

# A Radical Rethinking of Sexuality and Schooling

Status Quo or Status Queer?

Eric Rofes

2005

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.  
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Oxford

1

## Beyond the Bruising Sites of Boyhood

This book is about me. It is about a third-grade boy forced to play sports when he'd rather be inside playing with his sister's necklaces and rings. It is about the seventh-grade student, seen as gentle and girlish, harassed in junior high hallways and chased home from school. It is about the high school over-achiever, not only compensating for gender violations with elevated test scores and energetic service to the school, but also diligently working to earn himself the relative safety provided by high-track classes and school leadership positions.

Yet it is also about the little boy who against formidable odds chose cooperative play over competition, sharing over selfishness, gentleness over toughness. Is it possible that my desire to play with the girls, while often interpreted so simplistically to mean I wanted to *be* a girl and not a boy, actually indicated my attraction to the values and rituals more common to girl culture than to boy culture?

While many understand gender-nonconforming youth as simply their being "born that way," is it possible that children enact a type of agency that doesn't comfortably fit within the traditional ways we understand cognitive choice and mindful decision making? I believe my moral development and the values I embraced may have been tightly linked to my refusal to conform to the proper image and behavior assigned to boys. The messages that came my way from all sides—from my father, peers, siblings, school teachers, neighbors—clearly demanded that I adhere to the socially appropriate behavior for boys. I hemmed and hawed; I prevaricated; I resisted.

Ultimately, I opted otherwise.

The literature on student resistance and on social production and reproduction has traditionally focused on students' rebelling against the rules and

regulations of our education system with the values and politics embodied in that system. Studies of school dropouts, students with "behavior problems," and those with lackadaisical attitudes toward academic achievement examine ways in which complex social and cultural forces drive students to resist the socialization and disciplinary work of schools and ultimately end up reproducing the status quo (Fine 1991; Stevenson and Ellis 1993; Willis 1977). The students typically studied by resistance researchers are the "bad" boys and "bad" girls—the hoods, gang members, troublemakers, sluts, and smart alecs (Eckert 1989; Willis 1977).

Yet, I believe an argument can be made for understanding gender-nonconforming children and adolescents as resisters—resisters to the patriarchal gender inculcation that occurs within most schools, family units, and youth peer groups. My boyish effeminate hand gestures can alternately be understood as either genetic errors that required social approbation to correct or rebellious acts committed to undermining the macho values constantly thrust on me. My determination to skip rope, enjoy hopscotch, and play with dolls rather than join the boys in kickball or dodge ball might suggest an ambitious intent to create an alternative social world for myself outside the bruising sites of boyhood.

### DOMINATION, SUBMISSION, AND TEMPORARY CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

This book is about gay issues in education, and it attempts to conceptualize lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and gender-nonconforming youth as something beyond passive victims of sexist and homophobic assaults. While not denying the powerful and sometimes unrelenting violence visited on the bodies and souls of these youth, this book aims to broaden our perspectives and shift our analytical position on this population. We can see queer youth and other outsiders as vulnerable or fragile, but we can also see them as daring, powerful, and rebellious. We can understand them as resilient survivors of repeated traumas, or we can see LGBT youth as engaged in a lengthy effort to undermine constrictive gender roles and create alternative childhoods and adolescences. Or, we can see both.

My own experience suggests that gender-deviant children may not proceed through their everyday lives in a constant state of suffering, terror, or sadness; it suggests that we might regard these alternative spaces and sites that these children create for themselves as places of hope, celebration, and respite. This book is about a boy who created his own sites of safety and happiness, his face buried in *Wizard of Oz* books or his eyes and ears enraptured by alter-

school soap operas. It is about the Cub Scout who sought joy in nature; the boy who found daily inspiration in showtunes; the nine-year-old fascinated by his Avon-lady mother's monthly cache of green-tinted bottles, shiny silver tubes, and containers of exotic-smelling bubble-bath oils. It is about the young teen who, on some level, sized up his life chances and strategically plotted a path that would bring him a modicum of safety, success, and personal satisfaction while maintaining his integrity and dissident values.

Americans often create narratives of childhood that do a tremendous disservice to the complex day-to-day reality of our early years. Traditional accounts of childhood innocence still maintain tremendous salience, as individuals choose to recall warm family holidays, toboggan rides down snowy hills, and hot summer days at local swimming holes. We embrace comforting tropes of loving parents, safe neighborhoods, and community prosperity. We then live our adult lives as castaways from the Eden of childhood, determined to compensate for our own fall from grace by re-creating these idylls for the children of today. We bookend our lives by telling ourselves that retirement and old age will be a return to the supposed ease and innocence of our childhoods, and we imagine old people as children, somehow freed from the constraints, complexities, and challenges of life.

Over the past thirty years, our culture has paired this original story with an equally powerful narrative of childhood trauma. Perhaps spurred as much by twelve-step programs and the public exposure of long-suppressed violations—such as child abuse and neglect, incest, schoolyard bullying, and sexual violence and harassment—we remember our childhoods solely as sites of peril, terror, and deep, sustained sadness. We come together around new tropes of dysfunctional families, absent fathers, vindictive mothers, and the terrible loneliness we felt in our victimization and social isolation. We become determined to protect today's children from similar fates, and we marshal our resources and personal energies toward child saving. We become accustomed to searching for the sources of our current unhappiness and adult failings in the persecution we experienced as children. We imagine ourselves as martyrs to those early years, fated to live out unfulfilled lives because of the damage wreaked on us in childhood.

I once organized my own life story from this vantage point. I made sense of everything—from my relationship failures to my intense commitment to my work to my inability to control my anger—by linking them to my family of origin. In addition to blaming Mom or Dad (sometimes both) as the source of my current unhappiness, I could also blame my childhood experience as a gentle boy mocked and derided by bullies. My reasoning at the time was that, because others victimized me, I avoid conflict with others; I assume the role of peacemaker; and I shut down when the yelling occurs.

If we've learned anything from the first two decades of research into the sociology of childhood, it is that this stage of life is complex, driven by powerful and competing forces, and rarely reduced to simple description or painted in broad brushstrokes (Austin and Willard 1998a; Brake 1980; Skolnick 1976). In the late 1970s, early in my career as a schoolteacher, I was struck by the gap between the ways in which adults see children and the ways in which children see themselves. As the economy shifted and the women's movement gained speed, my middle school students in a liberal Cambridge, Massachusetts, school were among the first cohorts of children to collectively have foisted on them the process of divorce. I recall recognizing that seventeen of my twenty students had endured family breakup; I then used this realization to explain a range of classroom tensions and individual student failings. I developed a huge empathy for these "poor children" and felt their suffering deeply, even though I had not experienced divorce in my family. At the same time, divorce became an easy excuse for a student's failing an exam, forgetting to do homework, or acting sullen or aggressive in school.

Only when I began exploring the experience of divorce with the students did I learn that many of my students had not experienced their parents' divorces in the way I had imagined. Many had found aspects of the divorce that provided new benefits and relieved longstanding tensions. One girl told me about her delight in having two different homes with two different sets of rules. She felt able to marry her personal tastes and daily moods to the proper home environment. A boy discussed his relief of finally living in homes without a lot of arguments or drama. He believed life after divorce offered an opportunity to focus on himself rather than on comforting his parents or serving as a mediator between two adults on a regular basis. Whereas few students would ever wish divorce on their families, these children, ranging from ten to fourteen years old, were not only able to note the benefits and liabilities of their transformed situation but could also understand the nuanced ways in which they were personally affected by their changing family structures (Rogies 1981). I learned something valuable from those students.

My own childhood cannot be simplistically characterized as either good or bad. This would be like reducing one's entire life to a one-paragraph obituary. Such effort makes for quick reading but fails to present the complex detailing, multiple contradictions, and rich texture that form the real substance of everyday lives. Nor was my childhood "done" to me. I was not a victim of my father's anger, my peers' harassment and violence, or my sister's jealous rage, as I have told myself I was at other times of my life. Despite the constraints placed on children—owing to economic dependence, patriarchal regulations, and the dictatorial governing style of most families and most classrooms—children are always to a greater or lesser extent active agents in

participating in the production of their own childhoods and adolescences (James and Prout 1990; Mayall 1994). Although as children we do not necessarily ask for what we get, neither do most of us passively accept our circumstances. If the culture does not offer us opportunities to physically remove ourselves from sites of persecution or deprivation, then many of us find ways to remove ourselves emotionally and transport ourselves psychically to other worlds. We play an active role in shaping our own consciousnesses, creating our values, and invoking our own spiritual resources. This is as true for most children as it is for most adults.

There is much that needs to be said in favor of transforming the economic, political, and social position of children in the United States and in removing key structural barriers to the health and wellness of all children. Were there a major movement to democratize the family, shift from nuclear family structures to the communal raising of children, or economically emancipate children from dependence on their parents, we might radically transform the life chances of children of all races as well as the landscape of social problems that emerge from the squalid contemporary conditions of childhood. Suppose that we were to guarantee all children over the age of, say, ten years not only shelter, schooling, and proper nutrition but the right to determine where and with whom they lived, the freedom of self-expression and self-determination, and the right to full participation in the institutions of our democracy. If we were to do so, we might find that we had created the circumstances that would deliver to our culture an adult populace more capable of managing their day-to-day lives. Less likely to engage in abusive power relations with others, and ultimately more capable of participating responsibly in the processes of democratic citizenship.

The abuses of power foisted on children in the name of "child protection," "child defense," or "child welfare" may be well-intended attempts to offer care and sustenance, but they do little to displace a construction and lived reality of childhood that do their best to leave a significant portion of our population economically dependent, socially isolated, and politically disenfranchised. The first experience that all Americans have toward understanding inequality, oppression, and disempowerment may be rooted in our culture's treatment of children. What is done to children and what they learn from these power dynamics provide a model for the lifelong misuse of power and play a shaping role in a range of inequities with which our culture struggles. The original template for our contemporary systems of racism and sexism is the adult-child paradigm that dominates the first two decades of most Americans' lives. In contemporary America, the original sin is the symbolic and embodied violence structured into our concept of childhood and the ways we organize children's lives. Ageism, rarely seriously considered or deconstructed, inculcates all of us into the powerful paradigm of oppression.

I am not talking here about the child who is beaten regularly by a parent, chained to a bed, and forced to lie in his or her own excrement. When one talks about the abuse of children, we conjure up visions of frail waifs with bruises on their bodies, boys who are regularly locked in closets without food, girls who are repeatedly sexually violated by fathers. All these are horrible conditions and must be addressed. Yet there is another level of abuse perpetrated against children and youth, one that is experienced by so-called normal kids who function in their families, schools, and neighborhoods, seemingly without any problems. This form of abuse, while more subtle, is about the misuse of personal and institutional power; it is rooted in simple-minded concepts of childhood that make us see these small people as incapable, inept, and profoundly dependent. It allows adults to smugly believe that children's supposed inexperience demands that we direct, monitor, and control every aspect of their daily lives.

An entire apparatus has been put in place that ensures the perpetuation of this adult-child power dynamic and that works from infancy through young adulthood to immerse young people into social worlds that treat them much the way women were treated before feminism, as blacks were treated before emancipation and, again, before the civil rights movement: as hysterical, immature, know-nothings, who are not capable of full participation in the institutions of our democracy. The science of developmentalism and most of the theories in the educational psychology canon serve as the foundation for a range of social institutions that function to suppress, repress, and incarcerate childhood. Adult-child relationships emerge from that context. The books that instruct parents in the raising of children; the folk wisdom passed down by grandparents; the social networks of other parents sharing their experiences with discipline, behavior problems, and children's insubordination are all woven together to produce the social fabric that puts children in their place. Schools, Disney cartoons, youth activities, summer camps all play a role in perpetuating the inequities of the child-adult system.

The oppression of children and youth constitutes the foundation out of which highly charged issues related to LGBT and gender-nonconforming youth arise. It was not my father's belt repeatedly hitting my butt that wreaked havoc on my childhood; it was the fact that no social institutions provided me with resources to compensate for the physical differences between an eight-year-old boy and a thirty-five-year-old man. Were he striking another thirty-five-year-old man, there would be legal statutes, social rules, and cultural processes that offer options for response. Because I was a person who was eight years old and legally regarded as his property, I had no recourse in the law at that time. More so, I had no cultural models of children fighting back, no access to education about my rights, no use of lawyers, and no self-defense materials such as Mace. Rather than being *born* vulnerable,

as people like to think of children, social and cultural forces colluded to make me vulnerable.

It was not the bully taunting me with names such as "sissy" and "faggot" that made me feel hemmed in, cornered, and without alternatives; it was the fact that I was required to be present in the social institution of schooling every day and that the education system offered me no choice of school, no end in sight for schooling, and no opportunities to confront my persecutors in a democratic forum. While I would lie in bed at night and fantasize violent schemes that would ensure the death or public humiliation of the boys who tormented me, I had neither the resources nor inclination to enact my fantasies in real life. There were no children's courts in which I could confront my tormentors, and complaints to my teachers or parents led me to be derided as a tattletale.

When I read about adolescent students who bring shotguns to school, I do not share in the shock and surprise of many of my colleagues. Instead I feel a powerful recognition: *this could have been me*. If some children experience years of soul-numbing persecution, if they are offered no comfort, no support, no court in which to confront and win compensation from perpetrators, then who is ultimately healthier—the children who are empowered enough to strike back or those who take no action and self-destruct?

By saying this, I do not intend to excuse the increasing numbers of outcasts, misfits, geeks, and queers who explode into violence in their school cafeterias and shoot willy-nilly in all directions, striking down students and teachers with whom they have no complaint. At the same time, I find myself wondering whether these enraged students were actually targeting the bullies who made their lives miserable for years. In my own childhood fantasies of revenge, that is precisely what I did.

If we ever hope to eliminate the horrors visited on young people, we cannot do it solely by initiating superficial violence-prevention programs or peer education workshops about child abuse and neglect. We have got to face the core issues head-on. Not only does this involve providing young people with the legal status, knowledge, and resources to be fully empowered human beings with the power and authority of self-determination, but it also means finding ways to radically transform what we believe is the nature of childhood in America and reduce the privileges and stature awarded to adults due solely to their biological ages.

## BEYOND NATURE VERSUS NURTURE: TOWARD A VOLITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

This book is about me. It is about the young boy who found ways to explore his own body and others' in the bathtub, in backyard tree houses, and behind

closed doors. It is about the boy's eyes that rebelliously gazed at his mother's fingers, neck, and breasts; looked at body parts on beaches; and became transfixed on his father's body hair when they showered together. It is about that boy's hands that, despite classroom lessons that attempted to desexualize childhood, boldly explored his young body, seeking sources of pleasure and release. It is about the central role of pleasure in the lives of all people, including children, and the risks we will take because we enjoy feeling good. It is about the belief many of us hold—including many children—that we deserve pleasure and happiness, the enjoyment of picking our noses, the thrill of hugging our security blankets, the excitement we find in fondling our genitals, the satisfaction we garner by stealing cookies from the cookie jar.

This book is about the young adolescent whose erotic obsession suddenly changed as he directed his gaze from newspaper cartoon character Brenda Starr's cleavage to her exotic and elusive paramour Basil St. John. It is about how he charged boys who performed traditional masculinities—athletes, hoods, surfer boys, and even bullies—with intense erotic power. It is about how he claimed taboo desires by selectively paging through teen-idol magazines, muscle magazines, and the male swimsuit advertisements relegated to the back pages of his father's *Playboy* magazines. It is about how deviating from the norm brought not only confusion and fear but also comfort, joy, and a sense of personal triumph.

I do not believe that I was born gay, just as I was not born effeminate, gentle, or gender nonconforming, even though the limited ways in which we understand the role of biology, genetics, and conscious choice make it seem as though people are born homo- or heterosexual, gender conforming or not. Instead, I believe that I was born as most other mammals are—that is, sexual and capable of erotically responding to a range of stimuli: touches, words, smells, sounds, emotions, foods, pets, symbolic images. My turn toward boys and men during my early adolescence was not a genetically determined act; it was a utilitarian act rooted in a kind of personal choice that lies below the level of consciousness. I never cognitively opted to insill special meaning into my relationships with boys and men. At the same time, I cannot claim that I failed to receive the clear and powerful message from society that such attractions were sick, sinful, or criminal. I knew the social meaning of being queer, just as all boys of my generation knew it. Nevertheless, I chose to invest my friendships with boys and men a special meaning, a spiritual power that I rarely conferred on girls or women. In a world where homosexuality was not spoken about and where gay people were derided, I made the decision to love men. While some might see this as a product of a gay gene or as an act of self-destruction, I see it as a profound act of courage and rebellion. Becoming queer was the best thing I ever did for myself.

Our culture is terribly confused about questions of individual agency. Is it any wonder? We grow up receiving ambiguous messages about a range of matters related to cognitive decision making, individual choice, and the process of drawing distinctions and charting preferences. What made me opt for vanilla over chocolate ice cream during my childhood? I understood it at the time as a simple matter determined by the biology of my taste buds. How did I come to read all of the Oz books, when my parents would have preferred me to become an enthusiastic reader of Tom Swift or the Hardy Boys? Even these days, when I'm called on to explain my preferences for eating Thai food, listening to country music, watching *The West Wing*, or driving pickup trucks, my initial reaction is to simply state, "They just appeal to me." Yet sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work (1982, 1984) has shown how even seemingly meaningless distinctions and simple preferences may be laden with valuing and with complex meanings as well as political meanings.

I have come to view sexual preferences, including the sex(es) of one's chosen partners, as I view all preferences, through a Bourdieucian lens. Nothing in my genetic makeup predetermined that I would focus my erotic interest on one sex to the exclusion of the other, and nothing biological within me determined that I would focus on men. Instead, I made a choice that was bold and transgressive—a type of choice that occurs below the level of consciousness but is as closely linked to volition as those made by conscious decision-making processes. While I initially understood this choice to involve a preference and attraction to certain tropes of masculinity—facial and body hair; a deep, resonant voice; the musculature of male bodies—I believe now that such attractions extended deeper. As my friendships and comfortable relationships were with girls and other gender-nonconforming boys, I chose to expand the landscape of my world by focusing my attractions on boys and men who embraced traditional forms of masculinity.

I never made a cognitive decision to separate myself from girls and women; in fact, my adult life has always included the same close friendships and joyous sharings as I had with females during my childhood. I have never been separated from the values and cultures of diverse female social worlds. In fact, many gay men will tell you that even in an all-male gay bar, the feminine is never far away. I can be a big man and a big girl.

I talk through my history here to recommend that we consider thinking of LGBT youth as a group that has chosen, on some level, to direct their erotic energies in directions that the culture at large abhors. In a democracy supposedly founded on some level of respect for individual freedom, such choices cut to the core of our civic values and are part and parcel of the spirit of democracy. All of us—including children and youth—should have the right to organize our gender, sex, and intimate relationships in consensual

ways that we find satisfying and congruent with principles by which we choose to live. If we are capable of regarding queer youth as having the volition to choose renegade identities and rupture traditional gender regulations, then we might approach our work with them in more respectful ways. As teachers, parents, and supportive adults, we can take the liberal path and attempt to prevent slurs and protect those who need protection from violence. Rather than do so, however, we can alternately provide queer youth with the understandings, legal rights, and resources to protect themselves and to continue their valuable project of transforming social norms.

### QUEER CULTURE, GAY MALE TEACHERS, AND AUTHENTIC CULTURAL DIVERSITY

This book is about me. It is about a man who splits his time during the academic term between living near a small public university amid the redwoods of rural Northern California and living at his home in the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco, perhaps the neighborhood with the highest percentage of gay men in the nation. It is about an openly gay professor on a liberal campus where gay issues seem to never have been a central matter for public discussion. It is about a professor whose academic work focuses on preparing candidates to become elementary school teachers and whose political efforts focus on gay men's health activism and sexual liberation.

Identity management issues have followed me throughout my career; sometimes stalking me obsessively, like a slasher in a 1950s suspense movie. Early in my career, when I was a sixth-grade teacher, I remained closeted and pursued my activist work discreetly. I employed pseudonyms when I wrote for local gay newspapers. After two years, I lost that job when I came out as a gay man to the school's principal (see Rolfe 1985). Much to my surprise, I was soon hired as a middle school teacher by an independent progressive school nearby. In 1978, I became the first openly gay schoolteacher in Massachusetts.

While teaching at that school, I worked evenings to establish some of the initial programs for LGBT youth, and I founded Boston's first organization for lesbian and gay schoolteachers. During these years, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I often found myself in the spotlight, speaking out on gay issues and schools to an uninformed media, to hostile public officials, and to concerned groups of parents. I cautiously put forward a public identity of what I thought would be a respectable gay man. I appeared traditionally masculine, muzzled my radical politics, and I presented my relationship with my lover as if we were a traditional monogamous couple. I could bring my teacher iden-

tity with my gay male identity only by cleansing the gay identity of all aspects of gender trouble or sexual rebellion. I believed that my being homosexual was enough; to be queer as well would simply be too much for the public to handle.

I left my career as a schoolteacher in the mid-1980s when I felt compelled to become more closely involved in AIDS and gay community organizing. I moved to California, throwing myself into the tumult of the movement, and I worked full-time in gay and AIDS organizations. In some ways, I left my schoolteacher identity behind during these years and took on a heightened public presence as a gay activist.

These were daring and frightening times. I had expected that the move away from children would allow me to maintain more integrity in my public gay identity, but I instead found that working at a gay nonprofit or leading an AIDS service organization presented its own identity management challenges, too. Was it acceptable for the director of the gay and lesbian community center to show up at the local leather bar wearing a harness and set of chaps? When most of the gay men in San Francisco were clients, volunteers, or staff members of the AIDS organization at which I worked, was it appropriate for me to enjoy myself at a local sex club in full view of some of the organization's clients or board members? How was it possible to maintain my civil libertarian political views or my perspectives on the sexual rights of adolescents while the board of the gay center at which I worked was refusing to allow members of the local chapter of the North American Man/Boy Love Association—a group whose primary purpose was to create public discussion and debate on the sexual rights of young people—to meet in our building?

Many gay men appear easily able to make compromises related to managing their disparate identities. They seem to find nothing objectionable about enacting traditional masculinities in their work lives and keeping their private lives private. They are content to save their camping and pigging for after hours. Not me. Early readings of feminist literature heightened my awareness of the politics lurking behind such starkly divided boundaries. I learned from lesbian-feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich, Dorothy Allison, Jewelle Gomez, Amber Hollibaugh, Pat Califia, Cherie Moraga, Gayle Rubin, and Joan Nestle what violence is visited on our souls through secrets and silences. Why is it acceptable for employees to share all-American stories about family barbecues and attending hockey games, whereas narratives about attending full-moon orgies or Halloween drug contests are seen as inappropriate? Why do public gay male figures present themselves as either happily ensconced in a monogamous marriage or forced into a life of martyred celibacy (“I work *all* the time”)? In a democracy, people should have the right to organize their relationship to sex, fidelity, and gender however they choose.

After years of struggle and soul-searching, I maintain little shame about my erotic desires or practices. Pretending that all relationships are structured as *Dazzle* and *Harricot's* are does a disservice to those people of various sexual identities who have organized their emotions, desires, and relationships in other ways. This pretense does a tremendous disservice to the notion of liberty.

Ultimately, for me, this book struggles to address questions that I have struggled with my entire adult life, ones focused on cultural integrity, pluralism, and participatory democracy—concepts central to the work of elementary school teachers in the United States today. The assimilationist notion encourages us to embrace a process whereby all Americans jump into the stewpot; as the heat is turned up to simmer, the rough edges get melted away and we are left with one thick, creamy ooze. We aim for the Chicano kindergarten to closely resemble Anglo children in learning styles, peer relations, and communication patterns by the sixth grade. We admire the deaf child who seems “normal.” Although we tell ourselves that this stewpot process alters all children, in reality, the process of assimilation is ultimately about subjugated populations coming to resemble dominant group norms. At best, mainstream America develops an appreciation for Thai food or hip-hop music but remains ignorant of the history of the Hmong people or the social and economic forces that force people into poverty.

For gay men, this melting-pot model offers us cultural acceptance in exchange for eliminating all the ways in which our bodies, lives, and kinship patterns differ from traditional heteromasculinities. Congressman Barney Frank can be accepted as a mainstream political leader today because he has succeeded in relegating his use of call boys to the distant past, packaging such activities as unfortunate episodes linked to the perils of the closet. His credibility as a public figure would likely be diminished if he continued to employ the services of escorts and did so without secrets or shame. Even if such practices were not illegal, such brazen violations of heteronorms would bring banishment from the corridors of power and would diminish one's respect in the public sphere. Witness George Michael, caught cruising in a men's room in Beverly Hills, who responded without guilt and who exhibited an awareness and appreciation for gay male cultural norms, rarely exhibited by big-name celebrities. The recording artist's refusal to be shamed into a narrative of regret, claims of sexual addiction, and rhetorical self-flagellation created a public backlash in which his popularity and public image took a hit.

Assimilation has its rewards. I see many children from poor white families who want nothing more than to fit into the commodified consumption patterns of the middle class. We read studies of black children who express preferences for white dolls and of Asian immigrant children who are embarrassed by their parents' use of languages other than English. Likewise, the gay male

teen who adheres to traditional gender roles and comes out as captain of the football team is more likely to win support and acclaim from his peers than the queen in the drama club. Because the primary social worlds that children occupy—the family, the neighborhood, the school, the religious institutions—reward assimilation and pathologize difference, is it any wonder that children wrestle with conflicting drives to both resist the norms and embrace them?

Many contemporary gay men exhibit this same powerful desire for assimilation. Many of us have seen the social position of gay issues change remarkably in our lifetimes. Those who are now choosing same-sex relationships and even coming out as LGBT people are those who would never have done so before, during a time when societal approbation, social isolation, and public silence on homosexuality reigned supreme. The shifting position of gay issues creates an entire subbody of unexamined aspects in which the normalization of homosexuality encourages a once-despised population to hunger deeply for public approval. I live with this tendency every day as I find myself enjoying the benefits of being openly gay that I never thought I would see in my lifetime. How effective would I be as a professor if my hands fluttered as I lectured or if I girlishly crossed my legs as I sat in front of my class? Would my lover's family embrace me as warmly as they do if we did not keep some boundaries between their images of us as a couple and the reality of the ways we organize our sex? Would I enjoy domestic-partner airline benefits through the employer of my lover, an airplane mechanic, if the company knew we were nonmonogamous? I hope so, but I, too, play this game of assimilation and public performance because I want the rewards.

The stewpot model of cultural assimilation requires all of us to strip away our differences and eliminate any attribute that conflicts with the status quo. We enter public sphere denuded of any special qualities that might be judged as problematic, confusing, or threatening to the existing structures of power and privilege. At the same time, another model of cultural diversity affirms differences and does not demand that rough edges be eliminated or that distinctions be expunged. Under this model, individuals and groups continue to maintain and value key differences from the dominant culture—differences in style, values, social practices, histories, and worldviews—and move into the mainstream unabashedly, holding these differences intact. People enter the workplace and the public sphere, bringing their original cultures and ways of being; the work at hand is then to learn to work across lines of authentic difference.

Under a truly multicultural model of diversity, our collective project is to work together, drawing strength from the ways in which we are similar as well as the ways in which we are different. It is about resisting a trigger reaction of fear when we are placed next to someone different from us, and it is about cultivating an interest and appreciation for that difference. There is a

huge distinction between a multiculturalism that respects cultural integrity and challenges us to work across cultural differences and an assimilationism that asks us to deny, mitigate, or vanish the differences. It is the distinction between saying that "I don't see race; I only see people", and saying that "my students come from many different cultural backgrounds and I will work with them best if I gain an appreciation for their home cultures."

For gay men who identify with an urban gay culture characterized by a heightened attention to gender performance and gender play, to patterns of kinship traced through friendship networks rather than through nuclear families, and to an innovative and daring relationship to our bodies and desires, the tug between cultural integrity and assimilation is strong. Whereas some imagine gay men's kinship patterns and sexual cultures as unfortunate products of homophobia and antigay laws, I believe that these patterns will continue to thrive, even as the bulwark of homophobia subsides. They will continue because many gay men truly do find pleasure and meaning in our cultural forms of social organization and sexual networks. They will continue because we are willing to make sacrifices in our public lives and in our work lives, but not in our private lives and not in our lives in community with other gay men.

Are teachers sexual beings? One wouldn't think so by visiting an elementary school, by reviewing the curriculum of teacher preparatory programs, or by attending a conference of LGBT educators. Especially at the elementary school level, teachers who present themselves with even a hint of the erotic are shunned. I have noticed that the discussion of maintaining "proper classroom appearance" that occurs between the discussion of maintaining "proper teachers, university supervisors, and principals with whom they interact is as much about desexing the teacher's body as it is about up-classing it. Once again, white middle-class patriarchal norms rule supreme.

In some places, the sexuality of teachers becomes exposed. Certainly grabbing headlines are those public scandals involving teacher-student sexual conduct and male teachers arrested on moral charges for having sex in public parks and rest stops. The position of sex at the high school level is distinct from that at the elementary schools. The television show *Boyz n the City*, focusing on life inside an urban high school, is rife with romances and philandering among teachers at the school and between teachers and students; it effectively captures, perhaps with a bit of exaggeration, the issues faced in many high schools. Likewise, anyone who imagines schoolteachers as eunuchs only needs to hang around the hotel bar during one of the major teacher conferences. Teachers are clearly sexual beings, but teacher culture has evolved in a desexed way.

Is it possible to allow teachers to present themselves as full human beings, including as sexual beings, without harassing or violating their students? Can

we unabashedly hold our sexuality around students of any age in a way that is neither violating or predatory? In a world where many young people have been subjected to sexual harassment, coercion, and assault, is a gesture toward a sexualized teacher simply going to push buttons that need not be pushed? Or could a reasonable integration of one's erotic nature into one's teacher identity help students gain greater agency over their own sexualities? These are questions I struggle with as a professor, just as I struggled with them years ago as a sixth-grade teacher.

### STATUS QUO OR STATUS QUEER? A RADICAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION, SEXUALITY, AND SCHOOLING

After thirty years of increasingly concerted efforts to improve the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and gender-nonconforming youth in schools, why does it seem today as if homophobic and gender-based persecution among young people is at an all-time high? If the United States has had openly lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers working in schools for the past three decades, why does it seem as if educators continue to be marginalized, harassed, terminated, and hounded out of jobs when they make the transition from being covertly to overtly homosexual? How can the media saturate America with things gay while the formal processes and sites of K-12 schooling continue, with rare exception, to remain silent on gay issues?

This book tries to answer these questions by examining critical contemporary issues linking sexuality, education, and schooling: books for children of lesbian and gay parents; the influence of queer teachers on their students; the various approaches to antigay harassment; the relationship between teachers and controversial issues such as sex and gender; gay men's shifting relationship to HIV education; and the cultural politics fueling debates around gay issues in schools. As the national battle for equal rights for LGBT people targeted traditional American institutions in the 1990s—namely, the military and marriage—gay inclusion in public education emerged as a central battleground in local communities throughout the country. Although liberal Americans have begun to embrace gay rights as a critical component on their political agenda, it is unclear whether the hiring of openly gay men as kindergarten teachers or the affirmation of lesbian-identified seventh graders are included as priorities. It also remains unclear whether queers are invited to join in the sites of public education on their own terms.

This book takes seriously the powerful right-wing forces that have emerged locally and nationally to resist the integration of gay people into public schooling. Yet its central argument does not focus on the traditional opponents of gay rights—religious fundamentalists, socially conservative

huge distinction between a multiculturalism that respects cultural integrity and challenges us to work across cultural differences and an assimilationism that asks us to deny, mitigate, or vanish the differences. It is the distinction between saying that "I don't see race; I only see people" and saying that "my students come from many different cultural backgrounds and I will work with them best if I gain an appreciation for their home cultures."

For gay men who identify with an urban gay culture characterized by a heightened attention to gender performance and gender play, to patterns of kinship traced through friendship networks rather than through nuclear families, and to an innovative and daring relationship to our bodies and desires, the tug between cultural integrity and assimilation is strong. Whereas some imagine gay men's kinship patterns and sexual cultures as unfortunate products of homophobia and antigay laws, I believe that these patterns will continue to thrive, even as the bulwark of homophobia subsides. They will continue because many gay men truly do find pleasure and meaning in our cultural forms of social organization and sexual networks. They will continue because we are willing to make sacrifices in our public lives and in our work lives, but not in our private lives and not in our lives in community with other gay men.

Are teachers sexual beings? One wouldn't think so by visiting an elementary school, by reviewing the curriculum of teacher preparatory programs, or by attending a conference of LGBT educators. Especially at the elementary school level, teachers who present themselves with even a hint of the erotic are shunned. I have noticed that the discussion of maintaining "proper classroom appearance" that occurs between my credential students and the mentor teachers, university supervisors, and principals with whom they interact is as much about desexing the teacher's body as it is about up-classing it. Once again, white middle-class patriarchal norms rule supreme.

In some places, the sexuality of teachers becomes exposed. Certainly grabbing headlines are those public scandals involving teacher-student sexual conduct and male teachers arrested on moral charges for having sex in public parks and rest stops. The position of sex at the high school level is distinct from that at the elementary schools. The television show *Boston Public*, focusing on life inside an urban high school, is rife with romances and philandering among teachers at the school and between teachers and students; it effectively captures, perhaps with a bit of exaggeration, the issues faced in many high schools. Likewise, anyone who imagines schoolteachers as eunuchs only needs to hang around the hotel bar during one of the major teacher conferences. Teachers are clearly sexual beings, but teacher culture has evolved in a desexed way.

Is it possible to allow teachers to present themselves as full human beings, including as sexual beings, without harassing or violating their students? Can

we unabashedly hold our sexuality around students of any age in a way that is neither violating nor predatory? In a world where many young people have been subjected to sexual harassment, coercion, and assault, is a gesture toward a sexualized teacher simply going to push buttons that need not be pushed? Or could a reasonable integration of one's erotic nature into one's teacher identity help students gain greater agency over their own sexualities? These are questions I struggle with as a professor, just as I struggled with them years ago as a sixth-grade teacher.

### STATUS QUO OR STATUS QUEER? A RADICAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION, SEXUALITY, AND SCHOOLING

After thirty years of increasingly concerted efforts to improve the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and gender-nonconforming youth in schools, why does it seem today as if homophobic and gender-based persecution among young people is at an all-time high? If the United States has had openly lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers working in schools for the past three decades, why does it seem as if educators continue to be marginalized, harassed, terminated, and hounded out of jobs when they make the transition from being covertly to overtly homosexual? How can the media saturate America with things gay while the formal processes and sites of K-12 schooling continue, with rare exception, to remain silent on gay issues?

This book tries to answer these questions by examining critical contemporary issues linking sexuality, education, and schooling: books for children of lesbian and gay parents; the influence of queer teachers on their students; the various approaches to antigay harassment; the relationship between teachers and controversial issues such as sex and gender; gay men's shifting relationship to HIV education; and the cultural politics fueling debates around gay issues in schools. As the national battle for equal rights for LGBT people targeted traditional American institutions in the 1990s—namely, the military and marriage—gay inclusion in public education emerged as a central battleground in local communities throughout the country. Although liberal Americans have begun to embrace gay rights as a critical component on their political agenda, it is unclear whether the hiring of openly gay men as kindergarten teachers or the affirmation of lesbian-identified seventh graders are included as priorities. It also remains unclear whether queers are invited to join in the sites of public education on their own terms.

This book takes seriously the powerful right-wing forces that have emerged locally and nationally to resist the integration of gay people into public schooling. Yet its central argument does not focus on the traditional opponents of gay rights—religious fundamentalists, socially conservative

Republicans, and the Catholic Church. This book argues instead that the collective efforts of LGBT people and their justice-minded allies to combat homophobia and heterosexism in schools have served to buttress a system where power functions to oppress and marginalize entire groups and strengthen precisely those forces that ignite social tensions and continually reproduce inequality.

How can this be? When we began our work to make schools safe for gay people in the 1970s, our intentions were good. We saw ourselves as part of a broader movement to protect the rights and the stature of all educators and to promote full inclusion of all children and youth in public education—kids of color, special education students, and incipient dropouts from poor families. As we went about coming out in our classrooms and teacher unions, organizing gay youth programs, and demanding that school libraries diversify their offerings on gay issues, we understood that for public schools to be truly public, all members of society had a right to participate. This impelled us to break through barriers to the hiring or retention of lesbian and gay teachers by gaining union support, winning contract protections, and educating parents and school committees. It moved us to make our schools safer for LGBT teens and gender-nonconforming children and to put a halt to the assumption that all our students are situated in families where there is a father and a mother.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I embraced the movement for full inclusion of all children and all teachers in American schools. It led me to initiate the formation of Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Schoolworkers, one of the first organizations of queer teachers in the nation, and to begin providing peer support to closeted queer teachers as we as a community began to make initial interventions in the policy arena. At twenty-three, I was motivated to begin Out There and Committee for Gay Youth, summer programs for gay and lesbian teens, ages fifteen to nineteen, which eventually grew into Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Youth, one of the pioneering queer youth organizations in the nation. By the age of thirty, when I became executive director of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Center, I was overseeing the nation's largest gay youth program, including over a dozen peer-support groups throughout Los Angeles County, two shelters for homeless youth, and one of the first HIV-prevention programs aimed at gay male youth. When I discuss the first stage of work on gay issues in schools throughout this book, I want to be clear that I am pointing the finger not only at the work of others but at my own work as well. This volume is as much a reflection on the shortcomings of my own work as it is of the field at large. It represents a midlife rethinking of work that we have been engaged in for thirty years.

While much progress remains to be made, we have done an excellent job in beginning to address homophobia and antigay bigotry. At the same time,

we have failed to confront a more ominous challenge—the root causes for these inequities. What is it about our current system of schooling that produces the conditions in which bullies thrive? How do the ways we conceptualize, recruit, and prepare teachers create conditions in which a system that oppressively categorizes, sorts, and assigns young people is perpetuated and strengthened? How does the contemporary position of children and youth in our culture serve to drive scapegoating, harassment, and persecution? Is much of our work on gay issues in schools ultimately focused on assimilation and reform, rather than on authentic cultural pluralism and radical social change?

In this book, I argue that we have done terrific work in creating first-stage approaches to a range of policy matters related to queers and education but that such approaches are inadequate to bring about the deep and profound change needed to transform systems of education in our nation. The book proposes that we move toward a second stage of work that digs to the root cause of these social problems. For me, the change proposed in this book exemplifies the distinction between liberal approaches to social problems and radical approaches. Liberal approaches focus on additive approaches, on tinkering, and on gradual shifts; yet, they leave the overarching systems and regimes of power and privilege firmly in place. Radical approaches believe something fundamental needs to be transformed for authentic and sweeping changes to occur.

I believe that the greatest challenge we face in school reform involves the radical transformation of our foundational assumptions about children, youth, and teachers. When historians of education review the past hundred years of schooling in America, their major finding usually focuses on the relative imperviousness of the classroom to innovation and change, and they cite many social and economic forces that contribute to the failure to transform school and classroom practice (Cuban 1995; Tyack 1974). Yet I have yet to see any educational historian, sociologist, or anthropologist link the stability of school structures to the stability of our conceptions of childhood. Despite the significant work over the past fifty years that has examined the ways in which our assumptions and understanding of childhood are linked to profound imbalances of power and privilege, our work in schools continues to leave this matter fully unexamined. If we hope to transform schools and classrooms, we must take the leap, radically transform our cultural understandings of children and youth, and examine the implications for our systems of education.

To achieve this, we must eliminate systems of power that effectively trigger a cycle of domination and abuse, an endless craving for repeated social ranking, and a culture rife with overt force, subtle coercion, and widespread disenfranchisement. We all like to say that we seek to “empower” children, but our efforts occur within a system of public education that is structured to do otherwise. What do we truly mean by “democracy” or “empowerment”?

Are we willing to stand by while empowered young people make decisions we consider unwise? Is it possible for adults to facilitate the empowerment of children and youth without giving up power themselves? If we are willing to deconstruct and transform our cultural understandings of childhood, are we willing to do likewise with adulthood?

By failing to understand the ways in which unethical uses of authority and power serve to acculturate young people into nonconsensual rituals of dominance and submission and to socialize them into pecking-order systems, we remain blind to the betrayal of our youth. When addressing antigay remarks in the classroom, we demand that teachers intervene and punish; hence, we strengthen in a Foucaultian sense the very same system of surveillance, regulation, judgment, castigation, and correction that consistently imposes adult authority on children and youth. We produce and advocate for "inclusive" literature in libraries, which results in the simple queerification of texts that continue to depict young people as innocent, vulnerable, and dependent on adult supervision. In our attempts to win inclusion of openly gay and lesbian teachers, we insist that they serve as exemplary role models, and then we strip them of anything that might spur controversy, influence their students' emerging identities, or catalyze radical change. These are hardly strategies for empowerment.

I have recently argued that the one useful response to today's teacher shortage is to expand sites of recruitment to places as yet untouched by teacher recruitment drives: state prisons, homeless shelters, gay bars, and blighted urban neighborhoods. At first I made this suggestion ironically, but as I had time to reflect on the challenges we face in recruiting teachers committed to social change rather than in reproducing the status quo, I have come to consider this strategy more seriously. If we are trying to shift our system of public education away from its role as a reproducer of social inequities, then we need teachers who are willing to challenge the status quo. Better yet, we need teachers with experience in challenging the status quo. Those who survive on the margins of society acquire an intense experience of being the outsider. These outlaws and social misfits may be more likely to advocate for the radical transformation of ideologies and for the dramatic restructuring of systems of education than are the traditional pool of people whom we cycle through teacher preparation programs.

What would our schools look like if their faculties were comprised of ex-cons, queers, and street people? How might the life chances of all children be different were there more welfare mothers working as elementary educators? If we filled our classrooms with people with heightened experiences of resisting and countering abuse, victimization, marginalization, and approbation, would we succeed at moving school closer to our social justice aims than if

we continued to hire all the Miss Jean Brodys and Jaime Escalantes of the world?

As a culture, we tell ourselves how much we love children and how committed we are to protecting them from savage forces and menacing threats. At the same time, by seeing children and youth as innocent and vulnerable, we participate in the creation of structures and social forces that keep children from information, resources, social organization, and self-concepts that might allow them to produce themselves as strong, savvy people. This is profoundly political; it is about power, and it is about adult fears of children with power. It is about the political manipulation of children for the benefit of adults. I understand it as mass political abuse of children, writ large.

This book is the culmination of thirty years spent teaching, organizing, researching, and writing about LGBT issues in schools and struggling now to critically rethink our baseline assumptions about sexuality, education, and schooling. At its core, it argues that it is possible for educators—not only LGBT educators but all social justice-minded educators—to change the world for young people, not only queer youth, but all youth. Making deep and meaningful change requires us to face head-on the barriers in our path and the work that needs to be done. It requires us to critically challenge our core beliefs and the categories we utilize in our work, and it urges us to consider what radical visions of queerness might offer our debates about education and schooling. It calls on all educators who are committed to social justice to radically rethink our efforts and our role in either maintaining or radically transforming the status quo.