life. In the midst of all that loss, during those years of the "gay plague," it was for me the only life-affirming position to take—the only way to affirm my place in a community under siege.

Decisions about coming out are incomprehensible, complex mixes of personal history and political agenda. Didi Khayatt deconstructs the commonplaces of coming out in class, including our responsibilities to extend our support to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students; become appropriate role models for them; unsettle heterosexual norms; and combat institutionalized homophobia.¹ Yet in retrospect I see that in 1985 I acted out of neither the desire to become a role model for gay students nor the wish to promote greater tolerance among straight students. Rather, it was disingenuous to lecture prospective teachers about the connectedness of lives and *not* talk about being gay. It was a matter of integrity, of encouraging the authentic voices I hoped my students would assume in their own classrooms.

I teach that education is an ethical and political practice, which is difficult for some young people to accept. I am obligated to reveal the way that sexual identity informs my understanding of how social institutions function in our society. I do not know if coming out in class helps me communicate my concerns about the state of American education. Confessions of desire have a paradoxical effect. While suggesting that teachers too are made of flesh and blood, they reinforce our positions as experts, albeit in uncharted and dangerous disciplines.

I do know that my coming out has changed the tone of my classes. It has shifted some of my discomfort about teaching onto the students. The situation has

become less problematic for me and more disquieting for them, for they have begun to question their assumptions about who can speak and who must remain silent. Our conversations have become richer since I left behind the pose of objectivity.

I arrived at Bank Street College of Education in midcareer; my credentials included years of HIV/AIDS work, in which being openly gay was part of my expertise. My office door and bulletin board are covered with flyers about gay events. My lover's photographs of lesbian and gay writers hang on the walls, and I work with a group of colleagues, gay and straight, on issues of sexual orientation and early childhood education. But each year we meet new students, and so every gay teacher's story becomes a coming-out story once again.

Scores of recent books document the difficulties encountered by lesbian and gay teachers at all levels of education.² A central theme in this literature is the cost-benefit analysis we undertake when deciding whether or not to come out. Closeted gay teachers often experience frustration, isolation, and self-hatred. But not all accounts are bleak. The figure of the closet is inevitably linked to that of coming out. The literature also contains successful accounts of teachers asserting their gay identities.³ Beyond the matter of being more comfortable with ourselves, how does our gayness function in the classroom? What new questions can we ask about teaching as a result of our changed practices? What happens after the closet?

Even at my progressive institution I do not underestimate the powerful ways in which ignorance is socially negotiated. I am only too aware that the carefully chosen words and neatly linked sentences I utter about my sexual orientation on the first night of class do not shatter the glass closet by themselves. The students easily pretend that nothing has been said, that my confession has no immediate relevance. The hard work follows. Over the next few months I try to demonstrate how living as a sexual outlaw provides insights into the larger society. It is not the simple label we affix to ourselves but our continual use of our experience in the classroom that earns us the reputation of having an agenda. It is how we risk turning our weekly acts of resistance into semester-long public spectacles.

The classroom confession guarantees that we will not be submerged in a sea of faceless faculty. And we will surely alienate rather than engage certain students. Last year I received this appraisal on a course evaluation: "I appreciate the personal excitement of an instructor, but this went too far. Is it the introduction of sexual identity issues per se or the active presence of a gay teacher that constitutes going 'too far'?" Can we be too gay?

In a course on contemporary childhood I require two novels about identity

development; half of the choices offered are by lesbian and gay authors. I invite a young gay novelist to read from his work in class. I illustrate course themes from my own experience: psychiatrists' treatment of lesbians and gays as an example of social surveillance in the "helping" professions; gay liberation as an example of movements for social change; HIV/AIDS as a social issue silenced in schools.

Despite our best intentions, there is always a gap between our goals and our practices as progressive educators. Elizabeth Ellsworth reminds us that it is the quality of classroom life as much as our analysis of social issues that fosters communication and coalition building. Erica McWilliam cautions us to attend to the of positional talk that new teachers themselves produce and to leave aside our own radical rhetoric.⁴ No matter how moving our stories or provocative our reading lists may be, resistance to social injustice cannot be mandated. And what of our stories? Are they merely exercises in self-display, testimonials to the privilege of class, or do they lead students to new forms of action?

Michel Foucault announces the possibility of resistance at the same time as he marks the confession as a mechanism of social constraint. He delineates the nineteenth-century shift of power from questions of law and prohibition to the functions of knowledge and new technologies of the self. Power is now understood to circulate among people and through discourse. It is no longer a discrete entity to capture, or something from which we may escape.⁵

The liberation narrative, which demands a complete account of the past and a coherent vision of the future, is replaced by more modest stories of resistance and survival. These are the kinds of stories feminists tell about women who teach and that queer historians tell about the work of HIV/AIDS activists over the last two decades. They inspire us to act and remind us that social change requires close attention to the world immediately around us.

Central to Foucault's description of power is the transformation of the confession from a religious technique, confined to matters of sin and redemption, to a civil practice through which the listener (parent, teacher, psychiatrist) passes judgment on the teller (child, student, patient). The injunction to say what one is and does affirms our belief that speaking frees us and that silence indicates our powerlessness. In recounting our stories, however, we do not reveal some prior truth about ourselves. Rather, through the confessional relationship we constitute the self. In the theater of the classroom the teacher confesses—I am a single parent, a lesbian, a product of the working class—and the student hears the confession. What is the meaning of this role reversal?

Foucault describes the confession as a moment occurring between two individuals. But it was only in the thirteenth century that church law mandated yearly

private confession between priest and penitent. During the first part of the Christian era confession was mostly public, and humiliation played a central role in regulating social behavior. Public penance was a way to regain one's membership in the community, a way to heal the wound inflicted on oneself and on the body politic by nonconformity. Similarly, teachers' confessions, which disclose our own marginal identities and are tinged with uncertainty and shame, integrate us into the classroom community. While I do not tell my gay stories to engage students in personal conversations, they do ease my feelings of alienation. They help ground me in the classroom, in the institution, and in the larger world of education.

Foucault emphasizes the potential for intensified surveillance and social control that results from the demand to speak the truth of our lives. But his observations are often global and fail to account for the differing effects of storytelling. After all, our stories are not abstract fictions, separate from the world "out there." They link our lives to particular communities, offer maps for others, and provide insights into sociopolitical realities.

Stories change over time and are transformed by the times. If we constitute ourselves through the stories we tell, we are also constituted by the communities available to hear them. My gay story could not have been told before the 1970s, when the contemporary lesbian and gay community began to take form; now that community is strengthened every time someone tells his or her story. This lesson is most easily seen in the consciousness-raising strategies of Chinese revolutionaries in the 1940s and American feminists in the 1960s. Telling stories promotes social mobilization as well as personal catharsis.

In the classroom I want to create a community in which students can tell their own stories and trust that their differences will be heard. Democratic communities are based on difference. Real identifications are earned only when we struggle to make sense of the other. We recognize that our knowledge is always incomplete and unsatisfactory.

By making teaching a "very personal experience," we give up being liked by our students or even being liked by them in order to foster authentic dialogue with them. If this trade-off makes some novice teachers uneasy, it also asks them to consider how they will want to be known by their own students and what they will want to know about them.

Perhaps I am unduly sensitive to the question of how others read us. Like most gay people, I grew up with a keen awareness of the politics of representation. How could I ever forget summoning the courage to buy my first book about homosexuality, Edmund Bergler's bleak study of pathological deviance? It was 1959, and I was fifteen.

Finding myself absent from the arts and literatures in which I sought to affirm my sexuality, I filled the void with my own narratives. Electrified by the touch of Marc's hand on my shoulder as we walked home from the museum, unnerved by Roger's invitation to a sleepover that New Year's Eve, mesmerized by the folds in Donald's electric blue bathing suit—I gave life to my own stories. Reading my own words provided an illicit pleasure I hardly understood. Hiding nothing from myself, I spent hours secreting my desires from others even as I hoped they would be discovered.

Not, as a young teacher, could I forget the constraints placed on me by traditional representations of gay men: emblems of moral depravity, possessed of unique powers to corrupt the young. I lived in a space defined by the tension between revealing enough to attract another and concealing enough to avoid discovery by those who might do me harm. Silence and voice are not the opposites we would like them to be. They are more nuanced phenomena awaiting interpretation by varied reading and listening audiences. J. D. McClatchy captures the insights made possible by a queer childhood when he writes:

Long before I was given that fountain pen, of course, I had learned to hide things. Childhood's true, polymorphous perversity, its constant source of both pleasure and power is lying. But that pen helped me to discover something better than the lie. Almost as soon as it was given to me, I learned to hide inside the pen. Or rather, the pen allowed me to learn the difference between *hiding* something and *disguising* something—that is to say, making it difficult but not impossible to see. Even when I knew the difference, I couldn't always keep myself from confusing them.⁷

What of the students awaiting us each semester? What do they make of our pronouncements, our cues, our silences? How does our sexuality inform our interactions?

Teaching as a gay man in a predominantly female environment, I try to imagine a range of meanings, from contempt or indifference to curiosity and identity, that straight students might attach to my stories. I see the surprising silences of some of my lesbian and gay students in class as a reflection of my own speech. Perhaps I take up the gay space to which they might otherwise lay claim. How would this space be transformed by a lesbian teacher? While gay men may be read through pederastic traditions, Sue-Ellen Case suggests that lesbians are read through traditions that eroticize the powerful teacher, whose seductiveness is precisely her untouchable and unavailable position.⁸

Regardless of gender, the erotics of classroom life are as inevitable as they are inevitably denied. From our refusal to know young children's sexuality and our deployment of moral panics about sexual abuse in early childhood settings to the erotic complications of working with graduate students, questions of desire punctuate every stage of academic development. Deborah P. Britzman tells us that Freud's initial insight about complexity in pedagogical relationships occurred after an accidental meeting with a former teacher. As an adult, seeing that the teacher was considerably younger than he had remembered, Freud wondered why he had once imagined him so much older and wiser.⁹ Who does not have memories of sighting a teacher out of context—perhaps a chance encounter at the grocery store or in line at the movies? When teachers are loosened from safe moorings in either time or space, their students are unsettled. Teachers who provoke such rereadings in class make their own authority more legible and problematic for their students.

From the psychoanalytic perspective, transference—the tendency to put others in the place our parents once held for us, with all the ambivalent emotions that that entails—is central to any student-teacher relationship that makes a difference.¹⁰ If we cannot possess the parent, we can become one. The successful student turns teacher, transforming the desire for the teacher into a desire to be the teacher. Then we learn that, like the good authors, we teachers must seduce our student-readers into wanting to know, promising to deliver the certainty that will itself terminate desire. We maintain their interest in the text by appealing to its mystery, unexpected turns of plot, and indecipherable outcomes. We are experts at giving and withholding, promising and postponing, titillating, and calming.

As teachers, we concern ourselves with evoking desire rather than conferring knowledge. Explanation leads to fulfillment. Satisfying the appetite kills the hunger. So we want our students to grasp the questions that inform their search for meaning, that tell more about the desiring self than about the object of desire. We hope that our students will learn to love the subject matter and we do not hesitate to display our own passion for it.

It is the articulation of these questions that can be discomforting to students and to me. I try to manage my discomfort by steeping myself in feminist and postmodern theories. They confirm the need for me to take a position. I also turn to queer theorists who teach us how questions of desire permeate the literary and cultural texts that constitute the curriculum. But my discomfort cannot be managed. The subject of desire, my own subjectivity, is unruly and cannot be disciplined by the laws of reason.

These laws tell me that among other societal changes, the burgeoning field

of lesbian and gay studies legitimates my classroom confessions, which have brought me new opportunities and a better life. Yet I agonize over the commodification of story that these opportunities offer as I trade my life history and ask students to exchange theirs in the academic marketplace. For a course on childhood a young woman writes a beautiful and powerful description of her mother's long illness and death. I encourage her to think about the impact of these experiences on her work with children and their relationship to the assigned readings on feminist pedagogy and novels about growing up. On the last night of class, after handing in her final paper, she tells me how uneasy she has felt writing about her life in a graduate-school course for which she will receive a grade. I reply in terms of my own ambivalence about using personal narrative as a vehicle for public education. I doubt that I have relieved my student's uneasiness.

We live in a culture that thrives on intimate personal narratives.¹¹ Television talk shows, bookstore shelves, and self-help groups are awash in stories in which people recount their struggles with addictions, destructive relationships, and the effects of childhood abuse. Are the classroom confessions we elicit so very different? Do we seek an inappropriate intimacy with our students? Do we unwittingly help induct them into a culture of self-display?

In *A Life in School* Jane Tompkins describes her experiments with holistic approaches to education, which speak to the body as well as the mind. Disappointed in her students' unwillingness to assume responsibility for their own learning, Tompkins learns that she must offer them safety along with freedom, certainty along with empathy. She must define herself both as the one who cares, momentarily sacrificing her own identity to better hear her students, and as the one who knows, an expert in control of the classroom. In the end, despite modest success in leaving behind her own fears of teaching, Tompkins announces her intention to leave the academy. Abandoning a romance gone sour, she describes teaching in this way:

It's like being in love. You know how when you're in love or have a crush on somebody; you're always looking forward to the next meeting with desire and trepidation—will he or she be glad to see me? Will he or she be late? Will she or he think I'm smart, good-looking? A nice person? It's the roller-coaster of love—up one day and down the next—no two classes the same. How soon will we be going steady? Will our love be true? Do you love me like I love you?¹²

Telling our stories in class makes the roller-coaster ride that much scarier and more exhilarating. It makes us feel vulnerable in new ways. Attending to our vul-

narrability, we realize how our storytelling changes us. Every time we reproduce the story, we reproduce ourselves in a slightly altered form. There is no truth to be hidden, no self to be kept in reserve. Our storytelling is always performative, differing with audience and context. I carefully weigh what I say to students about my experiences as a gay man and about our complex community. When I define classroom discussions of lesbian and gay lives solely as discussions about issues of equity, I leave by the wayside the more disturbing issues of desire.

I remember my reluctance to come out to my parents when I was involved in multiple relationships, often with men more than twice my age. I waited until I was in a stable relationship with a peer, a relationship that has endured for more than twenty-five years. I knew that that was a more acceptable way to represent my gay life. It was not the only way or the most honest way. Then as now, I simplified gay life, denying the possibilities that make existence at the margins exciting as well as oppressive, joyful as well as painful.

This denial reflects a strategic use of abstract categories in real political struggles. In a sexually repressive society, any talk of desire can destabilize social structures. Queer sex undermines traditional ideas about masculine and feminine roles, sources of pleasure and pain, and the workings of power and control in relationships. Desire speaks to us about the irrational, the unconscious, and the body and how they have been tamed in the name of civilization.

The tension between packaging gay life in the most acceptable and least threatening terms and celebrating the variety of relationships it makes possible is debated in the gay media, in the offices of advocacy groups, and among queer theorists. Too often these new possibilities and conflicts related to race, gender, and class are masked by false representations of a single, homogeneous gay culture in which categories are collapsed and assumptions unquestioned. Well-meaning colleagues find private moments at professional conferences to ask after my health. I want to remind them, but I never do, that not all slender gay men who write about AIDS are HIV-positive.

Social categories belie the complexity of our lives. My work with students is mediated by the multiple identities through which I hold positions of greater or lesser privilege, depending on context. I am both a white, male scholar born into the middle class and a Jewish, gay early childhood educator. Once I have attempted to say these identities and have given up the aura of the omniscient narrator, my qualifications to speak from and about a particular position become problematic. How do men talk about women's lives? How do people of privilege talk about the lives of the oppressed? How do homosexuals talk about heterosexuals? About children? These are fundamental questions about teaching and social

science—about our relationships with students, research participants, and the world in between. I want my students to ask them as they design curricula for children, talk with parents, and participate in school governance.

I hope that my students see that the questions we ask about the politics of representations are echoed in regular debates within the academy about the ability of a Gentile to chair a Jewish studies program, for example, or of a white person to teach African American history. In class we struggle with the connection between theorizing marginal lives and the lived experience of marginality. Is queer theory only a tool of literary analysis, or is it a form of social critique that must lead to political action? How is theory fastened to the world?

The increasing specificity of our location within identity politics makes the question of how to speak *about* rather than *for* others more pressing and paralyzing every day. This is the confessional cul-de-sac, where our stories become the end rather than the beginning of our political work. Stories that function effectively, that lead out of the cul-de-sac of self-display, engage our students and persuade them to take up their own positions. Then they must craft their private identifications into collective actions.

Where once I understood the act of speaking for ourselves and about others as a fascinating epistemological conundrum, now I understand it as an ethical imperative.¹³ There are always risks: our words and our lives are often misunderstood and misrepresented. Naming confines and controls. Articulation belies the power of the unrepresentable. But silence is a denial of pedagogical responsibility.

I have read books that proclaim the closet a construct of the past, and I have written about the paradox of coming out as a reinforcement of homo- and heterosexual distinctions.¹⁴ No doubt our life experiences overflow the linguistic categories in which we seek to contain them. Yet one recent study indicates that lesbians and gays are the most reviled minority group in middle America—that a formerly progressive state has repealed its legal protections for sexual minorities—that yet another gay teacher has been fired and another lesbian foster mother has lost custody of her child because, as one official says, “We don’t ordinarily license persons when we know them to be involved in any kind of crime on an ongoing basis.”¹⁵ Then I know that we must license ourselves and that I will continue to come out in class, to risk the spectacle of teaching as a gay man, in the hope of provoking my students to resist common injustice.

Last year one of my students wrote in her final evaluation that I had an “excellent” command of the course content. “But,” she added, “this material is clearly his baby.” The “but” belied her assumptions about teaching and challenged my authority. It suggested that real teaching occurs when we transmit

material from which we are distanced and detached rather than ideas to which we are connected as to a baby, through the immediate demands of the body. I recognize that for some students, men can make more convincing arguments about feminism than women, just as straight faculty may be more persuasive than gay faculty in discussions about sexual orientation. But I am no longer willing to occupy the position of objective purveyor of truth or disembodied teller of other people's tales, and for my students that is probably the most disturbing part of my "agenda."

Notes

This essay was presented on 12 March 1998 at the Qualitative Research Network Seminar of the Centre for Feminist Research at York University. The seminar was organized by Gail Haig-Brown and cosponsored by the Faculty of Education at York University.

1. Didi Khayat, "Sex and the Teacher: Should We Come Out in Class?" *Harvard Educational Review* 67 (1997): 126-43.
2. E.g., Didi Khayat, *Lesbian Teachers: An Invisible Presence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Rita M. Kissen, *The Last Closet: The Real Lives of Lesbian and Gay Teachers* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996).
3. See Linda Garber, *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians, Teaching, Queer Subjects* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman, eds., *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1995).
4. Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59 (1989): 297-324; Erica McWilliam, *In Broken Images: Feminist Tales for a Different Teacher Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 148.
5. Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 94.
6. Edmund Bergler, *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956).
7. J. D. McClatchy, "My Fountain Pen," in *Boys like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories*, ed. Patrick Merla (New York: Avon, 1996), 191.
8. Sue-Ellen Case, "The Student and the Strap: Authority and Seduction in the Classroom," in Haggerty and Zimmerman, *Professions of Desire*, 33-46.
9. Deborah P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 40.
10. Jane Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 56.

11. Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
12. Jani Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996), 144.
13. Diane Elam, "Speak for Yourself," in *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*, ed. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 231–37.
14. Jonathan G. Silin, *Sex, Death, and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 162–83.
15. Sam H. Arhoveck, "Homosexual Foster Parent Sets Off a Debate in Texas," *New York Times*, 30 November 1997, 20.

