

Sexualities in Rural Spaces: Conservatism and Fundamentalism as Curriculum

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Abstract

Notions of sexual and gender identities seem to be troubled as people are more forth-coming with sexual and gender practices that stray beyond traditionally defined boundaries. Working within geographical locations; in particular, those that are rural, the authors explore the impact of fundamentalism, traditionalism, and conservatism as curricular elements that support the construction and maintenance of particular sexual and gender identities. Constructions of sex, gender, femininity, and masculinity are called into question and possibilities are offered for imagining identities between and beyond those that are defined through traditionalism, fundamentalism, and conservatism.

Key Words: rural studies; rural sexualities; conservatism; fundamentalism; sexuality; gender studies; curriculum studies; queer studies

1. Sexualities in Rural Spaces: Conservatism and Fundamentalism as Curriculum

When one considers rural, many images may come to mind: a long country road, a meadow, farms, a more “simple” life, traditional values, etc. Thinking about sexualities, much like considering what constitutes rural, conjures up many representations of ways to be sexual, usually defined with some label, e.g. straight, gay, bisexual, or any number of descriptors. Certainly modernity has created opportunities for sexual behavior to be defined and codified; yet, acting sexually with someone else remains a very personal endeavor. Desire sparks endless sexual imaginings that may or may not be practiced. In America, sexualities are often perceived to revolve around the coupling of the so-called opposite sexes, the male and female. The notion that there are only two sexes becomes troubling as one considers realities and possibilities beyond the male/female binary, e.g. those who identify as “transsexual” or “intersexed.” Indeed, thinking in the binary is generally troublesome, as existence beyond its limits seems to have no place to locate. As sexualities are considered, they often become entangled in the binary of gay/straight, so we rely on constructions such as “bisexual” or some other category as a place to be in-between. What about what lies beyond the in-between? How do we come to know how to be sexual? These questions begin to provoke imaginative and critical thinking, which are the perspectives used in this essay to consider sexualities in rural spaces.

2. Let’s Talk About Sex!

Sexual identities, gender expressions and sexual orientations that are different from traditional heterosexual practices are all under suspicion in the United States. Traditional constructions of sexuality and gender include roles and practices that are grounded in normed expectations of what it means to be a man or a woman. Some of these expectations for men include strength, athleticism, individuality, and rational approaches to problems. For women, they include softness, care taking, dependence, and emotional responses to problems. Media tends to support such traditional representations of sex and sexuality as much of mediated popular culture (re) presents stereotypical paradigms of masculine/feminine (re) packaged bodies for consumption. In mainstream American media, products and services are marketed to both males and females who represent traditional interpretations of so-called sexes. As “male” and “female” are reinforced and reiterated, sexualities and gender roles associated with the two “sexes” are reified, packaged, and sold to the public. This heterosexist capitalistic framework unto itself perpetuates the notion and assumption that everyone is “straight” and all other sexual expressions are at worst diseased, deviant, and/or immoral and at best alternative or edgy. Based upon the socio-cultural dynamics of what is defined as male or female, gender has little to do with an individual’s actual biological sex, sexual identity or sexuality, though it is often woven tightly into the fabric of sex and sexuality. Just what is meant by such terms as gender, sex, femininity and masculinity?

As Lugg indicates, “Gender is an ongoing, life-long series of evolving performances. Sex is chromosomal” (Lugg, 2007, p.120). Indeed, science has complicated the notion that there are two biological sexes as research has revealed several “conditions” that are popularly referred to as “intersexed” (the presence of both “male” and “female” chromosomes and other sexual characteristics associated with biological definitions). While sex is supposedly biological and determined by simple tests, gender has more to do with identity and common notions of femininity and masculinity.

Gender does not always correspond to so-called biological sex. Despite particular body parts or the presence of particular chromosomes, there are “men” who like to express themselves as “women” and there are “women” who like to express themselves as “men,” e.g., “drag queens” who perform particular expressions of gender for money and fame. There are people who live their entire lives expressing gender traits opposite of their supposed biological sex. Across America, particularly in rural areas, high schools, civic clubs, and community centers use the performance of gender for entertainment in an effort to raise funds for some cause as football players (traditionally male) and cheerleaders (traditionally female) cross roles at pep rallies in the name of school spirit. There are “womanless weddings,” where males perform the roles associated with traditional marriage ceremonies including the female roles, and “womanless” beauty pageants where “men” engage in all the traditional events of beauty competitions. While gender studies have typically focused on the construction of femininity, more recently scholars have focused on the construction of masculinity. Indeed, curriculums of gender are often grounded in the traditional masculine. Regarding masculinity, Chafetz (1974) presents in descriptive terms seven areas that “define” masculinity. They are as follows:

1. Physical-virile, athletic, strong, brave. Unconcerned about appearance and aging;
2. Functional-breadwinner, provider for family as much as mate
3. Sexual-sexually aggressive, experienced. Single status acceptable;
4. Emotional-unemotional, stoic, *boys don't cry*;
5. Intellectual-logical, intellectual, rational, objective, practical,
6. Interpersonal-leader, dominating; disciplinarian; independent, free, individualistic; demanding;
7. Other Personal Characteristics-success-oriented, ambitious, aggressive, proud, egotistical; moral, trustworthy; decisive, competitive, uninhibited, adventurous. (pg. 35-36).

Indeed, Chafetz’s descriptors seem to capture traditionalist notions of masculinity and work in tandem with the so-called feminine, which is traditionally conceived as “opposite” the masculine. Strength, fortitude, and reason are all situated firmly in the masculine and are often held in high esteem as characteristics of a “successful” person regardless of sex. Thus, the masculine and feminine with respect to traditionalism are well defined, dominant, and revered as ways of *being*. Breaking away from traditionalism, gender, sexualities, and sex are conceived here as fluid and not a static concepts. Our human behaviors and their interpretation by those who witness them become curriculum and speak to how gender, sexualities, and sex are constructed, enacted, performed and contextualized. To be male or female means a pattern of behaviors must be engaged and read for the production of gender (Gause, 2008). The patterns that define genders and sexualities both traditionally and in non-traditional and non-conformist ways are constructed and reconstructed as curricular endeavors and, through pedagogies, are delivered to pupils in many settings via texts, images, and other mediums.

As Kinsey (1948, 1953) pointed out to us in his groundbreaking work on sexualities in males and females, people are engaged in any number of sexual ways of being despite the perception that there is a “normal” and “natural” way to be sexual. Indeed, sexualities are often defined within a context of normal and heterosexual sexualities are dominant in American cultures. Rasmussen Rofes, & Talburt (2004) point out that “Normative frameworks, including heteronormative frameworks, are the scaffolding that holds in place an entire system of power and privilege that endeavors to regulate young people, people of color, queers, and women to the symbolic fringes of society.” (p. 3). Indeed, it is so-called normal that allows the creation of so-called abnormal, which sets in motion an incredible system of oppression contextualized in hierarchy and binomial paradigms with gender and sexuality being prominent in the discourse of what is and is not normal. Moral codes support this framework of normal and natural and morality is often constructed from and through religious traditions. Here, there is particular interest in the construction of sexualities and gender identities within rural contexts, as so-called rural is often linked with traditionalism, fundamentalism, and conservatism. The assertion here is that traditionalism, fundamentalism, and conservatism become central in the curriculum that defines sex, sexuality, and gender within rural spaces.

3. Religious Fundamentalism

It is impossible to discuss sexualities within rural spaces in America without discussing religion and its impact on what many believe to be moral behaviors and decision-making. Indeed, Christianity, particularly fundamentalist Christian traditions are built upon a Biblical narrative that emphasizes obedience, concern for others (though this has become selective), and the promise of an eternal life if one conducts one's self in a moral fashion. Interestingly and of utmost importance, the Bible is a guide a text if you will, for how to live a moral life, particularly for those who adhere to fundamental perspectives (Harris, 2008). Geographically there are many areas that may be considered non-urban in the United States and many of those areas are thought to be grounded in fundamental religious beliefs and practices; however one region in particular bears the distinction of being the "Bible Belt;" the South.

The southern United States is as synonymous with religious fundamentalism as it is with rural geography. As Sears (1991) points out, Southerners as a group are predominately Christian and "often are more orthodox, their reading of the Bible is more literal, and their religious rituals are more flamboyant." (p. 24). It is not surprising that religion is a dominant thread in the tapestry of the lives of most Southerners and this is no exception for those Southerners who claim any variety of sexual and gender spaces. Southern Baptists and United Methodists combined account for the majority the church population of the south and have for nearly two centuries (Sears, 1991). The Southern Baptist denomination is predominant in the south with well over 42,000 churches nationwide according to the Southern Baptist Convention (<http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/default.asp>). Most importantly, the location of dominant models of gender roles and sexuality resides in religious spaces that have been constructed within the hegemony of the Christian church and in the South the church represents orthodoxy, conservatism, and fundamentalism. Additionally, the foundation of morality within this context is built upon the church and in the South the moral code is reiterated through immersion in the teachings of the Bible as interpreted by the preachers and the family, who become the pedagogs of fundamentalism and conservatism.

Thus, the curriculum of conservatism and fundamentalism is taught both in the classroom of the family and the classroom of the church, spilling into the social systems that comprise the cultures associated with rural spaces. Being a good student of conservative and fundamental curriculum requires adherence to particular rules including rules about sexualities and gender identities that are contextualized in "normal" and "natural" ways of being. Transgressing these rules often becomes detrimental personally and socially. For people who begin to negotiate the differences between normative and non-conformist gender and sexual identities, clashing with religion based ideals occurs early in the process, resulting in a constant sense of avoiding deviance, shame, and isolation from what has been deemed natural and/or normal according to the moral code (Krondorfer, 2009). Keep in mind that sex for pleasure continues to violate fundamental aspects of the moral curriculum, which emphasize the role of sex as primarily reproductive.

As Katz (1995) reports, the use of the term "heterosexuality" did not emerge in medical literature until 1892 and was, interestingly, a signifier of the perverse, referring to its use a descriptor of sexual activity "divorced from reproductive imperatives." (Stokes, 2005, p.132). Defining such categories as heterosexual, homosexual, etc. became locations for identity and for those who do not or cannot identify within "normal" and "natural" frames, they must negotiate being un-natural, abnormal, and immoral (Downs, 2007). Since American cultural ideals and practices, particularly moral codes associated with rural spaces, are often contextualized within religious structures, the link between identity and conservative and fundamentalist definitions of morality exists within spaces that are defined by religion and religious doctrines and practices; thus, shame is again given space to exist and grow.

Apple (2001) suggests that American public education has been drastically influenced by conservatism and religious fundamentalism; thus, academic curriculum is colored by what is supposed to be held within the confines of the church and/or familial religious practices. Beyer and Liston (1996) point out that the debate between conservative and progressive approaches has shaped and will continue to shape curriculum in American schools. Indeed, Breault (2010) argues that the so-called progressives in education tend to reflect fundamentalist approaches despite claims of critiquing fundamentalism and conservatism and Whitlock (2006) points out that in the Southern United States, it is extremely difficult to use curriculum in schools to change attitudes and approaches toward sexualities because of the embedded conservative and fundamental values. Fundamentalism and conservatism are intertwined with public education and efforts to detangle them are challenging.

As history shows us, the argument between religion-based public education and so-called secular (scientific) curriculum has raged since the beginning of public schooling with a basic question held at the fore; how did we come to be? Indeed the very creation of humans according to fundamentalist Christian doctrine relied on a male and female formed by a higher being. It seems that sex and perhaps gender are at the very foundation of human existence and the quest to discover how humans were and are created.

4. The Curriculum of Creationism

Pre-modern thought has as its focus the explanation of phenomena based on control exerted upon humanity by a higher power – traditionally defined in the West as a male, e.g. Zeus, God, or Mohamed. The narratives of Biblical creation reinforce a scenario where males are the first to be made by the higher power, followed by females. In the Bible, one of the predominant sacred texts in Western cultures, the narrative names the first man Adam and the first woman Eve with the woman's defiance of God being the location of the moral downfall of all humanity. Unlike the strong and powerful Adam, Eve was, according to fundamental readings of the story, vulnerable, weak, and subject to poor decision-making. Interestingly, the creation story that so many who are reared in fundamentalist Christian environments hear over and over again emphasized the supposition that Adam and Eve had no knowledge of their nudity prior to Eve's consumption of the fruit of the Tree of Life; thus, they were filled with shame about nudity and presumably sex once the fruit had been consumed. It is this linking of nudity (awareness of the physical body), sexuality, and shame that becomes intriguing and important as one reflects on how one may become shameful about one's body and its engagement with others sexually.

Inerrant in the fundamentalist Christian creation story is the "natural" sexual coupling of males with females for the purpose of procreation in order to establish God's greatest creation - humans; after all, Adam's partner was Eve, not Steve. Thus, opposite sex sexuality, whose primary purpose is to produce offspring, is established as natural and normal and gender roles are clearly defined with males being physically and mentally superior to females, who are contextualized within a shadow of contempt for breaking the rules set forth by God (Pagels, 1988). Within the frame of rural, if one presumes that rural includes moral codes based in fundamental, conservative, and traditional Christian-based sexual and gender roles, sexuality is bound by roles that emphasize male-dominance, reproduction, and adherence to gender roles. Abandoning normal and natural sexualities and gender identities becomes a very serious matter and often a location for much angst and shame. Indeed, we see what happened to Adam and Eve when they disobeyed God; they were banished from the Garden of Eden (a rural space) into the cold cruel world where they faced lives of hardship.

To abandon particular beliefs and practices in the South is to abandon God and his son Jesus (Cosner & Payne, 2008). Doing this will jeopardize eternal life according to many Christian teachings. Currently, religious fundamentalism and evangelical Christianity play major roles in American politics with an emphasis on keeping a moral code that does not embrace differences (Feldman, 2005). Indeed the family in American is often structured around Christian-based ideals and, as we have discussed, rural frames emphasize the nuclear family structure. So-called "family values" emerged in the 1990s in the political discourse surrounding morality and has remained a player on the political stage (Jakobsen, 2000). For those with so-called rural points of view, the family unit is central and the hegemony of the family is structured within a heteronormative frame. "Alternative families" are not easily conceptualized or practiced in rural spaces; thus, sexualities that promote alternative families are not acceptable.

5. The Curriculum of Rural Spaces

Those who are non-conformist with regard to sexual and gender identities often find it difficult and sometimes impossible to carve out an existence in spaces that adhere to conservative and fundamental ideologies (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Goldfarb, 2006; Kendall & Martino, 2006). Indeed, many people do exist in non-urban environments where they engage in a variety of sexual and gender practices; however, visibility of such "deviance" is often minimal (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Gray, 2009). Indeed, Gray (2009) points out that "metronormativity" contributes to the notion that gays/queers in the country are somehow incomplete and in need of escape to the metropolis in order to fully realize their gayness/queerness. Certainly there are gays, lesbians, trans-people, queers, gender queers, bears, etc. that live happily in rural locales just as there are people in such locales that struggle with shame, anxiety, and isolation. In Fellows (1996) work *Farm Boys* readers encounter the lived experiences of men who grew up on mid-western farms struggling with identities that did not fit into conservative and fundamental frames.

The impact of gender roles contextualized in the rural is evident as one reads about “farmwork” and “housework” and the struggles many of the people interviewed had with negotiating their positions in and among these expected ways of being productive on the farm. Also, readers of *Farm Boys* will note that there was common silence about sexuality associated with life in a rural space; thus, one was left to negotiate sexuality within one’s own mind or within dark experimental spaces with a friend, neighbor, or family member. The curriculum of fundamentalism and conservatism, while emphasizing individual freedoms, is careful to school its pupils on the importance of value systems steeped in tradition. If one is acting non-traditionally, one is to keep such actions silent and/or invisible. Of course, not all is silent in the world of rural sexual deviance as evidenced by such social/political groups as the Radical Faeries who embrace anti-establishment perspectives while adapting rural and environmentally sustainable stances in the politics members promote. Yet, the voices of sexual and gender non-conformist in rural spaces are often minimized or silenced as the construction of what and how one should *be* remains grounded in frames that do not embrace diversity, which has become a location for social and political discourse as the 21st century unfolds.

6. Constructing the Future Curriculum of Sexualities in Rural Spaces

Certainly, no one can say that sexualities will become drastically different in rural spaces or any other space for that matter; indeed, human sexual practice has probably remained fairly consistent throughout time. What does seem to change is the codification and level of visibility sexual and gender identities enjoy within any given historical period (Bolin & Whelehan, 2009; Foucault, 1978; Jefson, 2005). In America, sexual and gender identities that do not conform to traditional identities have become increasingly visible over the past forty years with momentum building as the 21st century passes its first decade. Mainstream print and electronic media includes any number of representations of people who are sexually and gender non-conformists despite the continued dominance of heteronormative representations. Non-traditional characters abound on television, and though they are often stereotyped in their construction, they represent new spaces for the presence of the “Other.” Political debates are fueled with discussions about “gay marriage,” gays in the military, and gay families and while “queer” identifying people have not emerged in the limelight of the discourse related to gender identities and sexualities, they are, nonetheless, present in the discussion. Even geographically rural spaces enjoy enhanced visibility of sexual and gender non-conformity through television and Internet.

As Gray (2009) points out, youth in rural locations are exploring queer sexual and gender spaces through the use of new and mass media. Indeed, the queer youth of today are probably no queerer in terms of sexual practices than youth fifty or one hundred years ago; yet, they enjoy the ability to easily access each other and those outside their geographies, which enables potentially liberatory experiences. Explorations of sexualities on the Internet are seemingly endless as people engage in cyber spaces unbound by physical limits. One can simply close the bedroom door and *be* anything one can imagine via the Internet (Rebchook & Curotto, 2007; Ross, 2005). Thus, the Internet as pedagogy becomes a unique space for exploration of the between and beyond, particularly for those who may feel isolated or excluded in the curriculum of conservatism and fundamentalism and for those who are geographically isolated. If one’s perspective is grounded in traditional, fundamental, and/or conservative frames, one is not likely to stray too far into experimental sexualities or gender identities without guilt and angst and certainly not in any public way. Indeed, the public face of rural sexualities remains steadfast in its heteronormative foundations even for those who are sexually non-conformist, e.g. the happy gay/lesbian “married” couple (Valverde, 2006).

Alarming, evidence suggests that among African-American teens, those in rural areas geographically compared to those in urban areas are likely to have sex more often than those in urban areas, more likely to have unprotected sex, and more likely to contract STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases, 2003). It is not clear that similar studies have occurred for white or other non-white teen groups. One may presume that silence about sex and sexualities is an underlying cause for the apparent discrepancy between teens in the country versus teens in the city. Certainly, this area of inquiry raises questions and demands more research. In any case, it seems clear that current discourses about sexuality call into question assumptions about value systems that are rooted in traditionalism. The discourse between traditionalists and non-traditionalists is evident in American cultural and social spaces and well as political spaces. Foundations rooted in puritanical belief systems and reinforced by Victorian era silence run deep and even in the new Millennium many find it difficult to abandon tradition. As Ferber and Kimmel (2004) point out, conservative and right wing positions emphasize the building of America by white men and the modern militia movement is demonstrative of efforts to reclaim so-called rural values including masculinity (and femininity) contextualized in traditionalism.

Ferber and Kimmel (2004) use an illustration that appeared in WAR magazine in 1987 that depicts a white man wearing a hardhat and a workman's vest with a caption that reads, "White men Built this nation!! White men Are this nation!!!" Indeed, racism, sexism, and nationalism abound in this image. Whiteness, contextualized in the traditional, reflects the notion that to be successful and productive, you must work for what you want and what you have reflects your commitment to hard work. According to the dominant work ethic, those who suffer from poverty simply have not or will not work hard enough to pull themselves out of it. Traditionalism and conservatism thrive in the rural and reinforce a curriculum that emphasizes values based in "acceptable" ways of being and being together including how one can *be* sexually and how one can *be* with regard to gender.

Thus, sexualities and gender identities in the rural reflect traditional, fundamental, and conservative approaches contextualized in capitalistic frames that emphasize building material wealth however meager it is. Rural sexualities and gender identities may be located in perceptions, values, and beliefs as well as on maps and reiterated through curriculum via pedagogies that reinforce particular and exclusive ways of being. Obviously, one cannot dismiss the impact of the country or the city for that matter on how one perceives; indeed, it is perception that opens up possibilities for new ways of being. Perhaps the promise of the future truly lies in the abilities of people to critique and question what is known, how it became known, and what can be known. In imaginative spaces with curriculums that emphasize plurality, sexualities and gender identities may take on shapes, forms, and practices that are not bound at all by rural, urban, or any other space.

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