

## A Queer *Currere*

William Pinar

### **NA: When and why have you chosen to engage with queer in education throughout your career?**

WP: It was an evening in December 1981. I was in California visiting my five-year-old son when, in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library, I composed the first draft of “Curriculum as Gender Text,” translating into theoretical terms inclinations I’d sensed since I left his mother and she, with the infant, had moved West. Denah and I had been together in Rochester, New York, where Gabriel had been born. I wouldn’t leave the University of Rochester for Louisiana State University for another four years. Almost two of those years I had I held onto that paper-in-progress, finally entrusting it to my close and critical colleague Philip Wexler who indeed delivered his review in gentle but explicit terms. (I revised accordingly.) Finally, in 1983 I published it in a journal I had started some six years earlier.

Why the delay? I’d grown up homosexually repressed (i.e. straight). Not until my relationship with my son’s mother ended did I decide I wanted to be gay. Despite “backsliding” and thanks to an older “mentor,” I made my way. By 1981 I had made the transition not only from straight to gay but from “top” to “bottom,” and in that first effort at queer theory (a decade before the term emerged) I juxtaposed – relying on Guy Hocqueghem – anal eroticism with the male infant’s symbiotic relationship with the mother (or caregiver), this time relying on Nancy Chodorow. The remaining question I faced was not theoretical but practical (or so it seemed to me then), the matter “coming out.” So several of those 15 months was spent mulling over what I’d composed (and considering the critique Wexler made) and whether or not I would be gay in a public way at the University of Rochester. The new dean of education had made it clear he was no friend of mine (did he smell a queer?), but academic freedom seemed sacrosanct at the University, a policy I wagered would continue despite the more general political climate of “conservative restoration” indicated by the election of Ronald Reagan.

Queer theory didn’t exist in 1983 and my key concern was – remains – the curriculum, hence the term in the title. I was immersed in feminist theory and so chose “gender” rather than “homosexual” (as in Hocqueghem’s text) as another key term in the title. (“Text” derives from my fascination with Foucault and poststructuralism more generally at that time.) Chodorow’s emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between mother and infant enabled me to challenge what would later be termed “heteronormativity.” In 1985 I left Rochester for Baton Rouge (and Louisiana State University) where, supplementing my primary appointment in the College of Education, I joined Women’s and Gender Studies where, in the 1990s, I began teaching queer theory. Challenging “heteronormativity” remained the impetus for much of my queer scholarship, as I formalized the term with the publication of the 1998 collection *Queer Theory in Education*. It informed my juxtaposition of lynching and interracial prison rape in my 2001 study – again “gender” dominates the title – and in my 2006 effort to understand the genesis of racism in the West, juxtaposing Noah (yes of biblical flood fame) and Schreber (the German judge whose case stimulated Freud’s theory of homosexuality) along with anthropological and queer

theory (especially Edelman). Since then my forays into queer theory have been somewhat sporadic, co-editing (with Ugena Whitlock and Nelson Rodriguez) a book series on queer studies in education at Palgrave Macmillan, composing a piece reflecting on sexuality (“the constant”) in my life. I’ve a short unpublished piece on “queer love” and started but stalled on a study juxtaposing queer theory and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

**Do you feel it necessary to define queer? Why/why not? Is it necessary to define queer when working in education?**

The clarification of concepts is important and, as you phrase it, “necessary.” I affirm Jagose’s definitions.<sup>1</sup>

While “queer” hardly excludes “gay” and “lesbian,” it does not necessarily coincide with them.

Yet when I hear and read the term invoked these days it is often a moniker for these two plus transgender and two-spirit Indigenous peoples. In the past I’ve resisted the minoritizing of sexual Identities because it stabilizes even threatens to “essentialize” them. (Even after marriage was legalized in the United States, when asked why we didn’t marry – Jeff Turner and I have been together since 1995, I quipped: “I’ve theoretical reservations and Jeff says I can’t afford the ring.”) Soon enough the tax and health-insurance savings persuaded me to suspend those reservations and Jeff to accept an inexpensive ring.

I still resist conflating “queer” with stable or monolithic definitions, even “gay” and “lesbian.”

**What more is there to learn from/about queer in education?**

Given the mutability of queer, its inner heterogeneity, its political potential, the term continues to inform my conception of *currere*. A queer *currere* emphasizes the subjective and social reconstruction that can occur through study and teaching. So queer remains a concept from which I learn and which animates my ongoing effort to understand education.

**Where does queer (in education) go from here?**

Pasolini remains central to my theorization of “queer.” His antipathy to identity, his embrace of alterity, his adoration of the sensual sacred body and his reasoned if aesthetic critiques of capitalism require me to position him so. So does his repudiation of the homogenization associated with modernity – with its gendered subsets: heteronormativity and homonormativity. All these cast him as emblematic of queer. He would disavow such a characterization, as today it risks reinscribing a stasis of which he was almost always skeptical. “Sex,” Pasolini knew, “is nothing other than a political problem.”<sup>2</sup> And, as we’ve known for a very long time, the political is personal: enter *currere*.

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#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> 1996, 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Watson 1989, 14.