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*"No promo homo" laws in a few states seek to prevent schools from openly supporting LGBT students. However, there is evidence that public support is growing for the implementation of gay-straight alliances, nondiscrimination policies, and other interventions designed to counteract and prevent violence and harassment against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth in public schools. Eight states and the District of Columbia have a sexual orientation nondiscrimination and/or anti-harassment law, and at least six states have regulations addressing sexual orientation bias. A growing body of research indicates that these interventions are helping to make LGBT students feel safer. Additionally, school districts that choose not to voluntarily implement these interventions may be convinced to do so by the increasing number of successful lawsuits that have held schools liable for failing to protect LGBT youth from pervasive harassment and violence.*

KEYWORDS. Gay youth, LGBT education issues, legal issues, safe schools

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KEYWORDS. Coming out in the classroom, gay and lesbian teachers, gay and lesbian students, sexual identities in language education

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*This article explores ways of queering the youthful cyberflâneur, using the television series Queer as Folk as the touchstone for such explorations. The concept of the youthful cyberflâneur, as developed by Kenway and Bullen, links power, pleasure, and consumer politics to pedagogy. However, it has been criticised for its heterosexist register. Here, the authors seek to attend to this criticism and enhance the pedagogical potential of this concept by drawing on the work of Rasmussen who introduces discourses of pleasure and sexuality into debates around pedagogy. The queer youthful cyberflâneur not only attends to the centrality of sexuality in*

*young people's lives but also to some of the links between consumer culture, sexuality, and globalisation.*

KEYWORDS. Consumption, flâneur, globalisation, *Queer as Folk*, sexual identity, queer theory

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# A Queer Chaos of Meanings: Coming Out Conundrums in Globalised Classrooms

Cynthia D. Nelson

**ABSTRACT.** Education research on sexual identity issues has increasingly engaged with poststructuralist and queer theories of identity. The focus has shifted toward conceptualising sexual identities as “acts” rather than facts, and problematising all sexual identities rather than liberating oppressed ones. However, in the growing literature on the complexities associated with “coming out,” little attention has been given to these matters in classrooms with student cohorts that are international, transcultural, and multilingual. This article considers puzzling conundrums associated with teachers coming out (or not) in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for adult immigrants, refugees, and international students residing in the United States. Drawing on interview transcripts, the author looks at (apparent) disjunctures of meaning between how three ESL teachers decided to represent their sexual identi-

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ties in class and how five of their students interpreted these choices. The author explores this "queer chaos of meanings" with a view to illuminating key tensions associated with negotiating sexual identifications (and dis-identifications) in globalised classrooms. A case is made for thinking not only queerly but also transculturally about sexual identity issues in education. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Coming out in the classroom, gay and lesbian teachers, gay and lesbian students, sexual identities in language education

One of the reasons that I'm not out to them is they're pretty much fresh off the boat . . . and the one thing they don't need [laughs] is to have a, a gay teacher on their hands. . . . I mean they have enough culture shock as it is. . . . [So] I'm gonna be . . . the normal American guy. Tony<sup>1</sup>

I've done it [come out as a lesbian] just about every single term. I don't make a big production of it, you know. I think for most people it's not that big of a deal. Gina

I'm sensitive because most often I think people wanna know how you categorise yourself. . . . I'm afraid somebody's gonna, um, judge that part of me that doesn't yet know how to label myself. . . . I don't want to, even. Roxanne

Over the past decade, education research on gay and lesbian issues in general, and on "coming out" issues in particular, has increasingly engaged with poststructuralist and queer theories of identity (Britzman, 1995; Pinar, 1998). Theoretically, the focus has shifted toward conceptualizing sexual identities as "acts" rather than facts, and problematising all sexual identities rather than liberating oppressed ones (Butler, 1993; Warner, 1993). In this context coming out means more than just expressing, rather than repressing, lesbian or gay identity. Questions are being asked such as, "Out of what? Into what?" (Malinowitz, 1995, p. 75). There is now more of an emphasis on "unpacking" the complexities associated with negotiating a variety of sexual identities in the classroom (Evans, 2002; Grace & Benson, 2000; Talburt, 2000).

Another, more recent, move (evidenced in the international scope of this journal) is to consider sexual identity issues in education in relation to the concepts of globalisation and postcolonialism. This involves investigating these issues within geographic regions that have thus far been underrepresented in education research on sexual identities. It also means applying postcolonial analyses, whatever the geographic context. Even in countries whose publication record on lesbian/gay and queer matters in education<sup>2</sup> has been relatively prolific, little attention has been paid to "coming out" questions in increasingly globalised classrooms, with student cohorts that are international, transcultural, and multilingual. This dearth is all the more notable given the "unprecedented levels of immigration and displacement" associated with globalisation (Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 345).<sup>3</sup> Few analyses of the sexual identity negotiations of teachers also investigate the perspectives of their students; especially overlooked are the perspectives of immigrants, refugees, and international students.

Here I consider puzzling conundrums associated with teachers coming out (or not) in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, held at two universities and one community college, for adults from various language backgrounds residing in the United States. Over 100 English language teachers and students participated in the larger study (Nelson, forthcoming), which took place in two US cities and involved focus groups for teachers, class observations, and interviews with teachers and students. One key issue that emerged was how participants were negotiating their sexual identities in class. Interestingly, the meanings teachers intended to convey in class with regard to their sexual identity positioning often diverged from the interpretations their students were making—yet the teachers rarely seemed cognizant of such dissonances.

Drawing on the interview transcripts (and informed by the class observations), this article examines how three ESL teachers—Tony, Gina, and Roxanne—decided to represent their sexual identities in class and how these choices were interpreted by five students.<sup>4</sup> My aim is to use several (apparent) disjunctures of meaning that occurred between teachers and students as a means of illuminating key tensions associated with "doing" sexual identities in globalised classrooms. The broader aim is to show why efforts to engage with sexual identity issues in education need to take into account the challenges and opportunities afforded by the globalisation of education.

### COMING OUT CONUNDRUMS

I use the term "conundrums" to refer to puzzlements associated with the three teachers' sexual identities as perceived by their students.

#### *Tony: In the Closet?*

Tony, a man in his fifties from the United States was teaching a "speaking and listening" class in an intensive English program affiliated with a university. The 11 women and three men in the class, most of whom were in their twenties, were international students from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. At the time I observed the class, they were studying a unit of work, which the students themselves had selected, on "lesbian and gay culture."

*The Teacher's Perspective.* In this class, Tony explains:

I definitely, I guess, present myself as a straight person. Maybe especially now because we're doing this gay topic. . . . One of the reasons that I'm not out to them is they're pretty much fresh off the boat . . . and the one thing they don't need [laughs] is to have a, a gay teacher on their hands. . . . I mean they have enough culture shock as it is. . . . I'm gonna be . . . the normal American guy. . . . I don't know if I've used [the words] "my girlfriend" . . . for a long time. But I might say something like, uh, "I went to a movie with a woman." . . . I wanna gain their trust . . . show them . . . that we have a lot of things in common.

Tony's decision may have been informed by his view that the concept of gay identity would not necessarily be familiar to students from Asia, who might conflate it with transvestitism. "I think to a certain degree . . . Asians as a generalization . . . have a stereotype of . . . flamboyant . . . men who . . . dress up [as women]. . . . They don't think 'the homosexual' exists, a lot of them."

Describing a class session which students were discussing gays and lesbians, Tony says:

When they talk about humorous things, you know, I just laugh right along with them. . . . Even though I realise it's demeaning . . . to me as a gay man. . . . I mean the humour possibly directed against gays or lesbians. . . . Of course it's all unaware of the fact that there may be a gay person sitting in this room right now.

Using laughter to position himself as straight and anti-gay, Tony believed that he was the only gay-identified person in the classroom—and that only he knew this.

*Students' Perspectives.* Miyuki, a woman from Japan, lived with an American host-family, with whom she regularly discussed her classroom experiences.

Miyuki: [My host-mother] said "Maybe your teacher is gay." [laughs] . . .

Cynthia: And what did you think about that?

Miyuki: [laughs] I thought so. A little. I thought.

When asked if she thought it would be a problem to have a teacher who was openly gay, she replied no, adding that, in Japan,

if someone says "I am gay" or "I am lesbian," maybe . . . we can't continue a friendship . . . same as before. . . . But in here, I think, if my friend's a gay, maybe . . . we can continue good friendship.

Unbeknownst to Tony, there was much innuendo among the students about his sexual identity. Most, like Hae-Woo and Jun-Kyu, suspected their teacher was gay. These two men from Korea, who chose to be interviewed together, brought up Tony's marital status. Their laughter, frequent winks, and nudges underscored the strong gay subtext that seemed to run through the interview:

Hae-Woo: I think Tony is a good man.

Jun-Kyu: Yeah, good man.

Hae-Woo: But he didn't marry. [both laugh]. . . . In Korea . . . some men didn't marry even he very old . . .

Jun-Kyu: The other people think he's some problem.

Hae-Woo: Yeah. [laughs]

Jun-Kyu: In personality and thinking.

Cynthia: I see.

Jun-Kyu: Physical problem. [H laughs] . . .

Hae-Woo: In Korea if, uh, Tony is my friend but he's old and he didn't marry, I introduce some women.

Jun-Kyu: Yeah, yeah.

Hae-Woo: . . . They meet and some talk and very short time they date . . . And they get married. (H laughs)

Jun-Kyu: . . . I feel a sense of necessity to introduce, uh, some [women] to Tony.

*Thinking Transculturally.* For Tony, coming out requires "a defining moment," a verbal "declaration," a "speech-act," which is not surprising since lesbian/gay discourses in the United States tend to focus on "liberation through disclosure" (Strongman, 2002, p. 181). This peculiarly (albeit not exclusively) North American preference for what Santiago (2002) calls "public exhibitionism" may be "[m]ore rapid and efficient, yes, but certainly less wily" (p. 18). Perhaps students such as Miyuki, Hae-Woo, and Jun-Kyu did not need to hear Tony say "I'm gay" in order to surmise it. Perhaps his students were more likely than Tony to understand coming out as involving not just one solitary speech act but a slower and subtler process that does not necessarily require explicit verbalization (Strongman, 2002).

Hae-Woo and Jun-Kyu did not explicitly discuss Tony's sexual identity, but they volunteered that in Korea it would be socially unacceptable for a man of his age to remain unmarried. The meaning of a word like "homosexual" is especially open-ended in contexts where homosexual identities are largely absent from public discourse, such as South Korea:

Paradoxically, one might say that in [modern] Korean society, "homosexuality" is a term without its own referent. . . . [H]omosexuality does not seem to be "that love whose name one dare not utter" but rather "that love whose name does not refer to anything." (Seo, 2001, p. 66)

This raises the question of whether, for some students, the notion of a gay identity is even available within the discourses that are familiar to them.

Thinking transculturally also means avoiding "smug nationalisms" (Fung, 1995, p. 128)—in this case, reductive taxonomies in which people (usually students) are aligned with particular points of view based on their country of origin. It would be highly problematic to assert, for example, that because Hae-Woo and Jun-Kyu are from Korea they have no way of conceptualising or talking about homosexuality. It is possible that in our interview they "may have indeed chosen to state something ambiguously and thus avoid expressing it 'in so many words'" in order to preserve "deniability," thereby allowing themselves an "escape route" if asked for clarification (Willing, 1992, p. 180).

Unlike her classmates Hae-Woo and Jun-Kyu, Miyuki used the word "gay" in relation to Tony. But does "gay" have the same meaning for her as for him? As Tan (2001), writing of sexual politics in Taiwan, argues:

[T]here is no reason to expect that just because some Taiwanese and San Franciscans employ similar vocabulary or relationship models, then these words and models must carry the same personal or social significance, or that they will function in the respective societies in similar ways. We do not find in Taiwan a pristine Taiwanese homosexuality but a confluence of local and imported conceptions, underpinned by economic, social, and political systems, producing distinct and sometimes conflicting hybrid models of what (homo)sexuality "is." (pp. 124-125)

It is likely that within any given classroom multiple understandings would be circulating as to what it means to identify oneself or someone else as "gay" (or "queer," "straight," and so on). This variation may be especially pronounced among students from a range of geographic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

Schenke (1991, p. 48) observes that "personal and social histories . . . in ESL teaching in particular, are traversed by legacies of colonialism." Might colonialist thinking have underpinned Tony's failure to consider that students who were new arrivals—"fresh off the boat," as he put it—could read him as gay? As Strongman (2002, p. 177) points out, in lesbian/gay discourses produced by and emanating from the United States, that country tends to be represented as "enlightened" and "progressive" in contrast to other "culturally backwards" parts of the world (Strongman's focus is Latin America). But, as Narayan (1997) contends:

We need to move away from a picture of national and cultural contexts as *sealed rooms*, impervious to change, with a homogenous space "inside" them, inhabited by "authentic insiders" who all share a uniform and consistent account of their institutions and values. Third-World national and cultural contexts are as pervaded by *plurality, dissension, and change*, as are their "Western" counterparts. (p. 33, italics added)

In Tony's view, students' countries of origin are places whose inhabitants (even when traveling beyond the "sealed room") remain united in their discomfort and lack of familiarity with gay people. However, Miyuki's statement that she would not find it problematic to have an openly gay teacher but might in her home country indicates that she was evaluating her experiences in the United States according to what she perceived as the local norms and practices. By identifying his students uniformly and exclusively with their ("foreign") cultures of origin (which he seemed to characterize as being either "non-gay" or "anti-gay"), Tony may have underestimated their ability or willingness to contextualise their judgments transculturally.

#### *Gina: Coming Out?*

Gina, a woman in her thirties originally from Europe, was teaching the ESL version of an academic English class at a university. The 11 women and 11 men in the class, all in their twenties and thirties, were mostly refugees and immigrants, along with a few international students from China, El Salvador, Japan, Korea, Laos, Norway, Singapore, and Vietnam. At the time I observed the class, they were studying a unit of work on "community," which involved some discussion of "the lesbian/gay community."

*The Teacher's Perspective.* Gina has come out as a lesbian "just about every single term. I don't make a big production of it, you know. I think for most people it's not that big of a deal." She felt coming out was important for a number of reasons. For example, "Every single term I have queer students in my classes. . . . Or I have people whose mothers are queer, whose sisters are queer, whose uncles are queer, and it always comes up."

In Gina's view, her students were likely to interact with queer people on a regular basis. They

work with gays . . . their dentist is gay, their teacher is gay. . . . We're here to educate people to be critical thinkers so that they can, you know, make choices that affect their world. But we let them go around the world like this [covering her eyes with her hands] and say "No! You don't have really to look at anybody being different from you."

In one class session, the students were in small groups discussing a class reading on nontraditional families: Gina circulated around the classroom, explaining to one group that she herself was a single parent. After the class I asked her about this interaction.

I told them I was . . . a dyke. . . . They were trying to understand the concept of traditional and nontraditional family. . . . I said "Well how about a single parent . . . how about . . . same sex parents" . . . and I used myself as an example. I said I was a single parent, but I was a single parent and the other parent . . . was another woman. So my family . . . was nontraditional in many ways.

Asked how the students had responded, she replied:

It did not hinder the discussion in any way. I think on the contrary they were like "Okay so that's nontraditional and this is traditional," and then we kept going. . . . I do use a lot of examples. And I try often to find something that is really tangible to them . . . really common. . . . I knew they were gonna listen to that . . . because it's about me.

Gina explained that these students had been very open with her about their family situations:

By this time of the term I've heard a lot about their families. . . . I mean, the woman who asked the question [Lucy] actually has shared a lot of very, very personal stuff. . . . At some point I feel that [laughs] it needs to kind of go both ways. . . . Just on a human level . . . if I'm gonna ask you to write that much about you, [laughs] if you're gonna disclose so much, it feels like it creates even more of an imbalance in power if . . . I'm this . . . unknown mysterious entity. . . . That makes me uncomfortable.

*A Student's Perspective.* I asked Lucy, a woman from Vietnam, about the incident.

Lucy: [Gina] said something like "For example my family." I'm, I'm thinking uhhh what about your family? There must be something that I don't know. . . . And then she said something about two mother [sic]. And I was thinking two mother, hmm. Really interesting. . . . I didn't really understand. I didn't want to *ask* her. . . . [So later] I said [to Bill, a classmate], "Do you understand what she's saying, like two mother, or something like that?" And [Bill] said: "No I don't know."

Cynthia: . . . I thought I overheard her saying something about she was in a nontraditional family, or something? Did-

Lucy: Hmm. I don't remember . . . nontraditional family. She just say that two mothers live in two different houses, something like that. . . . She . . . never mention her husband or anything else. . . . She mentioned her daughter once, or her son, I don't remember. . . . At the beginning [of the term] she mention herself, "Miss." So I just kind of [thought] oh, probably, you know, something happened. And then . . . on that . . . day, because we was confused about, about the [reading] . . . she kind of explain, I think, by giving herself as an example. But I'm not sure what example was she pointing it out. So we were kind of confused by that. But I didn't want to ask. Because . . . probably she want to keep this the privacy of her own.

Cynthia: Because she's the teacher?

Lucy: Yeah, of course. If you're a friend, probably I ask you. . . . So I'm not sure what I was listening to. [laughs]

*Exploring the Ambiguities of Meaning Making.* What might account for Lucy's failure to understand Gina's coming out—or, to put it another way, Gina's failure to make her coming out understandable to Lucy? Is this a failure on Lucy's part to decode the literal meanings of Gina's utterances? What actual words did Gina use—"dyke"—and were they part of Lucy's active vocabulary? Perhaps, when coming out, Gina was feeling nervous or excited and talking slightly faster than usual. Could this have impeded Lucy's comprehension? Or did Gina fail to communicate

that she was a lesbian because Lucy was not expecting her teacher to speak about her sexual identity? Perhaps Lucy did not consider this a "legitimate" topic within a classroom setting?

Decoding Gina's narrative required her listeners to make a series of culture-based inferences that depended upon knowledge of such concepts as domestic partnership arrangements, lesbian parenting, multi-household families. Were these relationship formations, which were common locally, sufficiently familiar to this young woman refugee from Vietnam that she could follow what Gina was saying?

The Gina/Lucy interaction underscores that "[l]anguage is always, inherently, and necessarily ambiguous" (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, p. 10, citing Levinson, 1990). Communication, particularly intercultural communication, involves an ongoing process of making and adjusting inferences—a process that is rarely smooth or seamless.

This disjuncture between teacher and student also underscores the importance of theorizing sexual identities—not as inner essences that can be either expressed or repressed, but as relational acts that are produced through interactions. As Britzman (1997) puts it:

*No sexual identity, even the most normative, is automatic, authentic, easily assumed, or without negotiation and construction. . . . Rather, every sexual identity is an unstable, shifting, and volatile construction, a contradictory and unfinalized social relation.* (p. 186)

In accordance with this view, the Gina/Lucy interaction highlights the value of looking at not only the teacher's experience of coming out in class but also how their students experience this. Luhmann (1998) makes this case for attending not only to what it means to "speak gay" in the classroom but what it means to *listen* to someone else "speaking gay:"

The making of selves begins with an other—the other in the text, in speech, the teacher, the student. The queer pedagogy that I imagine engages students in a conversation about how textual positions are being taken up or refused, for example when reading lesbian and gay texts or when listening to somebody speaking gay. . . . *What does the student actually hear* and how does he or she respond to the text? Can queer teaching, rather than assuming and affirming identities, take on the problem of *how identifications are made and refused in the process of learning?* (pp. 153-154, italics added)

With queer theory, ignorance can be considered not a lack of knowledge, but an effect of knowledge (Britzman, 1995). Might Lucy be refusing to understand that her teacher is a lesbian because this new knowledge is too unsettling, too disturbing, something she "cannot bear to know" (p. 154)? Or did Lucy understand perfectly well that Gina was a lesbian, but feel it would be inappropriate to share that information with me—whether to "protect" me from this potentially discomfiting knowledge, or to protect Gina's privacy?<sup>6</sup>

### *Roxanne: No Sexual Identity?*

Roxanne, a woman in her forties from the United States, was teaching a grammar-based ESL class at a community college. The twenty-six students in the class, evenly divided between women and men, ranged in age from their early twenties to mid-seventies, and were immigrants and refugees from 13 countries: Brazil, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Gambia, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Morocco, the Philippines, Somalia, Thailand, and Vietnam. During my time observing the class, they were studying modal auxiliary verbs (e.g., "could," "might"), and lesbian/gay themes arose during a grammar exercise.

*The Teacher's Perspective.* Roxanne says she doesn't "have a label for myself in terms of sexual identity. And I don't feel like the labels that I know about resonate for me, in particular." Her sexual identity

comes from so many different places and is changing. . . . It does bother me, for some reason, to be limited, seemingly limited, by a label. . . . I'm sensitive because most often . . . people wanna know how you categorise yourself. . . . I think that my resistance to knowing that, or my inability to know that . . . is uncomfortable for some people. . . . I'm afraid somebody's gonna, um, judge that part of me that doesn't yet know how to label myself. . . . I don't want to, even.

Roxanne dreaded being asked about her sexual identity in class. "If . . . a student asked me 'What about you, are you straight or gay?' . . . it would be a very big teaching moment for me. . . . If I say 'I don't know' . . . that could make me sound like 'Huh, how old are you?'" Roxanne assumed that in her classes she had students of every sexual identity, which she tried to factor into her teaching practices (Nelson, 2004). But she felt that she would never know who was who, as she considered sex-

ual identity fundamentally unknowable: "Even if someone is partnered with the opposite sex . . . I still don't think that means anything."

I asked Roxanne if she was concerned that students might think she was a lesbian because she was willing to discuss lesbian/gay topics in class. That possibility, she said, had never even crossed her mind and she seemed completely unfazed by the thought of it.

*A Student's Perspective.* Pablo felt a very strong bond with Roxanne: "I felt like she's a very trusting teacher. Like," this man from Mexico explained, "I can tell her I'm gay" (though he longed to tell her, he had not done so). Using the research technique "stimulated recall" (Nunan, 1992), I was having Pablo listen to an audio-taped discussion from Roxanne's class on the topic of same-sex affection in public. He became very animated upon re-hearing Roxanne's utterance: "I can't remember when I stopped. I used to hold hands with my sisters. And, I must, I must have been very young, like four or five, when we stopped doing that, I think. I can't even remember!"

With much enthusiasm, Pablo explained that in class when Roxanne had made this comment: "I was thinking . . . 'You sure? Are you serious? You, you stopped doing a long time ago? [laughs] Or you did it yesterday?'" This was not the first time he felt that Roxanne was probably a lesbian:

Since the beginning of the term I felt . . . something that made me feel very comfortable with Roxanne as a teacher . . . something special. . . . I would like to know if she is [a lesbian], you know? And I would not say anything. I, I just would be the same way I am. And. But I will never ask her. . . . I don't know . . . *how* to ask her. . . . Maybe [if] I ask her, we will not get along anymore.

Also, he found it amusing that when Roxanne talked about lesbian/gay themes she was "acting straight":

Where I'm from in Mexico some gay people . . . have to *try* to be straight and then not to move like gay people . . . not to talk about. When I see some gay people . . . do something, uh, like normal, I laugh. I laugh because I say, "Why should they do that? I mean, why they *have* to do that?" . . . That's why I laugh when Roxanne was talking.

*Unpacking Sexual Identities.* Points of divergence between Roxanne and Pablo raise several queer issues. One involves the paradox of identity, or what Butler (1993, p. 4) calls identifications and "disidentifica-

tions," which is a central theme within queer and poststructuralist theories. Roxanne is reluctant to ascribe to a particular sexual identity, as she considers doing so to be potentially constrictive. According to Bourdieu (1991), identifying as a member of a community or a group inevitably carries with it a requirement to act, since group identity involves obligation, duty, and behavioural codes of conduct. In this view, "to give a social definition, an identity" is "to *signify* to someone what he [sic] is and how he should conduct himself as a consequence" (p. 120). Thus, classifying people according to sexual identity has a regulatory function. Queer theorists do not consider sexual identities straightforward or necessarily desirable, cautioning that

[s]exual identities can exclude as well as include, limit as well as liberate (Fuss, 1991). Solidifying fluid sexualities into fixed sexual identities that can then be taxonomised may have more to do with social control than empowerment. After all, the purpose of the straight/gay binary is not merely to describe sexual identities but to regulate them; in other words, the binary is not neutral but normative. (Nelson, 1999, p. 376)

While Roxanne's reluctance to align with any particular sexual-identity positioning (which she called a "label") applied beyond the classroom as well as within it, her teaching aim was definitely "to engage students with the subject matter rather than with herself as a subject who matters" (Talbert, 2000, p. 70). Pablo, however, is eager for Roxanne to name her sexual identity, thus enabling him to speak openly with her about his day-to-day life. Perhaps the prospect of having an openly lesbian teacher is so desirable to Pablo because it would obviate the need for him to "enact the gay discursive deception" (Malinowitz, 1995, p. 257) when interacting with her (and his classmates?). Malinowitz's study of student writers found that

facing an audience of their peers and teacher, [lesbian and gay] students feel afraid-afraid that they won't be listened to, that they will be ridiculed, beaten up, punished, ostracized, that their expression will be curtailed, that they will be relegated to the remove of Other, that they will be denied, either explicitly or implicitly, the opportunity to articulate their "real" thoughts. (p. 131)

This sense of social isolation may be heightened in the case of immigrants, refugees, and international students (Espín, 1996; Kato, 1999).

For example, one Australian study found that male international students from Asia who are "homosexually active" are "[o]verwhelmingly . . . very reluctant" to approach staff and use support services on their university campus (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Van de Ven, Prestage, & Kippax, 1999, p. 33). Reasons like these may have contributed to Pablo's deep yearning for Roxanne to tell him that she was, indeed, a lesbian.

This brings up another paradoxical aspect of identity work: the problem of turning so-called "minority" (sexual) identities into "problems." While there is a need to consider the challenges that gay- or queer-identified students such as Pablo are likely to face, at the same time one must be cautious about characterizing them as "victims" or "at-risk" students burdened by problems pertaining to their sexual identity (Quinlivan, 2002). On the contrary, while "outsider" status (sexual, linguistic, and/or cultural) may be disadvantageous in many respects, it can lead to a more refined and critical attention to matters of communication and culture. For example, as a result of the constraints that lesbian and gay students often must negotiate, their writing can be "invigorated-not just stifled" (Malinowitz, 1995, p. 113). This certainly seemed the case with Pablo. He scrutinized Roxanne's every word, tone, and gesture, indicating a proactive language learner who was very attuned to the nuances of interpersonal communication.

Might the close ongoing attention that Pablo eagerly paid to his presumed lesbian teacher have had something to do with the fact that gay- or lesbian-identified students living in an adopted country may have to learn new patterns of relating? As Espín (1996, p. 177) explains: "Lesbians who have come out in their country of birth may have developed patterns of behaving and relating that might not fit the prevalent accepted codes of behavior among lesbians in the new country." Therefore, immigration may require "learning *how to be a lesbian* in the host country regardless of previous experience in the home country."

This raises another related tension evident in the Roxanne/Pablo scenario: the question of identity as a "signifying practice" (Butler, 1993, p. 145). Roxanne seems to think that as long as no students ask her directly about her sexual identity, she will not be categorised by them. This assumption may be problematic. Making a point of naming oneself does not in itself determine how one will be named by others, since the names themselves have historicity, or meanings that are already in circulation (Butler, 1993). And conversely, making a point of *not* naming oneself does not, in itself, preclude one from being named by others. Generally, an unmarked sexual identity would be likely to be seen as straight, as part of the normative category that has no need of self-nam-

ing. But in this case, a fluidly identified woman who dreads the thought of a student asking her about her own sexual identity, is seen by her gay student as probably a lesbian—and not only a lesbian but one who is choosing to act straight in the context of the classroom. Even when Roxanne makes classroom remarks about not being affectionate with other females in public since childhood, Pablo's reading is a queer one, dismissing this as a deliberate attempt to hide her lesbianism from her students.

Between them, Roxanne and Pablo exemplify the paradox of theorizing sexual identities as "necessary fictions" (Weeks, 1991, p. 155) that can be constrictive yet constructive. The notion of "a continual shuffling between the need for [identity] categories and the recognition of their incompleteness" (Phelan, 1994, p. 154) may be especially useful in the context of globalised classrooms, given the potential for multiple and mismatched readings of sexual identity.

### A QUEER CHAOS OF MEANINGS

Each of these three teachers clearly put thought into how to position their sexual identity within the classroom. Less consideration, however, was given to the possibility that their students might construct different meanings than those intended. Tony identified as gay but in the classroom deliberately gave the impression that he was straight; some of his students suspected that Tony was gay. Gina told some students that she was a lesbian; at least one student seemed to have no idea what Gina meant. Roxanne felt relieved not to be asked the unanswerable question about her sexual identity; at least one student believed that Roxanne was a lesbian who was acting straight. Ironically, this queer chaos of meanings took place in *language* classes—where the aim was to teach communication.

The interest here is not to eliminate queer spaces between teacher and learner, but for these to illuminate education practices and research. On the one hand, as Tony's case highlights, there is a need to be cautious about conceptualising international student cohorts as ignorant of, or necessarily uncomfortable with, lesbian/queer matters. On the other hand, as Gina's case suggests, it is important not to presume that students already have shared knowledge and familiarity of such matters, at least as they get constituted in local discourses.

To this end, the notion of "glocalisation" may be useful. This refers to the "development of diverse, overlapping fields of global-local linkages"

characterized as "fluid and translocal" rather than "territorialized," or ascribed according to nation state (Gabardi, 2000, p. 33). Thinking transculturally (or "glocally") means framing (homo)sexual identities not as inner truths or objective facts whose scope is universal, but as theoretical constructs that "arise at specific times, in specific places, to do specific work" (Poynton, 1997, p. 17). In short, sexual identities are social relations that are being performed, contested, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through day-to-day interactions.

As these coming out conundrums show, in this queer chaos of meanings, sexual identifications are continuously being construed and misconstrued through ongoing processes that are inherently fraught, uncertain and open-ended. Thus, in the classroom (and in research texts), unpacking (homo)sexual identities means unpacking heterogeneous meanings and meaning making practices between interlocutors. To this end, mismatched understandings are not problems that need preventing or failures that need fixing, but ordinary occurrences that constitute not only an expected part of classroom interactions, but useful opportunities for teaching and learning, if they can be framed as such.

### NOTES

1. For confidentiality, the teachers' and students' names are pseudonyms; also, "quarter" and "semester" have been changed to "term." Speakers' utterances have not been edited for grammatical accuracy.

2. Paradoxically, the term "queer" can be used in a poststructuralist sense to question clear-cut notions of sexual identity, or, in an essentialist sense, simply to summarise the rather lengthy phrase "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender" (Warner, 1993; for a discussion of lesbian/gay versus queer identity theories and their respective implications for education, see Nelson, 1999).

3. Globalisation in this article refers only to immigration and displacement. As Suárez-Orozco (2001, p. 348) notes, "Large-scale immigration is a world issue that is transforming Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas."

4. For the larger study I contacted teachers I knew, or knew of, through professional liaisons, and made arrangements to observe the classes of (and conduct a series of interviews with) three teachers who had an interest in the topic "sexual identities in ESL." These three teachers are the ones included here. As to the students, for the larger study I interviewed each student who volunteered, which comprised about half of the total number of students in the three classes. The five students selected for inclusion here are the ones who, during the interviews, happened to speak, more or less directly, about their teacher's sexual identity (though this was not an intended focus of the interviews).

5. An example of the ambiguities of language is found in Valentine's (1997, p. 99) analysis of the Japanese word "hen," which is "an all-purpose term for peculiarity" that can be used to refer to "queer sexuality, but with less specific implication of homosexuality than its English counterpart ('queer') now carries." Thus, compared to the term

"queer" in English, the term "hen" in Japanese evokes a greater degree of ambiguity as to whether or not a sexual connotation is intended. Of course, similar variations in meaning routinely occur among speakers who are proficient in a shared language. For example, a "queer teachers study group" that met in Canada over a two-year period "could not come to any agreement" about what the terms gay and lesbian "really meant," which Sumara and Davis (1998, p. 207) attribute to the richly divergent life experiences among the group's members.

6. Despite the many benefits of asking participants about their classroom experiences, what they say in an interview does not necessarily represent what they "really think" or what is "really true." That is, "the confessional mode does not necessarily offer unmediated access to some core or central truth" (McLeod & Yates, 1997, p. 28). As interviewer and interviewee interact, each is constructing narratives and identities in particular ways with particular objectives in mind, which are not necessarily transparent. Poststructuralists note the impossibility of "knowing the world in a direct and unmediated way—" as it really is (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 18). Given the constructedness of research interviews combined with the provisional status of knowledge, an attempt is made in this paper to "frame meaning possibilities rather than close them in working with empirical data" and, at least to some extent, to "create multi-voiced . . . texts from such data" (Lather, 1991, p. 113). The result may be that more questions are raised than answered, but it is hoped that the questions themselves are of value in teasing out key issues associated with coming out in globalised classrooms.

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## Queering the Youthful Cyberflâneur

Mary Lou Rasmussen  
Jane Kenway

**ABSTRACT.** This article explores ways of queering the youthful cyberflâneur, using the television series *Queer as Folk* as the touchstone for such explorations. The concept of the youthful cyberflâneur, as developed by Kenway and Bullen, links power, pleasure, and consumer politics to pedagogy. However, it has been criticised for its heterosexist register. Here, the authors seek to attend to this criticism and enhance the pedagogical potential of this concept by drawing on the work of Rasmussen who introduces discourses of pleasure and sexuality into debates around pedagogy. The queer youthful cyberflâneur not only attends to the centrality of sexuality in young people's lives but also to some of the links between consumer culture, sexuality, and globalisation. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Consumption, flâneur, globalisation, *Queer as Folk*, sexual identity, queer theory

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