Book Review

Gilbert, Jen. (2014). *Sexuality in school: The limits of education*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

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The relationship between "adults" and those bodies yet to achieve this discursively constituted position—children, adolescents, youth—is one that overlaps with the intersections of education, sexuality studies, queer theory, and youth studies. That is, the constructions of what and who constitutes "adult" or "not-yet-adult" by adults, themselves, have widespread ramifications for many of the central concerns of scholars with theoretical and methodological interests in youth, curriculum and pedagogy, gender and sexuality, sex education, and LGBTQ students and teachers. *When do youth become aware of their sexuality? What is the relationship between queer and trans adults and queer and trans youth? How should sex education be taught in secondary versus primary school? Do parents have in say the determination of a sex education curriculum?*

These questions about age, sex, gender, learning, teaching, and schooling represent the social, political, and educational imaginings about how bodies are constituted either as an adult or at a certain predetermined, developmental stage ahead of arriving at adulthood or, that is, before reaching the age where one is thought to become a viable, sexual—and therefore adult—subject.

The stipulation of sexuality as a requirement of adulthood is key toward the consideration of pedagogical questions about the relationship between children, youth, adults, and sexuality. As Lauren Berlant (2004) explains about children and sexual images, "they must neither know nor see them, at least until they reach that ever more unlikely moment of majority when they can freely consent to reading with a kind of full competence they must first be protected from having" (p. 67). This dominant expectation that sex and sexuality be disjointed from the not-yet-adult body, and the resultant normative ways of knowing about education, learning, and schooling with these bodies, is exactly the knowledge that is unsettled by Jen Gilbert's book, *Sexuality in schools: The limits of education* (2014). Throughout this insightful volume, Gilbert pulls from scholars in youth studies, psychoanalysis and affect studies, and queer theory to examine education's desire for secure, unshakeable knowledge alongside sexuality's always already unpredictability in ways that offer

refreshing ideas on combatting homophobia and transphobia in schools while simultaneously impelling scholars, researchers, and educators "to be suspicious of the bad company we might be keeping in our efforts to expand rights for LGBTQ adults" (p. 3). From this purposely precarious position, the book explores the various relations between sexuality and education, with a particularly important focus on the relationship between constructions of *adult* and *youth*.

This reexamination uncovers the temporal traces that seem to intrinsically connect certain youth bodies to certain histories, communities, and spaces. The assumption that youth are always already known by teachers, parents, schools and curricula is part of what Lee Airton (2013) describes as "singularity of education" (p. 540) or tendency towards the flattening of sexuality in schools. This flattening furthermore ignores the various and continually creative ways in which "LGBT" youth identify, present, and express their gender and sexuality (Talburt, 2004). As such, Gilbert's theorizing takes this flattening head on, with a careful and steady examination of what happens the desire for a steady, durable knowledge is released. She explains that in order

> …to welcome sexuality into the school, we must make room as well for our unintelligible selves. We can invite sexuality into the school, but we cannot know in advance who or

> what will arrive—and this impossibility marks the limit of an education committed to mastery. (p. xxiv)

In this vein, Gilbert moves through four chapters that consider the constructions and imaginings of the relationship between adults and children and youth, specifically through the lens of sexuality, before concluding the book in the final chapter by positing the Derridian notion of *hospitality* as a tool to think through the competing interests of sexuality and education.

The first chapter, *Backward and forward: Narrating the queer child,* expands upon how "the child" is a "powerful alibi for adult desires" (p. 7) by adding to the cannon of queer theorists who take up the image of the child and understandings of futurity. Adding to and expanding this discussion, Gilbert analyzes two Canadian court cases from the 1990s that concerned the image of the "the child": *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District* that dealt with the banning of LGBTQ-themed books from primary school classrooms and *Nixon v. Vancouver Rape Relief Society* in which Kimberley Nixon, a trans woman, was fired from a volunteer role at the woman-only organization because of her childhood experience "as a boy". The chapter's analysis of these cases, especially *Nixon,* impels scholars and educators to ask, "what we want and need from 'the child' in the name of education, or in the name of LGBTQ

politics" (p. 15). The arguments undergirding these cases—that queer children should have access to queer-themed books so that they may imagine a future for themselves or the determination that a transwoman's assigned sex at birth makes her unfit for service at a woman-only space—both rely on narratives of maturation and growth that act as opaque linkages between "adult" and "child". These normative temporal connections draw over what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) explains as "ways of living aslant to dominant forces of object-choice, coupledom, family, marriage, sociability, and self-presentation [that are] thus out of synch with state-sponsored narratives of belonging and becoming" (p. xv). That is, as Gilbert explains, "[w]hat gets lost in the claiming of queer childhoods are those childhoods that either aren't marked as queer or don't foreshadow a queer adulthood" (p. 21).

Moving from "the child" to questions surrounding the risks of adolescence, Chapter 2, *There is no such thing as a adolescent: Sex education as taking a risk,* takes a closer look at the category of "adolescent", itself, to explore sex education's supposedly "risky" influence on the pedagogical relationship between adults and adolescents. As Cris Mayo (2014) explains, "strategies to make schools safe [for queer and trans youth] may implicitly avoid education that considers the pleasurable riskiness of sexuality" (p. 73). Sexuality's arrival into schools, curriculum, and classrooms is

normatively constructed as a risk-filled move; the notion of "safety", then, must necessarily be put under closer examination. "Safety is not something one does or achieves," argues Gilbert, "nor is it an a priori state of being; rather, it is something one feels" (p. 38). Discussions of safety must take into account the theorizing of notions of space and place, specifically the ways *place* and the safety of a place often put under erasure networks of power. Gilbert's dispelling of the myths around safety connects to Lisa Weems' (2010) argument that "[f]oregrounding the transient component/feature of safe space allows us to make visible and explore the possibilities and limitations of conceptualizing relations of power as circuitous, contested and performative through competing claims to particular places as objects of safety" (p. 558). What is important here is the call to rethink the dominance of "safety" as being the benchmark through which issues to be talked about in the presence of adolescents must pass. That is, adults must let go of the idea that they have the power, insight, and clairvoyance to protect and "save" children and youth. As Gilbert explains, "we as adults must notice our own strategies for disengagement, not noticing and maintaining an illusory tone of safety" (p. 43). This advice, most importantly, is directed at the programs and interventions specifically designed for LGBTQ youth.

In Chapter 3, *Histories of misery:* It Gets Better *and the promise of pedagogy,* Gilbert offers her most incisive and important theorizing. Taking up the viral video campaign, *It Gets Better*, in which LGBTQ adults address LGBTQ youth through online videos, she explains her "oblique relationship to these critiques and a rather agnostic view of the merits of *It Gets Better* as an antihomophobic curriculum" (p. 47). As such, she both pulls out the ways in which some critiques of *It Gets Better* from LGBTQ groups rely on limited and essentialist notions of who LGBTQ youth are/can become while also reflecting on the self-sabotaging potential that LGBTQ critiques of such interventions have to further police how LGBTQ adults are able to communicate with LGBTQ youth. Throughout, she explains how, through the retelling of queer adult's stories of misery during their own childhoods, their stories become, for the first time, a *history*. However, in doing so, Gilbert argues that youth, "when writing the stories of their lives, must pass through adults' histories of misery" (p. 49). Airton (2013) concurs that "queer adult fantasy of wholeness and coherence is condensed in a belated mirror relation with children who are, in a phrase, 'like me.'" (p. 537). That is, the reaching back by LGBTQ adults to fetch their memories of miserable interactions with hetero- and gender-normative systems and institutions works to object-ify queerness. The queerness of those memories cannot be dragged into the

present because "queer", itself, is never where we thought we left it. As Adam Greteman (2014) explains, *queer* "is less concerned with staying put and more interested in moving collectively toward that which has not been, but might be somewhere there or here most likely over the rainbow" (p. 420).

At the same time—and this is the beauty of this chapter—Gilbert refuses to let the knowledge of this argument to sediment. While *It Gets Better* does, on one hand, enact a type of pedagogy that forecloses who LGBTQ youth can be/come, she calls for caution when enacting a critique of such interventions: "Put plainly, it is very difficult to find contexts in education where LGBTQ adults can talk to and offer support of LGBTQ youth" (p. 50). As such, she challenges educators and activists to use their (albeit important) critiques to do more than just dismiss a problematic intervention, outright. Rather, her careful analysis in this chapter is a prime example of how, as she states in the book's introduction, "our sexuality, 'as a piece of ignorance,' ruins our wish for absolute knowledge" (p. xix). This release of absolute knowledge—in this case, of ever being able to know whether *It Gets Better* is "working" or not—is part of the pedagogical dilemma. As Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997) argues, "'[o]scillation', 'slippage', and 'unpredictable transformation' are not the images usually invoked when educators talk about student

understanding" (p. 42). However, the Pavlovian negative response that education has with the unknown and the seemingly unsecure is part of the same force that keeps LGBTQ youth as only able to be what adults believe them to be. Through *It Gets Better,* Gilbert highlights how queer adults are "setting in motion a conversation whose direction and end cannot be known in advance" (p. 53). The indeterminacy of this conversation is, in fact, the reason it needs to be had.

Chapter 4, *Thinking in sex education: Between prohibition and* desire, calls for the renewed importance of thinking, itself. Thinking, for Gilbert "is something other than compliance; it is an engagement with uncertainty and doubt and…it is entangled in the affective histories of sexuality that inspire the capacity to think while also unsettling the wish for understanding" (p. 65). Within this particular moment of neoliberalism's demand for the efficiency of knowledge in education, there is a an increased importance to desire the unknowing of that which is supposedly known or, as Patti Lather (2013) describes it, towards an unknowing this is a "post-spectacular dedramatized story, a deflationary aesthetic that points to the insecurity of knowing (p. 640). The risks often associated with sex education or, indeed, the topic of sexuality having a presence in schools at all both assume a pedagogical moment that has yet to happen and, moreover, that

must be anticipated. That is, sex is too often struck from curriculum, education, and from schools and other spaces occupied by children and youth before students (sometimes) have had a chance to experience it. Thinking against these attempts to dispel the relationship between youth and sexuality, Gilbert explains, stands in contrast to how youth are otherwise expected to engage with knowledge production: "When it comes to sex education, we don't seem to trust youth to learn from experience" (p. 80).

In the final chapter, *Education as hospitality: Toward a reluctant manifesto*, Gilbert sketches out, albeit contingently, five points towards welcoming LGBTQ youth, adults, and issues into schools "inspired by Derrida's commitment to the impossible project of hospitality" (p. 83). In other hands, these concluding remarks might serve to walk back the book's central goal of unmooring knowledge and modes of knowledge production, but Gilbert's admittedly partial manifesto provides morsels of ideas towards the more thoughtful relationship between sexuality and education. The thinking beyond these seeds is left in the hands and minds of the reader. The limit of education, and indeed this book, is that it cannot do the work for you. Rather, sexuality and its attendant queerness cannot be contained or predetermined. "Indeed," Gilbert explains, "an engagement with queerness must risk the

failure of a certain dream of education—that prejudice can be educated and identifications anticipated" (pp. 92-3). And this certain possibility of failure seems less "risky" with Gilbert's words in mind.

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