Chapter 5 - "Articulating Sissy Boy Queerness"

In "Articulating Sissy Boy Queerness Within and Against Discourses of Tolerance and Pride," David McInnes and Cristyn Davies argue that "the pedagogical discourse of homophobia" (notably utilized by educators in Australian schools) reifies (rather than questions) the "ontological certainty of gender," or the presumed naturalness of a strict gender binary. McInnes and Davies argue that acts of gender nonconformity offer portals through which educators can critically examine issues of gender and sexuality; thus, they suggest a new ethics that focuses on "the precariousness of the other" (echoing Levinas and Butler), or the realization of the instability of gender identity, in order to promote compassion between straight and queer students.

Within the present "anti-homophobia education ¿in schools [in New South Wales, Australia]," queerness is merely assimilated into normative categories (homosexuality, for instance, is described as "only natural," thus perpetuating a binary between natural/unnatural sexualities). More importantly, a tolerance/pride discourse leaves gender assumptions unquestioned and perpetuates the supposedly logical nature of gender categories: when a straight student directs a shaming, homophobic remark at a sissy boy, the educator deems the homophobia "bad" (as opposed to the gender system that creates such homophobia) and encourages the sissy boy to be proud (in order to counter the shame) of his identity. This process, however, completely "stifles the reflexivity in shaming circuits;" in other words, when the sissy boy sublimates shame with pride rather than examining and questioning the shame, he misses an opportunity at self-reflection. So, too, do the straight boys (and girls) who are present during the homophobic encounter: the "reality" of the gender alignments (boys acting like boys; girls acting like girls) on which normative gender is built remained unscathed, unaltered, unpolluted by the performances of those that do not conform.

"Safe space" initiatives in schools have arisen with the intention of providing a physical space for queer students to be open about their sexualities and explore them in a tolerant and designated environment. The authors attempt to illustrate how, in practice, these notions of "freedom or liberation" become a process of subjection. They argue that Safe Spaces, in promoting the ideal of "being yourself," imply a certainty of the essential self, "working towards a _fixity_ of subjectivity," that perpetuates resistance to the critique of masculinity and femininity. Although these spaces may immediately protect same-sex attracted and gender non-conforming young people from being abuse and vilified, McInnes and Davies argue that they are not an effective method of reaching these ends.

"Fixity" of gender representation also thwarts compassion by "ignor[ing] the precariousness of others and assum[ing] a lack of precariousness for the self." Such a distinction between the "I" and the "(abject) non-I, an other," is embodied in the type of address/declaration ("He's gay/I'm straight") and return address/declaration ("He's homophobic/ I'm enlightened") that exists within discourses of tolerance and pride. Thus, McInnes and Davies suggest, in resonance with Levinas and Butler, that educators "resist sure knowledge of the other" and, instead, ask questions that reveal the malleability of gender, such as "What does how I make sense of you and your gender conformity suggest what is at stake with me?" Such an ethical engagement would "involve approaching the sissy boy as a valuable confounding manifestation of a gender order that is impossible to fix."

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Someone could go through the case studies (Matt, Marco, and Pablo) and talk about them? --Jonathan Pace

Discussion from class:

the present "discourse of homophobia" merely reinforces hegemonic notions of gender: when there is a sissy boy in the classroom, the homophobic remarks are said to be "bad."

starts off talking about how queerness is handled in schools in australia, teachers' discourses addressing homophobia actually reinforce hegemonic gender discourse

when there's a sissyboy in the classroom, the homophobic remarks are said to be bad, and the queer individual is taught to counter the shame of the homophobic statement with pride

author argues that instead ideas of masculinity and femininity should be questioned "why do students feel threatened by effeminacy in male students?"

a binary between straight and gay is reinforced, us vs. them, no compassion is fostered between groups

author proposes "new ethics" of queer discourse, emphasizing precariousness of queerness/gender (?) - picks up on Butler would destabilize notions of fixed gender identity, sexuality

understand sexuality in amore flexible way that enables cooperation and compassion b/w gay and straight students

authors don't offer very specific methods of incorporating the ethic, other than vaguely advocating questioning the current discourse, but provides a good start