

Book Review

The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture Edited by Dennis Carlson and Donyell Roseboro

Suzanne Rice
University of Kansas, USA

A great many who have attended a co-ed elementary school in the United States no doubt remember the day when their class was divided into two groups, girls and boys. Separately, these groups were then given information about breast development and menstruation, erections and ejaculations, and how an egg and sperm are needed for the process of conception. Depending on the school, a film may have been shown, likely with a title such as “Your Changing Body” or perhaps, “Becoming a Woman” or “Becoming a Man.” Whatever the specifics of the lesson, it most likely focused mainly on the biology of sex: hormones, the sex organs and their functions, and the mechanics of reproduction (although it may also have addressed the dos and don’ts of conventional sexual morality). In more progressive schools, students may have taken a course in which a wider range of sexual topics came under discussion, often entitled something along the lines of “human development” or “health and hygiene.”

A major premise of *The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture* is that “sex education,” such as that described above, that is, education focused narrowly on biological sex, has become nearly irrelevant. Thus the authors turn their attention to *sexuality* education. In recent years, more schools have purposefully included at least some such education, but in most schools it remains incidental and delivered mainly through an informal, hidden curriculum. Much of the sexuality education adolescents undergo occurs in extra-school contexts—through various media, in shopping centers, and in their homes and neighborhoods. Both school and extra-school contexts are examined in *The Sexuality Curriculum*, which draws heavily on theories associated with cultural studies. This edited book comprises an introduction plus twenty-three chapters which are organized into four sections, “Sexuality Education and its Discontents,”

“Sexuality and Youthful Subcultures of Difference,” “Adolescent Sexuality in Film,” and “Representations of Youthful Sexuality in Literature, Television, and Virtual Media.” What follows in this review is a description of one chapter from each of the book’s four sections.

Dennis Carlson’s chapter, “Constructing the Adolescent Body: Cultural Studies and Sexuality Education” (pp. 4-28), offers something of a primer on several major thinkers aligned with the cultural studies tradition and helps to illustrate their contributions, actual or potential, to sexuality education. Key among these thinkers is Michel Foucault. Here, Carlson describes how, according to Foucault, schools “produce” adolescent bodies in accord with dominant norms for masculinity and femininity. In Foucault, Carlson sees the possibility for rethinking sexuality education as the study of *how* sexuality is produced in a culture: “how [sexuality] gets talked about, according to what fears and problems; how it is related to class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability differences: and thus how it is implicated in a cultural politics” (p. 26).

Also featured in Carlson’s chapter is Eve Sedgwick. Sedgwick famously challenged the pervasive and deeply entrenched homo/hetero dichotomy, arguing that it fails to do justice to human sexual experience. It was Sedgwick who argued that sexual liberation and equality requires dismantling the homo/hetero binary. Carlson believes that an implication of Sedgwick’s argument is that sexuality education should offer a “more inclusive and multifaceted conception of normal sexuality” (p. 16).

Another scholar included in Carlson’s discussion is Susan Bordo. Bordo has examined the influence of popular culture, particularly images of sexuality and gender, in terms of its influence in shaping adolescents’ perceptions of femininity, masculinity, attractiveness, and sexiness (p. 20). Carlson adds to Bordo’s account by illuminating the economic dimension of popular culture: “A highly-commercialized popular culture serves to commodify adolescent desires and by emphasizing image over substance” (p. 20).

Finally, Carlson discusses the work of Henry Giroux. In Carlson’s chapter, Giroux takes on great significance in light of his work in the areas of critical pedagogy and cultural studies, which, as Carlson points out, have important implications for sexuality education. Giroux is at-

tuned to the fact that various media objectify and commodify images of youth. Critical pedagogy can be practiced in a way that helps to unmask this aspect of media and thus work against the “commercialization and exploitation” of adolescent sexuality (p. 18).

In “Sexuality Education: Lessons from Drag Kings” (pp. 171-185), Leslee Grey examines the experiences of women who dress and perform as men. Grey compares this experience to a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a sturdy writing surface, such as a papyrus or parchment, upon which past writings that have been erased continue to show through. In similar fashion, in a drag king show, a “male” costume covers-is written over - a “female” body. But the erasure of the female is never complete. Describing this complex layering as a type of palimpsest highlights the discontinuity of psychic life and instability of sexual identity. Drag kinging thus has interesting pedagogical implications, Grey believes. Not the least of these is that it challenges singular identity categories and opens a space for youth to talk about experiences of having “layers and traces of desires, hopes, anxieties, and resistances” (p. 183).

Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* books and the movies based on them are enormously popular, especially among pre-teen and teenage girls. The series revolves around the main character, Bella, and her vampire love interest, Edward. The title of Carol Siegel’s chapter, “The *Twilight* of Sexual Liberation: Undead Abstinence Ideology” pays homage to Lisa Duggan’s book, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (pp. 261-276). Duggan argues that the feminist insight that sexual equality is a requisite for political equality is under attack and Siegel reads the *Twilight* book series and movies as illustrating that argument. This series-which Siegel characterizes as “post-feminist”-promotes sexual abstinence until marriage, which is itself problematic from the perspective of pro-sex feminists. Further, the series promotes the (also problematic) ideas that “true fulfillment for women can come only through maternity (within marriage), and childbirth is the only area where women know best” (p. 271). Siegel’s critique provides an insightful response to those who praise the *Twilight* books and films on grounds that they affirm girls’ right to say no to sex. As Siegel argues, an alternative interpretation is that *Twilight* endorses a reactionary ideology of gender roles that praises women’s subordination to men.

“The Self-Porning of American Youth” (pp. 348-362) by Joshua

Garrison provides a Foucauldian analysis of erotica produced by adolescents featuring their own images. Some, but not all, instances of “sexting”—sending erotic images of one’s body electronically—are cases of self-porning. As Garrison explains: “Whereas sexting is simply a way of representing or replicating one’s sexual corporeality, self-porning entails envisioning the self as a pornographic subject, when the substance of one’s own subjectivity is influenced ...by the form and content of...spectacularized sex” (p. 359). Garrison is skeptical of policy makers’ efforts to control “self-porning” through such means as abstinence-only sex education and the use of surveillance strategies. He sees sexting itself as a mere fad, but the pornographication of culture as enduring and deep-seated. Understanding that aspect of culture will require critical and theoretical sophistication beyond that which the institution of schooling is likely to foster.

Many of the chapters in *The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture* are relatively short. Because of this, the book is able to examine a wide range of phenomena connected with adolescent sexuality and education; this is an appropriate reflection of the breadth of the topic under consideration. But this strength of the book is also one of its weaknesses. Because the chapters are brief, they do not all provide the depth one might desire. On balance, however, this volume is a welcome addition to the literature theorizing sexuality education and the sexual experiences of youth. Those with a special interest in these topics, as well as those seeking a general introduction to them, will find much of value in *The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture*.

Reference

Duggan, L. (2003). *The Twilight of equality?: Neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Biographical Note: **Suzanne Rice** is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy studies where she teaches courses in philosophy of education. Her research includes studies of pedagogical communication, ethics, and policy. E-mail: srice@ku.edu