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“Transformational Ministry” and “Reparative Therapy:” Transformative Learning Gone Awry

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Abstract: This essay interrogates how “reparative therapy” and “transformational ministry” debase queer. It takes up Cornell West’s notion of radical pedagogy to explore possibilities for a politics and pedagogy conducive to radical, democratic transformative learning. It provides an overview of my cultural work to advocate for queer persons.

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America... I point the finger in their face and say, “you helped this [– the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York and Washington –] happen.” (p. 1)

Jerry Falwell’s September 13th comments, as quoted by CNN, September 14, 2001

The terrible tragedy that has befallen our nation, and indeed the entire global community, is the sad byproduct of fanaticism. It has its roots in the same fanaticism that enables people like Jerry Falwell to preach hate against those who do not think, live, or love in the exact same way he does.

Lorri L. Dean, Executive Director, US National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, as quoted by CNN, September 14, 2001

Introduction

For those citizens who have known relative safety and security in countries like Canada and the United States, September 11, 2001 will be remembered as the day that ushered in the unthinkable – terrorism any time, any place. In the wake of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, many people are living afraid of monsters that may be lurking in their everyday lives. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon for queer persons. Throughout the history of homophobia, we have always lived with the fear of hateful monsters. Now, as a consequence of the terrorist attacks, many people are able to taste and feel our fear. They can know better what it has always been like to live queer. Gay bashing is the queer community’s daily terrorist encounter. It damages queer lives, and snuffs out far too many of them. Thus the current preoccupation with safety and security has always been our concern – all the time, in every place.

When Jerry Falwell issued his hate message debasing queer and other persons on September 13, 2001, he did damage that his apology later that day could not rectify. His verbal terrorist attack during a broadcast of the conservative Christian US television program *The 700 Club* – comments that constitute a crime and discriminatory practice, at least in my home country, Canada (Department of Justice, Canada, 2001) – kept a history of debasement of queer and other cultural outlaws alive like a cancer ravaging a human body. Since Falwell holds on to what Cornel West (1996) calls “thin and impoverished conceptions of the gospel” (p. 365), queer persons are not part of his Christian family. This stance is also taken by a visible and vocal contingent of other rightist Christians. For

example, this contingent includes those involved in “reparative therapy” and “transformational ministry,” which constitute forms of pedagogical and cultural terrorism that pretend to be forms of transformative learning. Both conservative cultural practices suggest the scientifically unsubstantiated possibility of “transformation” to a heterosexual “lifestyle” (JFC, 1999). In this essay, I discuss these contemporary forms of anti-queer public pedagogy as well as possibilities for the transformative, positional queer politics and pedagogy they induce. I draw on Cornell West’s notion of radical pedagogy in order to provide background and principles to help develop these politics and pedagogy, and I provide an overview of my cultural work to advocate for queer persons.

“Reparative Therapy” and “Transformational Ministry:” Debasing Queer

In 1999 the Just the Facts Coalition (JFC), a partnership of US education, health, mental health, and religious organizations, published a fact sheet in response to a conservative blitz that began in mid-1998 to promote “reparative therapy” and “transformational ministry” in educational conferences and the popular media. Transformational ministry, which emerged in the early 1970s, is a form of theocratic terrorism that aims to (a) eliminate the “sins” of same-sex desire and intimacy, and (b) “convert” queer persons to a heterosexual “lifestyle” (Grace, 2001). It debases queer persons and queerness (being/believing/doing queer) by promoting its belief that queer sexuality and religious faith are incompatible. JFC’s (1999) fact sheet relates that this ministry is at odds with the inclusive perspectives of many religious organizations that accept queer persons and support our right to protection from discrimination.

Reparative therapy, as a pseudo-secular counterpart to transformational ministry, is orthodox psychotherapy that is sometimes called “conversion therapy.” It is grounded in the outmoded notion that homosexuality is a socially dangerous mental disorder (Haldeman, 1999). It is a form of therapeutic terrorism that assaults queer identity, decency, dignity, and integrity (Grace, 2001). JFC’s (1999) fact sheet reports that reparative therapy is branded unethical and potentially dangerous by all major health and mental health organizations, which, beginning with the American Psychiatric Association in 1973, have declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder.

Collectively, Canadian and US transformational ministries make up Exodus North America (ENA), which is a small but visible and vocal anti-queer, conservative religious faction. Under girding Exodus’s “transformative” learning practices are the homophobic beliefs that (a) homosexuality is an addictive lifestyle, (b) queerness is culturally conditioned and nurtured from the queer margins, and (c) same-sex orientation signifies emotional deficit and unnatural gender identity development (Rogers, 1993). From Exodus’s perspective, such beliefs point to a need for “god’s refreshing” and “fresh vision, enthusiasm, and spiritual healing” (ENA, 2001, p. 1). This refreshing is allegedly found in such spaces as the faction’s national conferences. For example, from August 6 – 11, 2001, approximately 900 delegates gathered in Asheville, North Carolina for the 26th annual ENA conference where tearful testimonials of so-called restoration to a heterosexual “lifestyle” were shared. Sadly, these testimonials belied the hurt, anguish, and disconnection that many queer persons experience in heteronormative familial, community, and church spaces where systemic heterosexism and internalized homophobia are usually not recognized or interrogated. The social pressure to live “straight” is intense in these spaces. Of course, while one might live/act straight, it is

improbable that one can change one's sex-and-gender differences and be a straight male or a straight female (JFC, 1999). So, at best, ENA can only create the illusion of straight by encouraging frustrated queer persons to believe/act straight. Of course, the attempt to live "straight" while rejecting being/believing/doing queer only adds to their frustration.

From a Politics of Perversion to a Politics of Conversion

Locating himself within a larger historical narrative of nation and world, Cornel West (1993, 1994) aims "to speak the truth to power with love so that the quality of everyday life for ordinary people is enhanced" (p. xiv). He hooks this principle of leadership to two others: (a) the ability to "grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood" (p. 13), and (b) the ability to envision a future that draws on the best of history while being conscious of the ongoing challenges, risks, and barriers that ordinary people face in the culture-language-power nexus. As he speaks to these principles, West links structures to behaviors and institutions to values, and he situates culture as a structure. In this light, for queer persons negotiating a way through the structures and institutions emanating from heteronormative society and a heterosexualizing culture, two key questions arise: How should we behave? What should we value?

These are not easy questions for us to answer as we deal with the internal tides of self-hatred and internalized homophobia that are compounded by the external tides of bigotry, debasement, discrimination, threats, and physical, mental, and emotional violence. We experience these tides at home, at work, at church, in educational institutions, and in the community. Indeed living in fear is normalized in queer lives in the sense that the possibilities of harassment and harm lurk in these cultural spaces where a politics of perversion debasing differences is often at work. The sad consequences of these politics include emotional distress, clinical depression, attempted or actual suicides, promiscuity, and drug-and-alcohol abuse (JFC, 1999). Such outcomes are expressions of what West (1993, 1994) calls nihilism, which he sees as "a disease of the soul" (p. 29); it is "*the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness* [his italics]. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world" (p. 23).

To address the nihilistic threat in a troubled civil society, and to move away from a politics of perversion that humiliates queer persons and other citizen outlaws, West (1993, 1994) suggests a turn to a politics of conversion. These politics enable one to declare self-worth that is energized by concern for others: "Self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community" (p. 29). Engaging these politics to overcome the nihilistic threat, queer persons need to engage in critical questioning. When are we being self-destructive? When are we being cruel to those different from ourselves inside and outside the spectral queer community? When do we fall into the patriarchal trap and live out, for example, racist, sexist, classist, and ageist behaviors in both queer and the larger cultures? As we take up such questions, we might begin this process by understanding queerness as a political and ethical construct, which is a construct that West uses to understand those shattered by debasement of their differences. We need to acknowledge how we behave, and we need to ascertain why we behave in those ways so we expose any cruel intentions or behaviors that reflect complicity with oppressors.

Principles to Guide Fundamental Democratic Transformative Learning and to Help Build a Pedagogy for a Radical Democracy that Includes Queer Persons

In an interview on heterosexism and transformation, Cornel West (1996) locates heterosexism in power intersections with White supremacy and patriarchy. His perception of a popular struggle for liberation incorporates queer people into a vision for cultural democracy. As part of fighting an anti-homophobic struggle, West challenges educators to interrogate our living and teaching in order to expose ways that we have internalized and thus sustained racism, patriarchy, and homophobia in our work. He believes that all people must take responsibility for their actions, and work in solidarity to raze homophobia and other assaults on humanity and spirituality. As a responsible Christian, and especially as a radical democrat (his political philosophical stance), West maintains that this work involves (a) “wrestling with particular forms of evil;” (b) “trying to be true to one’s own sense of moral integrity;” and (c) attuning to “the tendency human beings have to associate persons who are different with degradation, [and] to associate those who have been cast as marginal with subordination and devaluation” (p. 357).

In providing a basis for a politics and pedagogy to dismantle compulsory heterosexuality, West (1996) highlights the relationships between (a) the cultural and the political and (b) the ethical and the erotic. He provides principles that affirm queer as normal, and disavow queer being as a disease and queer doing as a crime. *Principle 1:* One should attempt to signify the moral ideals advancing human growth, integrity, and dignity that enable one to critique heterosexism, homophobia, and their cultural and political repercussions. *Principle 2:* One should interrogate one’s own homophobic socialization – what one is taught and what one learns in heterosexualizing familial, religious, educational, and other cultural settings – that consequences in feelings of threat, fear, or hatred in relation to queer persons and actions. *Principle 3:* One should interrogate closeted sexuality because queer persons can assault their own integrity and dignity via self-hatred and internalized homophobia, which mark life in the closet. *Principle 4:* One should investigate queer bashing not only as a consequence of oppression by such factions in dominant communities as homophobic White supremacists, but also as a consequence of the shattering of particular marginalized communities. In regard to the latter in the US context, West accentuates the Black community where the shattering results in more conspicuous “paranoid dispositions” and “scapegoating of the most vulnerable: Black women, gays, and lesbians” (p. 359). *Principle 5:* One should turn to history in the political and pedagogical task of building radical democracy in order (a) to “keep alive a subversive memory of critique and resistance” (p. 359); and (b) to locate sexuality as both a particular discourse and institutional practice designed to maintain a tradition of compulsory heterosexuality.

My Cultural Work to Build Radical, Democratic Transformative Learning Spaces *Working in the Edmonton Community: The Diversity Conferences of Alberta Society*

The Diversity Conferences of Alberta Society (DCAS) was incorporated in 1998 to continue the spiritual and cultural work that Reverend Bert and Evelyn Frey, now retired from pastoral work with the United Church of Canada, had begun to address homophobia and prejudice in the predominantly conservative province of Alberta. DCAS is a diverse group of cultural workers whose members reflect an array of sex-and-gender differences that cannot be reduced to simplistic male/female and homo/heterosexual

dichotomous classifications. We also reflect an array of religious positionalities, including Judaism, Islam, Wicca, and Christianity; some members have no religious affiliation. DCAS provides space and place for (a) queer youth and adults who want to deliberate issues of sexuality and spirituality, (b) straight youth and adults who seek constructive dialogue with queer persons so they can build communities that affirm and accommodate spiritual and sexual differences, (c) professionals who counsel people around sex-and-gender differences, (d) people with queer family members and friends, and (e) paid and volunteer workers in social justice and helping organizations (DCAS Mission Statement, 2001). As we work to meet the needs of this diverse public, DCAS provides educational and other sociocultural opportunities for people “to learn, to question, to celebrate, to liberate, to integrate, and to affirm” (DCAS, 2001, p.1).

I began my work with DCAS in 1999 when I moved to Edmonton to work in education and queer studies at the University of Alberta. As a member of the Board of Directors, I engage in cultural work where I speak and act to help other persons (a) deliberate issues of sexuality and spirituality, and (b) engage in social and cultural education so that, one day, queer persons will experience the rights and privileges of full personhood and citizenship. In coordinating action groups for the 2002 DCAS Spring Conference, I have worked in community to highlight intersections of sex-and-gender differences with other relationships of power including race, ethnicity, class, ability, and age. For example, to focus on age as a relationship of power, we developed workshops to enable queer and questioning youth to engage issues of sexuality and spirituality, and the challenges, risks, liabilities, and possibilities associated with “coming out” in faith, educational, familial, and other communities. We also developed workshops to enable older queer persons to deal with issues of sexuality and spirituality in relation to aging in youth-oriented queer culture that too often demeans and isolates older persons.

Working in the Education Community: Agape

When I took up my position at University of Alberta during the 1999 fall semester, I initiated (with the support of the Faculty of Education) a new focus group called Agape, which considers issues in relation to sex-and-gender differences and education. Agape, as Martin Luther King, Jr. (1958) understood it, stands for “disinterested love. ... Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving others for their sakes. ... It springs from the need of the other person” (cited in Tierney, 1993, p. 23). From this perspective, our focus group is designed to meet personal and professional needs expressed by queer undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff. Straight allies are also welcome. As well, practicing educators in the greater Edmonton area have been invited to participate.

In our biweekly meetings we share and discuss narratives of educational experiences; use forms of queer popular culture such as queer-themed music, films, and magazines as resources to help us build educational practices that counter heterosexism and homophobia; address issues that concern job searches and welfare-and-work for queer educators; use role plays and other forms of drama as pedagogy to explore queer issues and concerns in relation to education; examine educational policies and practices for inclusivity; interact with invited presenters such as queer researchers and activists and members from community groups like PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays); and provide space to network and socialize in a safe, supportive setting. We have also worked to build an on-campus queer resource base useful to educators.

Concluding Perspective

While both religious and secular traditions have the capacity to spawn hateful monsters that debase queer (West, 1996), faith-based groups who either defile (such as Transformational Ministry) or affirm (such as DCAS) queer persons and queerness have been the focus of this essay. Perhaps those followers of the Palestinian Jew and prophet Jesus Christ who debase us might critically reflect on West's (1996) words, which provide impetus to rethink Jesus' words as a basis for an affirming, homosocial spiritual text that assists radical, democratic transformative learning for queer persons:

Now, of course, what's interesting is that most of the religious Right, and the religious persons who use scripture to justify homophobia, don't like to admit that Jesus is not only silent on the issue [of homosexuality], but he goes about engaging in forms of touch and intimate relation, not sexual that we know of, but in intimate relation in the best sense of sensual, across the board from Mary to Lazarus, you see. People have said, well, if homosexuality is such a burning issue, how come Jesus doesn't say anything about it? ... And that's very upsetting, very upsetting indeed to right-wing Christian brothers and sisters! (p. 365)

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