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# Democracy & Education

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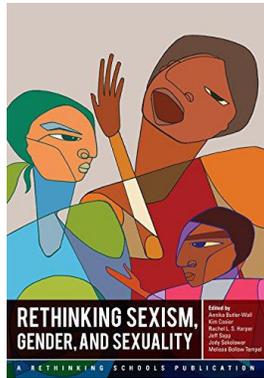
## In Defense of Ambiguity in Education A Book Review of *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality*

Caitlin Howlett (Indiana University)

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**R**ETHINKING *SEXISM, GENDER, and Sexuality* (2016) offers a readable and refreshing account of the ambiguities and possibilities relating to gender and sexuality in education today. With a focus on public school experiences, this collection of vignettes, lessons, and critical essays culminates in a resource that is of great value to teachers, preservice teachers, teacher educators, and citizens as they navigate the ever-changing winds of gender and sexuality, particularly as they diverge and multiply along categories of race, religion, ethnicity, and class. This book offers hope and excitement for those of us looking for resources and arguments in support of advancing the project of social justice, particularly as it relates to gender and sexual equality, and working to inaugurate a future wherein education is able to thrive as a space for activism.

*Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality* opens with a comprehensive introductory chapter discussing and analyzing the ways in which LGBTQ liberation rests upon and is implicated in other social justice issues. The text takes as its starting point a nuanced relationship with such social justice issues, beginning with a set of concerns, critiques, and questions often aimed at mainstream liberal assumptions about oppression and liberation. For instance, the opening chapter includes critiques of single-issue movements and arguments, single-identity category movements and arguments, antibullying platforms, militarization, criminalization, sex education, racism, and unity by rejecting the assumption that such issues are always inherently implicative of LGBTQ experiences and rights. In taking race, class, and ethnicity just as seriously in the attempt to articulate and understand such systems as it does sexuality and gender, the introduction also explores the ways such systems are influenced and related to each other and to the function



of the state. Against this background, the editors articulate their central questions: “What are the aims of our work—liberation or assimilation? With whom are we in coalition, community, and conversation? In our labors for just schools and communities, how can we ensure that we leave no one behind?” (Butler-Wall et al., 2016, p. 29). These questions are critically explored through the lens of queerness, “a stance that

assumes and honors human complexities, and demands action toward ending oppressive social systems that limit our gendered, sexual, and creative lives” (Butler-Wall et al., 2016, p. 29).

Chapter 2, “Our Classrooms,” and chapter 3, “Our Curriculum,” embark on this quest with a particular concern for queering classroom curriculum. In asserting a view of curriculum as something that “if it is anything, is the lifelong process of the teacher’s intellectual life and integrity alongside the deep desire to dialogue with students about content that thrills us with possibilities,” the content of these chapters offers incitement for teachers, students, parents, and community members to engage in liberatory practices (Butler-Wall et al., 2016, p. 125). It is of importance that this collection of writings includes numerous accounts of what teachers, activists, and organizers have already been able to accomplish—in doing so, the book makes visible practices and resources, including literature, that can and do interrupt discourses of appropriateness and innocence in schools and classrooms and enable culturally responsive contexts for learning.

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CAITLIN HOWLETT is a PhD candidate of Philosophy of Education at Indiana University.

Chapter 4, “When Teachers Come Out,” takes seriously the relationship between the teacher, their experiences, and their powerful influence on the classroom. It also highlights the empowerment for both teachers and students that can be felt when teachers feel comfortable to be themselves. These accounts address why and how teachers choose to come out and also reasons why teachers don’t come out. Here, the pieces illuminate the privilege present within the very idea of “coming out” itself and point to a view of empowerment that isn’t attached to such metaphors. Justice for trans students and teachers is discussed here as well, alongside convincing arguments that gender binaries and norms are present throughout all aspects of the classroom and curriculum, and thus can and should be addressed as they appear. Lesson and curriculum suggestions are offered here to help direct one towards these aims.

Finally, in chapter 5, “Beyond the Classroom,” the book’s editors turn their attention toward the relationship between school and community. They interrogate new ways of addressing restorative justice, safety, tragedy, and trauma and offer new stories that span the spectrum of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, and class. Each point is to the necessity of working to “live our lives together, so that we begin to know each other” (Butler-Wall et al., 2016, p. 318). This culminates in a bold but timely and important final chapter, “Teacher Education and Continuing Education,” which argues for the necessity for teachers to take an activist stance in their classrooms and teaching. This argument culminates in support for “action research” for preservice teachers, and for the roles of art, storytelling, and risk in both pedagogy and content, all oriented toward the project of liberation.

However, just as the idea of queerness is full of contradictions and questions, this collection similarly wrestles with consistency at points. For instance, despite the challenges to age appropriateness, there are also pieces that cling to the necessity of the concept, particularly when it comes to elementary schools. Here, it is used as a buffer between children and seemingly dangerous information or ideas, but that can replicate oppressive ideologies. Added tension occurs when one considers that this collection overwhelmingly reflects the experiences of middle and high school students and teachers. There is thus a contradiction between the arguments that suggest children of ages as young as four can benefit from such experiences and the amount of time and space committed to such arguments. Another example of living within a space of contradiction and tension lies in the treatment of gender as a stable category of identity. While many authors repeatedly remind the reader of the instability of the gender binary and of heteronormativity, others reinforce it.

There is also a palpable tension between the discussions regarding family. In the editors’ attempt to make numerous pleas for the expansion of the term *family* to be inclusive of “all” types of family formations, the dominance of the heteronormative nuclear family remains at work, particularly in the perpetuation of the parent-child relationship as central to the idea of family. However, there are families of friends, families without children, and, very truly, children without parents, as well as children and adults for whom “family” is not something to boast about, let alone desire. Within this text, there is little space for a child or adult to

understand the possibility of being nonpartnered or nonreproductive in their relationship to gender and sexuality, and certainly even less room for one to be both. The topic of family thus reveals the text’s own struggle with some of society’s most deeply engrained and normalized practices around gender, sexuality, and race.

Nonetheless, these ambiguities can also be understood as the book’s most important contribution. In honestly depicting the range of views, opinions, and arguments around gender, sexuality, race, class, and oppression, the text is able to reflect the world we find ourselves in—one of confusion, instability, and often pain and harm, but also of possibility, spaces for resistance, and liberation, and contentedness. Contentedness with this ambiguity and confusion is one of the most important lessons of queer theory, and thus these concerns ought to also be read as signs of the book’s success and sincerity.

This book is a powerful resource for teachers, teacher educators, and preservice teachers and can be used to inform one’s pedagogical and content choices. There are many intriguing and thought-provoking lesson plan suggestions, reading lists, book reviews, and firsthand experiences with meaningful lessons to be learned that could help guide an educator through the diverse encounters with sexuality and gender that occur in the classroom. There is also a useful glossary at the end of the book. For teacher educators, this book is highly recommended: By virtue of its diversity, it is likely to impact the thinking of any student in a way that could have important influence on their thinking about education and justice. Further, for parents, this collection of experiences, ideas, and arguments could shed light on their own children’s experiences related to gender, sexuality, race, and even religion and ethnicity, and could provide information for those struggling with the disruption of gender binarism and normativity their children, or their children’s friends or classmates, exhibit.

The most exciting promise of *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality* comes with the possibilities that lie in the answer to its call to build “coalitions, community, and conversation” through such writings and experiences (Butler-Wall et al., 2016, p. 29). I suspect that should we heed these calls, there is pain that will be processed and avoided, violence that can be eradicated, and lives that will be saved. This is no exaggeration—if this book contributes anything to conversations around the relationship among education, gender, sexuality, and oppression, let it be the reminder that allowing education to follow the same paths that it has been forced onto in today’s political climate puts lives at stake.

## References

- A., K., Harper, R., p, J., Sokolower, J., & Tempel, M. B. (Eds.). (2016). *Rethinking sexism, gender, and sexuality*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.