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An Education in Sexuality & Sociality: Reflections & Critiques

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“An Education in Sexuality & Sociality”

Reflections & Critiques

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A book is a marker of the things that we have done, the places we've been, people we've known. It is also a testament of what we have yet to do. This editorial, then, is both a comment on a topical concern related to higher education, and a way of furthering some of the arguments from the book and addressing elements that went astray or unmarked. In particular, this piece is in dialogue with the generous and critical review by Jason Wallace published in this journal issue. The essay is divided into two components. The first is more of a commentary on a particular issue – in this case heteronormativity on campus – stemming from the book. The second section addresses critiques raised in the review as well as issues that need to be addressed more generally.

The hope, in all of this, is to continue a conversation. Research and scholarship should never be conceived as an “end answer” to a question; for, minimally, the questions are always moving. The book is imperfect in a multitude of ways, and what I hope this editorial can contribute is to call attention to some of these matters and to further open up the book as conversation starter. At the beginning of every semester I tell my students, “if you don't leave the class with more questions than you came with (also, better questions) we are doing this wrong.” I then tell them that failure is one of the best learning experiences (and clarify that I do not mean getting an F grade in the class). These two approaches inform my writing and research with the desire to look for better questions and strive for failing better each time.

Heteronormativity on Campus

It seems fair to say that things on campus are complicated right now, not that there was ever a period where the campus – as space, place, or institution – was devoid of challenge. In fact, this is one of the fundamental *modus operandi* of colleges, though, truthfully, I don't think those that run the campus realize the full extent of this. Compounded with the United States' (U.S.) overarching taboos and repression of sexuality, and you have a situation in which it

is hard to think of campus as a space unencumbered with the trappings of a sexual education. What we see is an aversion to sex and sexuality, even when in the standardized heterosexual formation.

“Take a good long look around you tonight. Some of these people will become your lifelong friends; they'll dance at your wedding. They'll be with you to watch your children grow up. It is a good bet that your future spouse is in this room right now.” These words, spoken by a college President at the first collective event for first year students, and the only event as a full group, until graduation, demonstrate the role that universities play in the creation of “family values” – even if they are ostensibly ‘modern family values’ (Karioris, 2019).

When my mother went to university, there was an adage that most women went to university not to get a bachelor's degree, but to get an MRS degree instead. The suggestion was simple: women at university were there - or should be there - primarily to find a husband and become someone's Missus. While these days are thankfully gone, and women now go to university in higher proportions than ever before (NCES, 2015), the undergirding structure has remained steadfastly fixed in place. While the MRS degree may have gone to the wayside to some degree, universities continue to act as a matchmaking service for students. Based on a recent *New York Times* article, some tour guides at Princeton say that upwards of 75% of Princeton alumni marry each other (Carey, 2018). As the Kevin Carey puts it, “Princetonians like to marry one another” (Carey, 2018).

This is neither a random occurrence, nor a passive process of the university. Having spent a year studying, working, and talking with students, one of the things that became clear was the way the institution put forward specific passages for students. Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton (2015) have done an amazing job showing how these pathways relate to class and inequalities rooted through the system of fraternities and sororities. These pathways are always to the benefit of certain students, rather than the

totality of the student body on campus (Grasgreen, 2013). As Armstrong and Hamilton (2015) point out, these pathways are not simply class-based or gender-based, rather they also fashion sets of continuities to maintain these groupings.

The President's aforementioned statement not only hints at marrying fellow alumni, but also rests on the pillars of heteronormative coupledness: weddings and children. In what amounts to the only collective event prior to graduation, the President ensures that they understand that part of their education while on campus is to work towards marriage. While a large amount of research has shown ways universities are complicit and active agents in the creation of hook-up culture (Wade, 2017), the importance of understanding the university's role in regulating sexuality towards marital trajectory still needs to be discussed.

Both hook-up culture and the marital trajectories of the university are part of a heteronormative system, where not only is heterosexuality prioritized – and all other forms of sexuality marginalized – but also the practices and structures which are tightly wound to disallow anything outside of the norm, which, in the U.S. is still marriage. Reinvigorating the dictum of *in loco parentis*, many modern universities are not only taking on the moral development of students, but also the conjugal connection between them. They are doing this all while refusing to take on the task of actual sex education – something that the U.S. struggles to do (Rough, 2018). At root, I argue that *in loco parentis* is a substitute for substantive juridical concerns. Rather than have their children be subject to the law, parents wish for the university to create a pseudo-parental role by which their children will not be subjected to the law, per se. The students would instead be subjects of the university rather than the state, as parents and the university seek to situate students as children, rather than adults who should be held under the burden of law. By creating this form of judiciary, the university is simultaneously protecting itself from the law and legal ramifications without undertaking the educational components that would be necessi-

tated by *in loco parentis*. In this way, it is a circular issue wherein the university is able to negate both its educational responsibilities to the student-as-child, while also minimizing its duty to the student-as-legal-subject.

Higher education in the U.S is intricately and intimately linked to sex and sexuality. While the past five years have seen an increase in the number of issues discussed in the media – from hook-up culture to discussions of the erotics of teaching, relationships between faculty and students, and increased awareness of the amount of sexual harassment, assault, and rape that takes place on and around college campuses – colleges and universities have a long history of involvement in marital structures (Karioris, 2019). As we move forward, it is important that we do not simply hand over the reins of sex and sexuality to the university, which is what has happened to policing on campus in many ways; by 'policing,' I mean the direct and unequivocal entry of the state mechanism of the police onto campus, as well as the recent acquisition of military grade arms (Karioris, 2017). We must, instead, be critical of the ways that universities take on legal aspects of sexuality, while refuting their educational mandate when it comes to matters of sex and sexuality.

Issues of sexual matter fall into the perfect nexus of neither/nor for the university. They constitute the example par excellence of one of the ways that the university seeks out its own continuity, over a duty to its students or the wider community and society. We need to be careful about assuming that universities have the best interests of students in mind. Further, we need to rethink the belief that universities know how to, or are willing to, appropriately address issues of sex, sexual violence, and sexuality on campus. Further, we should be cautious about allowing the university system to be the arbiter and propagator of 'family values' (Cooper, 2017). In this, not only do they create 'good' and 'bad' relations between straight partners, but they contribute to the construction of the "good gay" bound for marriage and the "bad gay"

who is supposedly engaging in unsafe sex practices, spreading sexually-transmitted disease, and causing social problems (Halperin & Hoppe, 2017). These “social problems” are often moral panics, usually unrelated to any causal or actual issue.

Dialogue

In this section, I wish to engage with the critiques and comments of the book review published alongside this editorial. Again, I would like to thank the author for their thoughtful and engaged reading of the book. The review sets forward two main critiques, both of which are extremely prescient and fair.

The first critique is that the book would be better served by greater engagement with literature from and within the field of Higher Education and Student Affairs. This is true. The literature coming out of these fields – seen, in part, by the journal where this dialogue is taking place – is both engaged and nuanced in many ways. Let me, for a second, situate myself a little more specifically in relation to these fields. Prior to pursuing my master’s degree, I spent two years working at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). I worked as the Operations Coordinator for Housing & Residence Life, overseeing the day-to-day operations of a multitude of residence halls, apartment buildings, and sorority houses. Additionally, as an undergraduate, I spent four years working as a Resident Assistant (RA) in two primarily first-year residence halls. By providing this information, I hope to give a little more context into my engagement with the fields of Higher Education & Student Affairs, and demonstrate that, while I am working outside of the field (as the review notes), I was previously an insider, and was tracked for further study in Higher Education originally.

While the book addresses this field of inquiry to a degree, it does not necessarily give due diligence to provide background or thoroughly engage the current literature coming out of these fields as deeply as I would have liked. Part of this is simply due to time and space, and part of this is also a notable gap that I

would like to acknowledge. The review does a wonderful job of pointing out additional directions and sources which touch on these topics, and these are deeply appreciated. The foundational work by scholars such as Jason Laker and Tracy Davis (2011) and Shaun Harper and Frank Harris III (2010) has had an immense impact on the field and is important to look to even as we move forward. The forthcoming book *Men and Masculinities: Theoretical Foundations and Promising Practices for Supporting College Men’s Development* (Tillapaugh & McGowan, 2019), with contributions from Laker, Harris, and Davis (year) amongst others, will continue to push thinking about masculinities on campus forward. Work like this, as well as the work that *JCSHESA* is doing continues pushing the field of Student Affairs forward.

The second critique is that the book does not engage enough with the role of privilege, power, and background – as it is based on research with primarily White, middle-class young men – and that to have a full conversation about the impact of heteronormativity on campus we need to address individuals whose identities lie at the margins (racially, economically, socially, sexually, and regarding ability). I agree with this critique and would like to take this moment to clarify this component from the book.

In a sense, the book does not – as the review states – address these issues head on. What it does seek to do is shine light on part of what happens even to those who have the least risk, cost, or fear of danger from the system, in this case, White, middle-class men. By this I mean to suggest that part of what the book is showing is just how insidious and pervasive the system of heteronormativity is, and how deeply impactful it is on the lives of those who generally present as heterosexual and have the markers of privilege. Through this, what we can deduce – although it is not explicitly stated in the book – is just how damaging, hurtful, and oppressive this system is to those who already fall under various other axes of structural violence and oppression. Thus, I agree with the critique presented in the review and will attempt to extend the

analysis in the book to address this issue.

While the book tackles university-as-system via primarily White, middle-class men, the book is conceived of as part of a broader conversation in scholarship. A number of recent books address the complex interstices of race and gender and ways that different individuals mobilize and are impacted by the university. For example, *The Privileged Poor* by Anthony A. Jack (2019) discusses the ways that elite universities are failing minority students. In particular, these types of inequalities at universities, while being addressed in some spaces, are in fact getting worse in others. A recent *New York Times* report showed that “Even with Affirmative Action, Blacks and Hispanics Are More Underrepresented at Top Colleges Than 35 Years Ago” (Ashkenas, Park, & Pearce, 2017).

In a similar vein, Laura Hamilton’s book *Parenting to a Degree* (2016), discusses the ways that family impacts women in college and their ability to be successful. This can also be seen in Shamus Khan’s work, which addresses the elite elements of privilege and education (2018). Each of these volumes, and many others, build a critical understanding of the ways that researchers need to think through not only intersectional identities, but also the structures which undergird the inequalities these intersectional experiences elucidate.

The edited volume by Genny Beemyn, *Trans People in Higher Education* (2019), collects and presents a comprehensive understanding of the ways that trans students are working through and being addressed by higher education, building off of Z Nicolazzo’s *Trans* in College* (2016). The forthcoming edited volume *Fight the Tower: Asian American Women Scholars’ Resistance and Renewal in the Academy* (Valverde & Dariotis, 2019) will shine light specifically on the ways that Asian Americans are addressing the structure of academia and pushing back. In thinking through the structure of university and possibilities for future scholarship, la paperson’s *A Third University is Possible* (2017) provides valuable insights for theorizing the university in relation to settler colonialism. They do

this through global examples and by thinking explicitly about how to decolonize the university.

These books are part of a broad collection of literature that addresses institutions through an intersectional lens to provide a complex portrait of the systems, their effects, and ways to challenge them. *An Education in Sexuality and Sociality* is, at its core, a critique of university systems and the power and authority they have and are given in society. As such, the book focuses on structures, while simultaneously not fully addressing the ways that individuals are fashioned within these systems, and, more importantly, to the ways that some individuals (White, wealthy, able-bodied, straight men) are able to mobilize structures to their advantage, while others are grossly underserved and marginalized by the structures. Focusing on the university as institution, structure, and system is meant to re-orient them as central and often subtle drivers of inequality.

One element of what the book seeks to address is the ways that the university not only could, but ought, to do things differently. One of the first steps in this is to step away from a business model of education. In discussing Cornel West, Watson (2012) states that, “In recent years, West says that higher education has become so ‘commoditized and bureaucratized that almost everyone is up for sale.’ West says he worries about the younger generation of intellectuals who focus too much on “raw ambition and careerism” (para. 12). This model of selling education has damaged our ability as a society, and as individuals, to find ways to see education otherwise. This is a larger societal problem, not just within academia. We too often have a belief that things are the way they are, and must continue to be this way. This is summed up best by Mark Fisher who said “It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher, 2009, p. 1).

We must always remember that education can and should be for the transformation of society. “Freire’s work affirmed that education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor” (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Building on this,

McLaren and Farahmandpur state that Critical Pedagogy “must be a *collective process* that involves utilizing a dialogical (i.e., Freirean) learning approach” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005, p. 9).

Conclusion

I would like to close this editorial with a few thoughts on the production of knowledge, and academia as a space in which we find ourselves. Too often, it seems, research publications are seen and treated as conclusive, final, and over. For me, this book is the product of a particular period of time, and also a product constrained by time. The book stems from my doctoral dissertation – which was mostly written four years ago – and came into being during a period of my life when I was teaching a five-five course load and struggling. This is not an excuse, but, if we are honest about our research, we must be honest about its production as well. In doing so, one of the first structures that we will shine light on is the institutionalized forms of networking and cliques that are exclusionary and built on the basis of the name of your university, rather than the quality of your work. Like so many PhD students, I worked in addition to teaching throughout my degree, giving English lessons and copy-editing, and, during fieldwork, working at a restaurant. After graduating, I did not have a research-focused, post-doctoral position in which to hone this book into what it could have been. This is not simply a note about my book, but a note about the structures that allocate time and resources upwards – from Harvard PhDs to Columbia and Yale Postdoctoral roles.

As we move forward and engage the field of Higher Education and Student Affairs, and as we engage higher education as an institution and system, we must look to working against the grain of combative individualism and instead work in conversation. All of our scholarship is partial and to a degree, flawed. We are all growing, learning, and holistic students at heart. One of the things I have held on to from my undergraduate university’s mission is the idea of *cura*

personalis. It means “care for the entire person.”

Working in Higher Education, I often think we should think more of the classroom as a way of engaging in research. For example, bell hooks (1994) talks about her class, saying that in “my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share” (p. 21). The same is most certainly true in research and publishing. We all must risk, and risk means that we will fail; however, from failure, we learn the most.

Let me close by once again thanking the generous reviewer for their thoughts, time, and for their critique and invitation to keep thinking on these topics, and to push the conversation forward. I would also like to thank the Editorial Team at JCSHESA for allowing me this space to respond to the review and to continue thinking about these matters.

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