

“It’s pointless to deny that that dynamic is there”: Sexual Tensions in Secondary Classrooms

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I loved my job as a high school English teacher. I wasn’t wild about the subject matter but I *was* passionate about my kids; and English, with its emphasis on writing and literature, was a means to connect with them and make a difference in their lives. I carried with me a secret burden of guilt though, because sometimes my love for kids found its expression in dreams, where my subconscious transformed the platonic to the erotic. I felt awkward around my dream-subject for days, wondering what he (it was usually a “he”) would think if he knew we’d slept together in my fantasy. I figured I was some kind of closet pedophile, especially during my first two years of teaching when my students were mostly fourteen-year-old freshmen.

I also felt guilty about my effectiveness as a teacher. I was the youngest woman on staff and reasonably attractive, and so I wondered how much my physical appearance played into my success with students. I didn’t conform to the frumpy norm¹ of female teachers’ “familiar blandness” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995) in order to mask my body’s presence in the classroom; I wore trendy clothes and appreciated it when students noticed. The attention assuaged the lingering insecurity of my own adolescence, helping to diminish the ugly, nerdy girl who still resided within me. But I questioned how much I was using my body to manipulate my students—would I have been a “good” teacher without it?

The answer is of course a resounding “no,” though not for the reasons I struggled with as a teacher. What I didn’t understand then is that I was functioning within an ideology that, dating back to Descartes and the Enlightenment, dichotomizes the mind and body and privileges the mind’s position. Butler (1990) describes this hierarchy:

The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism. As a result, any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized. (p. 12)

The doubts I experienced as a teacher were the result of the understood assumption in education that the body has no place in the classroom; schooling has traditionally been about transferring knowledge from the teacher's brain to the students'. Recognizing how patriarchal privileging of the rational mind has worked to oppress women, feminists have troubled the mind/body split, refusing to accept the notion that the body is inferior or even that the two can be separated.² As a teacher using my body in the classroom (consciously or not), I was resisting the mind/body duality, though I didn't have the language to call it that at the time.

Nowhere in my teacher education preparation had I been told that I might develop other-than-teacherly feelings for my students. At most I had been warned that as a young woman I needed to take extra precautions to de-sex my body in order to ward off unwanted male attention—with all the

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heterosexist assumptions implied in such an admonition—and that teachers needed to guard against becoming too *emotionally* close to students; but there was no mention of the possibility of becoming *physically* attracted to students. I believe the intensity and self-exploration associated with a language arts classroom—in which

students read and discuss literature that engages them in real-life issues and make personal connections through writing—create an environment where mind-body distinctions and teacher-student relationships are more easily blurred than in other subject areas.

I also didn't have the theory as a teacher to understand my desire for students as anything but pathological. But teaching *sans* sexuality is impossible. Gallop (1997), who is committed "to the Freudian idea that teaching is better understood as an emotional and erotic experience than as a cognitive, informative one" (McWilliam, 1999, p. 37), argues that sex and pedagogy are linked:

At heart a Freudian, I believe that our professional impulses are sublimated sex drives. The pleasure I get from working with graduate students, the intensity of my wish that certain promising graduate students will choose to work with me, and the satisfaction I get from seeing the imprint of my teaching in their work all strongly suggest a sexual analogy. (p. 87)

Though Gallop works with adults, I argue that the analogy can apply to other levels or kinds of teaching. The embodied rush—the pleasure—I get from my work, whether it be in a high school or university classroom, whether it be teaching or research—is not unlike a sexual experience.

The power to influence students' lives is seductive (McWilliam, 1999); seducing students into loving the subject matter and by extension loving the teacher as the bearer of it is heady and empowering. But empowered women threaten the patriarchal structure of this society. Therefore, women have been acculturated to distrust erotic power:

We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. . . . As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world. (Lorde, 1984, p. 53)

Collins (2000) concurs; she claims “this erotic power is so often sexualized that not only is it routinely misunderstood, but the strength of deeply felt love is even feared” (p. 150). If women only equate erotic power with sex, that understanding limits their ability to tap into this power source since they've been taught that sexuality outside the bedroom (and even inside it!) is dangerous and taboo.

I believe hooks' (1994) teaching philosophy combines Lorde's (1984) and Collins' (2000) thinking—that erotic power doesn't necessarily have to signify sex—with McWilliam's (1999) and Gallop's (1997) argument—that teaching *is* about sublimated sex. hooks' Women's Studies professors and colleagues taught her that there “was a place for passion in the classroom, that eros and the erotic did not need to be denied for learning to take place” (p. 193). Rather, we as teachers need to appreciate that “eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that . . . enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination” (p. 195).

However, the notion that eros has its place in the classroom is not widely accepted in schools. The unstable and shifting interrelationships among knowledge, power, and sex (Foucault, 1978) make it crucial for those currently controlling the dominant discourse to limit teachers' ability to use erotic power in the classroom in order to maintain the status quo. Norms that serve the interests of those in power are perpetuated by unquestioned assumptions of appropriate conduct. Foucault's (1979) history of the prison system helps to explain why teachers conform to norms: Inmates, knowing they could at any time be under the watchful gaze of a guard whom they could not see within a centralized tower (the Panopticon), began to monitor

their own behavior. Foucault argues that this Panopticon-guard functions much like disciplinary power in society, which is ever-watchful of its members' conformity to dominant ideology; people, particularly women (McWhorter, 1999), self-discipline even when they know no one is looking. I see now how my burden of guilt functioned as my personal Panopticon; the desire for students that surfaced in my dreams made me feel dirty even though I didn't act upon it. Deeply ingrained was the sense that sexualizing students was wrong and punishable.

Blending an amalgam of theories in the fashion of Sykes (2001), who sought a "good-enough fit between . . . ambiguous purposes and contradictory meanings" (p. 17) in her work, has helped me to re-frame my guilt. Teaching-as-sublimated-sex can be understood from a psychoanalytic lens, where transference of passion for teaching to desire for students is a predictable outcome in a setting where sexuality is suppressed. Poststructuralism teaches us to trouble assumptions that guide our daily living and to look for spaces to resist the dominant discourse. Feminist theory questions patriarchal structures that function to oppress women and limit their empowerment. Together, these theories provide a good-enough fit to interpret my guilt as an internalized mechanism to discipline my resistance to the norms that govern women teachers' appearance and behavior.

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Now that I work with college students on the cusp of teaching English themselves, I am interested in subverting the discourse of silence surrounding sexuality. I want to "mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy" (Warner, 1995, p. xxi) in the manner that queer theorists Sumara and Davis (1999) describe:

[W]e . . . are interested in showing how *all* educators ought to become interested in the complex relationships among the various ways in which sexualities are organized and identified and in the many ways in which knowledge is produced and represented . . . of how the spaces of pedagogy can become more attentive to the complex relations of sex and knowledge. (p. 205)

In sum, as a teacher educator I want to provide a space for my students to talk about the role their and their students' bodies play in the classroom—a safe place for them to share, reflect on, and begin to theorize the sexual dimension of their teaching.

My space-creating intentions have been predicated on the assumption

that other teachers of secondary students felt as I did, but I first had to verify whether that assumption was legitimate. That's where my pilot study began: my investigation of how teachers experience sexual dynamics and their bodies in their classrooms and what factors influence their experiences.

The Study

Selection of Participants

Given that teacher sexuality is a taboo topic (evident in the indrawn breaths and raised eyebrows I get when I announce my research interest), I felt it was vital to select participants with whom I already had a rapport in order to assure a safe and comfortable exchange of ideas. Therefore, the students who had been in my English methods course, a requirement for their education degrees, were a logical pool from which to draw. During the time of data collection, my former students were in the midst of their 10-week student teaching field experience—some of them under my mentorship in my capacity as a university supervisor. I was frequently in contact with my group of student teachers,⁵ so our regular interaction both strengthened our rapport and allowed me to combine my roles as supervisor and researcher quite smoothly, with a minimum of interference in their already busy lives.

Of the student teachers I supervised, I chose five women because I am particularly interested in the complexity of women teachers' sexuality. Though sexual harassment policies are written in gender-neutral terms, they are intended to protect female students from male teachers (Maher, 2004). Women are stereotypically viewed as passive in sexual relationships, so it's surprising—and less common—for women teachers to be the aggressors when such situations arise; power relations are more problematic, less clear-cut. Though in the future I would like to expand my research to include teachers of varying genders, races, ages, classes and sexualities, the scope of this project was limited to a group with whom I self-identify: young, white, heterosexual, middle-class, unmarried women.

Setting

My participants completed their student teaching practicum in one of the fastest-growing school systems in the United States in a suburban area of the Southeast. I am focusing here on two participants, Sandra and Sheila,⁴ who were placed in the same high school serving a predominantly white, middle- and upper-middle class community. Though Thompson High School seemed overwhelmingly large with nearly 4,000 students enrolled, almost 250 faculty members (over 50 are language arts teachers), eight counselors, and

nine administrators, there was a comfortable sense of community in the lounge where English teachers gathered that was a welcome surprise when I visited. Unlike many teachers' lounges I've encountered, the general aura was youthful, dynamic and energetic; teacher talk was typically about ideas, not complaints. Some lunch sections were livelier than others, but in general there was a spirit of playful camaraderie among the faculty which extended to the student teachers whom they welcomed into their midst. Incidentally, Sandra and Sheila are currently members of the Thompson High Language Arts Department; both of them accepted positions just prior to the end of the practicum.

Participants

Sandra Womack

Sandra was a 27-year-old graduate student with a B.A. in English and French from a small private college in the Midwest. After completing her undergraduate degree, she worked at a restaurant and later for a software company, straying far from her original training in languages and literature. She felt subtle pressure to get back on track, both within herself from feeling "a lack of social responsibility in my occupation to date" and from her family, most of whom held post-graduate degrees and were disappointed that she had squandered over three years on non-academic pursuits. Getting certified to teach via a master's degree in English education was a logical choice to suit her interests and training as well as to assuage her desire to be socially significant.

Sandra described herself as "quiet and relatively reserved, but personal connections are the most important part of my life. I struggled with being in the middle of crowds at Thompson High until I began to feel connected to the students." Sandra taught four classes of seniors—three of them in the regular academic track and one honors track. Though seniors in their final semester can be difficult for student teachers to manage, Sandra handled both the material and the students with quiet assurance; she had a calm, competent demeanor in the classroom. Both of her mentor teachers, no doubt realizing their students were in capable hands, gave Sandra a great deal of autonomy; they stayed in the background, more supportive than instructive in their mentoring role.

Sheila Hardy

Sheila in many ways was the antithesis of Sandra. A 22-year-old sorority member, Sheila wrote about herself,

I am outgoing and a little nutty. . . . Besides the ADHD, I am like this b/c everyone in my family is this way—I am the least crazy. My sister and I were always in a little battle for the most attention (I see this now that we are separated), thus, I developed this hunger for attention.

Sheila was often at the social center of groups, telling stories and making people laugh—a quality that helped her fit right in to the ethos of Thompson High. Once when I was chatting in the lounge with faculty members about the new hires, several said how much they liked Sheila, whereas they didn't really know Sandra.

Sheila's desire to teach was motivated by her own positive experiences in school, including her active involvement in sports and school-sponsored clubs. She wanted "to share my wonderful experiences and help make my students have the 'time of their lives' like I had." From what I observed of her teaching, story-telling was indeed a staple of her pedagogy; she frequently shared and elicited stories to help students make personal connections to the literature they were reading.

Sheila's teaching assignment was exactly like Sandra's (three regular track and one honors track), except her students were juniors. Her mentor teachers' influence was much more invasive than Sandra's, however. Sheila spent three happy hours with Theresa Waters, a friendly, agreeable teacher whose laid-back, relaxed approach to teaching was concordant with Sheila's. Then, for the last hour of the day, Sheila taught under Mrs. Arms' more regimented supervision. Sheila listened to lengthy critiques of her teaching as well as diatribes on the poor attitude of today's youth, straining her ADHD-limited attention span to the breaking point. Sheila said she felt like she always fell short of Mrs. Arms' expectations for maintaining a tightly-controlled classroom and high standards for student achievement.

Data Collection and Analysis

My primary data source was a semi-structured interview with each participant based on questions pertaining to boundary issues, appearance, favorite students, student crushes, the role of eros in the classroom,⁵ and handling sexual content in the literature they taught. The interviews averaged about 45 minutes in length and I subsequently transcribed them for analysis, with an occasional follow-up question for the purpose of elaboration or clarification posted via e-mail. In addition to these one-on-one interviews, I videotaped and transcribed a focus group discussion comprised of my participants because I was interested in their group interaction to see if or how they

talked differently among their peers than to me alone, though the group also served my goal to open up a space to talk about these issues. The focus group was prompted by a set of questions that were similar to and an extension of what I had found to be important sources of information in their interview questions.

To supplement these interview data, I visited my students in their teaching settings every other week for a total of five times during the course of their 10-week practicum; they were also required to send me a weekly e-journal highlighting the events and including reflections about their teaching, which I e-mailed back to them with comments inserted in their text. Through the visits and electronic correspondence I was able to gather informal impressions about my participants as members of a teaching community, though I did ask participants to comment expressly about their thinking regarding teacher sexuality in the e-journal following the focus group.

While I recognize that the three-part data-transformational process of description, analysis and interpretation that Wolcott (1994) describes is not linear, it was still useful to follow a step-by-step procedure in order to exercise some modicum of control over the chaotic data by first “tidying up” and sifting through them (LeCompte, 2000, p. 148). However, I tried to keep in mind Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996) advice: “Dialogue between data and theory should be a recurrent, pervasive feature of all qualitative research” (p. 23). I couldn’t tidy up without my feminist poststructural sifter; I was always already thinking about what larger social structures or discourses were shaping my participants’ experiences as chaos became coherence.

Results

Most of the data in this study can be explained in terms of tensions that I believe are rooted in the mind/body duality that underlies Western humanist thought (Collins, 2000; Grosz, 1994; hooks, 1994). I will next illustrate two areas of tensions for Sandra and Sheila: physical appearance and attractions. Following Oliver and Lalik (2000), I foreground my participants’ voices in this paper, recognizing that my understanding of their stories is only mine—and an ephemeral interpretation at that; tomorrow or in ten years, I will likely see their experiences in a different light. By letting Sandra and Sheila do most of the talking here, I hope to invite “readers to become co-interpreters who use their own cultural lenses to construe meanings” (Oliver & Lalik, 2000, p. xx) and thus join the dialogue about teacher sexuality from their own points of entry.

Physical Appearance

All of my participants expressed self-consciousness about how they were seen in the classroom, and their attire had much to do with the image they presented. As Richardson (1985) argues, “Unless a single woman desexualizes herself by layering her body with heavy, ill-fitting clothing or fat, she represents erotic potential” (pp. 15-16). My participants often went to great lengths to disguise their erotic potential; one even bought non-prescription glasses to age her youthful appearance. The tension both Sandra and Sheila experienced was between looking professional and looking trendy; in other words, between looking like a teacher and looking like a student.

Sandra: “I don’t want them . . . saying I dress like a geek.”

Of all my participants, Sandra appeared to be the least concerned about issues of attire; she said nothing at all about dress during the focus group discussion. However, even she was body-conscious, aware of her students’ evaluative gaze:

I’m conscious of my body—I’m very very conscious of my body up in front of the class. You know, are they looking at my rear end, or not necessarily in a sexual, but you know, do I look out of shape, or—you know, are they noticing, ’cuz I remember noticing those kinds of things about MY teachers, certainly. So—what do they think of my clothes, just things like that.⁶

When I asked Sandra about her clothes, she responded that she weighed both colleagues’ and students’ opinions:

I think about how other teachers are going to see me. I don’t want to look like I’m trying to look like one of the students, but on the other hand, I don’t—you know, we always talk about teacher clothes, and I don’t necessarily want to get into that yet either. . . . I guess I tend toward very monochrome, solid colors. . . . I don’t want them looking at me and whispering and saying that I dress like a geek.

Sandra said that other young women faculty members wore less innocuous clothes—“the more tight pants and shorter skirts and things”—but that she dressed conservatively because of her status at the school: “A lot of that comes from being a student teacher. . . . I think you can get away with a lot more when you’re on the faculty. Maybe, I don’t know.” Sandra’s ambivalence here suggests that she hadn’t thought through issues of attire, perhaps because her understated monochromatic style was in keeping with her quiet, reserved personality and the “familiar blandness” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995) of most teachers’ attire. Also, as a relatively older student

teacher at 27, Sandra didn't run as much of a risk of being mistaken for a student; she didn't need to alter her appearance significantly in order not to look "like one of the students."

The tension Sandra experienced appeared to be more with her physical body than the clothes she put on it; she stated that she didn't know how to respond to compliments from her students:

It makes me feel uncomfortable because I feel like I don't know—I don't know how to respond to it. When they compliment me. Today I had a new haircut and they said, "Miss Womack, your hair looks so nice!" It's not necessarily flirting, but I don't necessarily know how to respond to it, either.

Responding in the socially accepted manner—with a "thank you"—acknowledges that the student has noticed and appreciated part of her body, a source of discomfort because teachers aren't *supposed* to have bodies.

Sheila: "Miss Hardy, why you wearing slut boots?"

Clothing was much more of an issue for Sheila than it was for Sandra. Whereas I would describe Sandra's style as timeless, Sheila's style was trendy, something her students noticed:

One day . . . they were like, "Miss Hardy, why you wearing slut boots?" You know, high boots, but I had them on with a long skirt. And I was like, "It's not appropriate to call what I'm wearing a slut boot." And he was like, "My sister's in college and that's what she calls 'em." . . . And then the other day I had on a long leather skirt. A long one. And they were like, "Teachers don't dress like that . . . You don't wear leather." And I was like, "It's like a big potato sack that I'm wearing. I can definitely wear this if I want to." They make comments about my clothes . . . all the time.

Sheila resisted the students' assessment that teachers didn't wear fashionable clothing; as long as her body was covered, she felt that she was within the bounds of propriety. She had to give up some of her favorite clothing, though:

I love v-necks because I like to wear weird necklaces. But lately I've gotten to the point where I'm conscious, because when I lean over you can see down my shirt and I try not to, you know? I'm thinking, "I gotta quit wearing these," they're right at that little point where, you know, and they're NOT showing everything or much at all, but it makes me nervous in front of them.

Even though they didn't show "much at all," the suggestion of "that little point"—that she in fact has breasts—was too revealing for the classroom.

Sheila's concern is reminiscent of Bauer's (1998) critique of the eroticization of teaching in film. The big-screen exemplar of the sexualization that Bauer deplores is Barbra Streisand's character in *The Mirror Has Two Faces*. In this film Streisand, an English professor, undergoes a personal transformation from frumpy schoolmarm to sexual being, an alteration that does not go unobserved by her students:

When her students notice her new style, she acknowledges the change, specifically the reaction to her breasts ("Yes, I have breasts"). Yes, she's a sexual creature, after all; no, they're studying literature not her; yes, she accepts and exploits the classroom as a place where eros is allowed; no, they must reserve their eros for books, not the teacher. (p. 309)

Bauer believes that eroticism must be sublimated (i.e., modified in a socially acceptable manner), and not by "the gratification of primary narcissism, where we measure success by our students' love for us," but rather through love of the subject and the classroom community. Bauer's belief that the very acknowledgement of sexuality is selfish and unseemly—that women teachers should pretend they don't have bodies and thus keep hidden the erotic element of teaching—reflects the larger discourse of silence surrounding sexuality in education (Fine, 1992).

Sheila's body-monitoring appeared to be self-imposed; she said in comparison to other teachers, "In some ways I'm more conservative than other teachers. There's a few younger teachers there, or two or three I've seen that I think I dress a LOT more conservatively than." The way Sheila positions herself in relation to her students and other teachers supports McWhorter's (1999) belief that women closely monitor themselves and each other in service to disciplinary power.

My participants' dressing regimen was one way they could distinguish themselves from their students, a particular concern of the younger student teachers. Sheila, at 22, could easily have been mistaken for a high school student. She voiced this concern in connection to casual Fridays, when many of the language arts teachers wore jeans:

I'll wear jeans that's kinda the same style that maybe the kids, the girls, are wearing with the flare. And I kinda feel uncomfortable about it. I've only worn them once, because I don't wanna like, have the same jeans on that will match a student. I don't know why, but I feel kinda stupid.

When I asked her to elaborate on why she felt "stupid," she replied

One thing that comes to my mind is that Anna [another university supervisor who had taught a methods course the previous semester] told us

that you have to be careful. She said that you don't want to dress like the students. . . . I don't know why.

To dress like a student might suggest that a teacher identifies too closely with students, threatening the teacher-student boundary that clearly demarcates the roles of each. It seems Sheila had internalized this message, though she didn't "know why"—a sign that hegemony is at work; Foucault (1979) argues that disciplinary power is most effective when we don't realize it is operating upon us. I find it interesting that "slut boots" were justifiable in Sheila's mind but flared jeans were not; both were trendy items that her students wore. Perhaps it is because boots cover feet, which aren't fetishized (at least not in our society), whereas jeans cover buttocks, which most definitely are (hooks, 1992)—and thus wearing the jeans invites being sexualized.

The underlying assumption here is that it's not okay for female teachers to draw attention to their bodies in ways that could be interpreted as "slutty," whether it be boots, breast-limning v-necks, or flared jeans. Several implicit understandings gird this assumption. First of all, when a student compliments a teacher on her appearance, it may be a thinly-disguised way of saying he⁷ likes the teacher's body; he can't say "I like your breasts," but he *can* say "nice shirt," with the subtle implication that he'd like to see what's beneath it. Anything outside of the typical female teacher's appearance is grounds for students' noticing and remarking upon the teacher's body. It is impossible to escape students' gaze, though; Sandra's monochromatic blandness did not deter them from noticing her hair, and Sheila's potato-sack skirt was still sexualized because it was *leather*.

If even the strictest self-governance and body-monitoring cannot disguise the body's presence in the classroom, then what is left but to reap the benefits of being noticed? As Sheila said, "They're confidence builders. . . . all those nice compliments make you FEEL good." However, the potential downside to being complimented is the disempowering feeling that students associate teaching with one's physical appearance; thus, one is only a good teacher because one *looks* good. Sheila could have interpreted some of her students' evaluations that she asked them to write on one of the last days of her teaching in such a way:

"I think your hott. Send me a note when your single!"

"You are a good teacher. . . . You seem to know the material really well. Honestly you are the HOTTEST teacher ever!"

But Sheila was not self-conscious about these evaluations; she didn't hesitate to share them with her mentor teacher Mrs. Waters and other student

teachers at Thompson High. Rather, she seemed amused and pleased by them.

On the one hand, Sheila was complicit in her students' sexualization of her by taking pleasure in their compliments, but on the other hand she was resisting "the work that schools have to do to ensure that knowledge is itself seen as a de-sexed or unsexy commodity" (McWilliam, 1999, p. 115). I believe that the increased confidence in her teaching that I noticed in Sheila (observation notes suggest she did not "seem to know the material really well" initially) was attributable in part to her students' liking her. To the extent that their approval and their corresponding effort in class was connected to their desire for her, she was empowered rather than disempowered by their sexualization of her.

Attractions

A second area of tension that I will discuss is feeling attracted to students. Initially, when I was designing this study, I intended to ask my participants about students who had crushes on *them*, not expecting that the reverse might happen. In fact, I scoffed at a colleague who warned me to be wary of unleashing all sorts of latent desires in my participants merely by talking openly about the topic; I didn't think my students would have *time* to develop a relationship in ten weeks, the duration of their practicum. I still question the implication that talking about sexuality will cause teachers to bed their students with gleeful disregard for conventions, but my colleague was partly right. I think the emotional intensity and newness of the student teaching experience worked to enhance the sexual dynamic that always already exists in any social setting (Richardson, 1985).

Sheila: "What a horny teacher I have become."

Toward the end of my interview with Sheila, she started talking about Devin, a student in her honors class:

His name's Devin, he's the perfect man. . . . Miss Waters said she didn't notice him until I told her about it. And I made two of the other teachers come and check him out. Because I talked about him all the time. . . . he's just FABULOUS. And today, he didn't turn in something, and I was like, "You can just give it to me on Monday," and I was like, "Miss Waters, I'm playing favorites 'cuz I have a crush on the guy."

What I find interesting is how freely Sheila discussed her attraction with not only her mentor teacher but other faculty in the department:

We were laughing in the teacher's lounge, and they were like, "Where were all these guys when WE were in high school?" All these guys who are sorta smart AND good-looking. . . . All the teachers talk about the guys, too, it's not just me.

For teachers to discuss students as juicy eye-candy isn't typical in most lounges I've encountered, but then Thompson High wasn't the usual place. The ethos in the department allowed for the kind of playful objectification of male students that Sheila engaged in, though it's significant that male teachers did not enter these conversations. This directly contradicts Ross and Marlowe's (1985) observations:

Most male administrators have either participated in or observed ribald conversations about the sexual allure of some particular female student Sexist? Probably. So be it. Men talk about women. Women, it is noted, seldom engage in the same kind of open speculation, for whatever reasons. Lounge chatter about sexy students may not be professional, but it is understandable. (p. 85)

However, Ross and Marlowe's work predates much of the sexual harassment discourse of the past two decades; we have learned to be more sensitive to abuses of power in work settings. Perhaps women teachers can still get away with "lounge chatter" because male students, by virtue of the power granted to them in our patriarchal society, are not really threatened by women's objectification of them, even if they are in an inferior power position as students. If a male teacher were to objectify a female student, the action would be doubly oppressive—on a theoretical level, at any rate. Along with Gallop (1997) and Maher (2004), I am hesitant to assume that girls are always powerless victims of their male teachers.

Sheila didn't stop at adding Devin to "the bunch of smart, good-looking guys" that the teachers had already established. Another boy in the honors class, Michael, balanced out Devin's shyness with his wild streak, as she described in an e-mail:

I have a new crush. . . . He has moved up closer to me the last week or so, and I must admit it is nice. Wow! What a horny teacher I have become. . . . Anyway—the strange thing (besides the fact that I have a silly crush on more than one student) is that Devin sits in the back, is quiet, kinda a nerd/jock and doesn't talk much. Michael on the other hand, has a tongue ring, is wild, lazy, talkative. How successful I have been to find two men who together could make the perfect male.

That Sheila described her attraction as "a silly crush" suggests a couple of things. First of all, it implies that she herself is silly for feeling this way—but

silliness is compatible with her self-description as “a little nutty” and thus it was not a source of tension. It also signifies her level of feeling; though she made flippant comments like “we’re in love” in reference to Devin during the focus group discussion, Sheila wasn’t languishing after her students. It was a playful desire—one that added a bit of spice to her day.

Sheila waited until the end of her interview to disclose her crush to me, which indicates that she was wary of my disapproval, revealing that on some level she was aware that desiring students (and especially admitting it) was transgressive. Certainly she knew it wasn’t an appropriate conversation to have with anyone—thus her reticence around Mrs. Arms, the more conservative of her two mentor teachers—but the attention she received from telling titillating stories empowered her socially in much the same way her students’ desire for her empowered her in the classroom. I was concerned, though, that Sheila’s attractions might affect her interaction with all students—that she might favor boys in ways that would be noticeably unfair. She claimed that wasn’t the case, and my unease was further alleviated by observing Sheila’s interaction with the honors class that contained her two crushes. If she hadn’t pointed them out to me, I would not have known or guessed that she felt differently about Devin and Michael.

Sandra: “I secretly relished that delicious feeling of excitement.”

After my interview with Sandra, I did not expect her to have the embodied experiences with desire that Sheila did. She spoke articulately about having a different kind of rapport with male and female students and speculated that the source may be sexual, but when it came being sexualized by students, she othered the experience to Sheila:

I can share a story of when Sheila was sexualized by my students. . . . She came in to visit my class . . . and when she walked out I heard TIM, the most openly sexualizing student I have, I guess, say, “That’s NIIIIce.” And I shot him a look, and as soon as she walked out of the door, all the boys ERUPTED. “Miss Womack, who WAS that? Is she a student here? Do you go out with her? Where does she go on weekends?”

Sandra attributed the boys’ reaction as follows: “because she’s a lot closer to their age, and I think . . . just her general appearance, she’s sort of what they’re looking for maybe.” Though Sandra was quite attractive, she didn’t see herself as sexualizable like Sheila, the quintessential blonde, blue-eyed sorority prize. Therefore, I was surprised to receive Sandra’s thoughtful e-mail reflection following the focus group discussion, which revealed that she, too, was experiencing an embodied desire for a student.

Sandra began her story with a “Deep breath,” signifying the power of the discourse of silence about sexuality; she had to fortify herself for the transgressive disclosure to come. She told how she came to be attracted to Dave:

One day . . . the students were doing group work, and—let’s call him Dave—*his* group was sitting near my desk. We started talking about something (looking up movies on the Internet, I think) and all of a sudden I saw him in a whole new light. I began looking for him as I walked through the halls, hoping for chances to talk to him, and even getting a little nervous before going into the classroom every day. The fact that I couldn’t stop thinking about him *totally freaked me out*, in part because it really *didn’t* bother me in a lot of ways that I thought it should. I think it was just so much fun to have this kind of an interest. . . . I secretly relished that delicious feeling of excitement every time I would see or talk to Dave. . . . I feel like a dirty old man talking about this even now.

Sandra’s journal was fraught with tension between the pleasure of attraction and feeling “like a dirty old man.” But, as was typical of Sandra’s reflective nature, she theorized why “it really *didn’t* bother” her:

It simply adds a bit of fun to my day, so I think of it as harmless. I think that he likes me as a teacher, so the positive feelings I have towards him help me to develop a better relationship with him on an instructional level. I also wonder whether, without two particular factors in place, this fascination would ever have developed. The first is the teacher-student dynamic. This fantasy is as old as schools themselves, and I think we’re fooling ourselves to pretend that it only happens on the student end of things. A power imbalance is a universally known aphrodisiac. The other is all the talk in our group about this sort of thing . . . the conversations around the topic of teacher-student sexual dynamics raised my consciousness of all of us as bodies in the classroom.

Sandra did not see any deleterious effects of her fascination with Dave; rather, it was a positive experience that added a “bit of fun” to her day and helped her “develop a better relationship” with him. The attraction was a natural outcome of the student-teacher dynamic and her growing awareness of “bodies in the classroom” as a result of her participation in this project.

Though my colleague who voiced concern that this study could encourage teacher misconduct might seize Sandra’s confession as evidence that talking about sexuality will persuade teachers to engage in sexual relationships with students, Sandra made it very clear that she would “never act on any of these feelings,” that she had no illusions about consummating her desire. Indeed, I would argue that without the space to talk honestly and forthrightly about the sexual dynamics in classrooms, teachers are more

likely to 1) feel guilty about desires they've been socialized to think are pathological and 2) suppress those desires in unhealthy ways. As Fine (1992) says about sex education in schools, silence doesn't make sex go away; instead, it marginalizes the discourse such that young women are disempowered by the socialized norm to "just say no," thus denying their bodies and their desires, a frustration that might well find its outlet in unhealthy sexual activity. Women teachers are similarly disempowered by the patriarchal expectation that they deny their (and their students') bodies' presence in the classroom. They are expected to de-sex their bodies and their classroom content in order to "just say no" to erotic pedagogy, thus limiting their power to engage students and take pleasure in their teaching—to have "a bit of fun"—with the means they have at their disposal.

This self-denial in a Freudian sense is unhealthy, as desire will find its psychic outlet *somewhere*—maybe not a safe place—if it's not dealt with and understood. As Wearing (1998) argues,

[I]ncreased and perpetual control over emotions, without the opportunity for emotional release . . . can result in emotional-somatic responses which are problematic for health. Feminist and poststructural theories are helpful here in suggesting that both men and women can and should refuse what they are told by society they should be and feel. . . . This applies especially in the use of one's body and in the positive expression of emotions. (p. 126)

Suppression of desire is not just an emotional health issue for teachers, however. hooks (1995) argues that the silence surrounding sexuality paradoxically allows teachers to hide inappropriate actions: It is "important not to deny erotic feelings between teacher and student, [because] that denial precludes the recognition of accountability and responsibility" (p. 38). The very pretense of an asexual classroom is what allows sexual misconduct to take place—it is easy to conceal an activity that supposedly does not happen. The question of the line between pedagogical eroticism and pedagogical abuse (McWilliam, 1996) becomes key, then, for teachers and teacher educators: When does the "bit of fun" Sandra and Sheila enjoyed in experiencing the sexual dynamic in their classrooms become predatory?

Discussion

"I think that with the student-teacher thing, there's definitely a line that cannot EVER EVER be crossed, but I think it's pointless to DENY that that dynamic is there. That's sort of the conclusion I've come to." So said Sandra in the focus group discussion, and the other participants nodded their heads

in agreement. Sandra's summative statement encapsulated two important themes of the pilot study: There was a sexual dynamic present in the classroom, and there was a line between teacher and student that must not be crossed.

Richardson (1985) helps to explain the always-present sexual dynamic:

In our society, being aware of and responding to the sexuality of the other, either consciously or unconsciously, is the way in which males and females have learned to relate to each other. Even in non-erotic settings, male-female interaction is continuously influenced by the other person's sex. Encounters between a man and a woman, no matter how incidental, have an underlying sexual element. Although this element may be suppressed, ignored, or otherwise not acted on, as is usually the case, nevertheless, it is still there. (p. 14)

Classroom settings aren't supposed to be erotic, and yet they are—they can't help but be, as long as there are sexed people within these settings. Richardson understands this omnipresent sexual dynamic to be gendered—both in that it occurs between males and females and that males are usually the aggressors in the pairing—though she acknowledges the heterosexism implicit in this view.

Though the “line” isn't always clearly delineated between teacher and student, talking about where that line is located and how it can become blurred helped my participants situate their bodies and their desires in the

Sandra and Sheila concluded that sexuality, whether it surfaced in the content of class discussion or in their connections with students, added a pleasurable dimension to their teaching. However, they both realized that the “line that cannot . . . be crossed” was drawn at physically acting on their desire.

context of their classrooms. Sandra and Sheila concluded that sexuality, whether it surfaced in the content of class discussion or in their connections with students, added a pleasurable dimension to their teaching. However, they both realized that the “line that cannot . . . be crossed” was drawn at physically acting on their desire.

As the most sexualized of my participants, Sheila struggled with the “line” more than the others. Though I don't think she was in danger of taking her crushes beyond the fantasy stage, as a “hott” teacher she did have to deal with her students' objectification of her. Though it was

flattering and made her feel good to be liked and complimented, she experienced a role tension when students went too far, forcing her to assert her authority as a teacher. For the most part, though, Sheila enjoyed the affirmation and support she received from male students who desired her and thus worked hard to please her. All of her students seemed to benefit from

the atmosphere of playful camaraderie she established in her classroom; it was evident in the classes I observed that they felt free to talk about issues they cared about (and of course sexuality was high on their list of interests) and had fun while they learned. I did notice, however, that Sheila's female students did not enter into discussions surrounding the study of *The Great Gatsby* when classroom talk became sexualized (Johnson, 2004). Although I'm all for acknowledging sexual dynamics in the classroom, part of exploring the possibilities and limitations of erotic pedagogy has to be a consideration of how a heteronormative dynamic perpetuates inequity through silencing female students.

The most important outcome of this research project—and the one I hope to share with other teachers and teacher educators—is that my participants, through talk and reflection, began to understand the implications of the student-teacher sexual dynamic that is always already in their classrooms. I agree with O'Brien (2000) that

What is needed is a way in which to better understand the myriad sexual and nonsexual desires which are an integral aspect of the pedagogical exchange. Such desires should not be cataloged and clearly defined, but should instead be accepted as shifting and uncertain, productive and repressive, pleasurable and oppressive. At the very least, the sexualized body in pedagogy must no longer be simply dismissed as deviant. (p. 51)

Sharing their experiences with societal pressure to de-sex the classroom (as in their body governance) allowed my participants to explore and sometimes deconstruct the assumptions that guide teacher appearance and conduct. Dress was not negotiable for Sandra and Sheila; they conformed to the norm, Sandra in her monochromes and Sheila in her body-covering potato sacks. They both realized, though, that their conforming did not impede their students' sexualization of them, and thus recognized the paradox of a convention that doesn't suppress sexuality as it purports to do.

An assumption Sandra and Sheila did resist was the notion that sexuality (and the bodies that experience it) has no place in the classroom; both found spaces to enhance their teaching and have "a bit of fun" via the possibilities for empowerment that acknowledging sexual dynamics opened up for them. This hooks-like erotic pedagogy (hooks, 1994) manifested itself differently in my participants' classrooms, in keeping with their respective personalities: social Sheila's power was more embodied whereas introspective Sandra's was more cerebral. What erotic power might look like in other people's classrooms, how it shifts over time, and its potential for pleasures and problems are topics for continued research, but for now I am comfort-

able asserting that opening up a dialogue about sexuality in the classroom is both healthy and important for secondary teachers. Had I had a space to talk about and theorize the sexual dimension of my teaching, I might have saved myself years of pedophilic guilt and patriarchally-imposed shame.

So what are teacher educators to do, then? Ross and Marlowe (1985) claim that the “problem” of teacher-student desire is a “taboo” that “we all know really happens” and “needs to be aired, explored, and analyzed” (p. vii). Unlike these two administrators who look at teacher sexuality as a “problem to be solved rather than a condition to be lived with” (McWilliam, 2004), I believe it is more productive to understand the phenomenon than to try (and fail) to eradicate it. Real classroom bodies aside, English teachers in particular have to “deal” with bodies in literature—but often relegate this to classroom management (e.g., what to do when students deliberately mis-

pronounce “Clitus” when reading *Julius Caesar*) rather than considering the larger social discourses that are shaping the taboo and transgression around issues of sexuality.

Teacher educators could play a role in creating a space within the larger framework of teacher education discourse such that bodily knowledge is considered along with pedagogical and content knowledge as a necessary component of teacher training and professional development. This can begin with frank and open discussions, much like my participants engaged

in with me and with each other during the focus group but on a larger scale—in teacher education classrooms, at in-service seminars, and so forth. Appendix A contains a series of scenarios based on my and my participants’ experiences, which I created for a session at the 2004 Georgia Council of Teachers of English annual conference; these scenarios generated a healthy dialogue among attendees.

In addition to opening the door for this kind of dialogue, more work needs to be done in order to address the silence in educational research surrounding teacher embodiment; although scholars like Gallop (1997), hooks (1994), and McWilliam (1999) have written essays and theoretical pieces on the subject, more research needs to be done with “real” teachers’ bodies. My dissertation research takes the pilot study discussed here a step further by looking at teachers who have crossed the line beyond pedagogical eroticism; my participants’ experiences range from relatively benign intellectual connections with students (along the lines of Sandra and Sheila)

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to sexual relationships. While it is not my intent to condone the latter, understanding how teachers make the emotional, physical, and ethical leap from one to the other will be my next contribution to the field.

Notes

1. McWilliam (1996) describes the typical schoolmarm as “bunned . . . gaunt from giving, nagging, and self-denial” (p. 4).

2. See Grosz (1994) for a description of the Möbius strip (the figure-8 infinity sign) model for the mind and body’s interrelationship.

3. I am aware that “preservice teacher” is the preferred term used in order to not reify the power imbalance of “student” and “teacher,” but I choose to use “student teacher” in this paper because 1) that is how my participants refer to themselves and 2) the power imbalance is key to the tensions they experience.

4. Analyzing all five women was beyond the scope of this paper, so I focused on Sandra and Sheila because their personalities foiled each other nicely. All people and place names are pseudonyms.

5. My participants had read hooks’ (1994) text in their coursework the previous semester, so they were familiar with the concept of eros in the classroom.

6. Capital-lettered words in transcript segments indicate emphasis.

7. Because all my participants have self-identified as heterosexual and talked almost exclusively about dealing with issues related to male students, I will use “she” in reference to teachers and “he” in reference to students. I mean no heterosexist disrespect; my pronouns reflect the language of my participants.

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Appendix A: Scenarios for Discussion

After you read the following four scenarios, which are based on my own and my participants' experiences, please select one of them and address these questions in small-group discussion:

1. What are the legal and/or ethical issues surrounding the scenario?
2. What are different ways of handling the situation (and, if a similar experience has happened with a colleague, how did she or he handle it)? How might the scenario be avoided?
3. What might be the consequences of handling the situation in the way(s) you have described?
4. Would it matter if the genders in these scenarios were different? How/why/not?

Scenario 1: Journal Flirt

One of the writing activities you assign to your sophomores is a weekly, one-page (minimum) journal entry, which you collect on Fridays and respond to over the weekend. You give them a prompt that is related to current or classroom events but tell them they aren't restricted to the topic; they can write whatever they wish, with the usual caveat that you must report anything life-threatening. For most students the journal serves its purpose as a vehicle to get them writing, but for others it has become a meaningful dialogic exchange of ideas. However, for Ian—a cutie whose identity as a quirky, delightful champion for the non-jocks is just starting to emerge—it has become a means to flirt with you. Initially a reluctant writer, Ian now produces pages of passages, which are for the most part amusing anecdotes about his friendships, family, and unsuccessful attempts at love. However, they're becoming increasingly interspersed with comments about you—how you're his favorite teacher, how he so looks forward to coming to class, and how your smile brightens his day. Flattering as this is, a few of the comments set off the “eek” meter in your mind—how hot you looked in that

outfit you wore yesterday, how he'd had a dream about you (with lustful-looking smiley faces surrounding it, leaving no doubt about the dream's contents), and how he was hoping you'd save a dance for him at Homecoming. What do you do?

Scenario 2: Snake Boy

You're teaching a unit on *The Great Gatsby* with your American lit students, and you give them periodic short quizzes to ensure that they're doing the reading. One of the questions on yesterday's quiz was, "What did Daisy do on her wedding night?" You noticed Tommy chuckling in the back of the room with his friends as you were going over the answers in class, but the conversation was beneath your sonar and you didn't think anything of it until you graded the quizzes after school. Rather than the correct answer (Daisy cried), Tommy had written, "Tamed the one-eyed snake." More amused than horrified, you remembered your admonishment to your students to be creative if they didn't know an answer to a question and thus earn partial credit; Tommy certainly had written a unique—and logical, given that he hadn't done the reading—answer. You're a new teacher, though, so you think it might be wise to ask your colleagues for some advice on how to handle Tommy. As you relate the story during lunch, your fellow teachers react with outrage, telling you to give him a detention, fail him on the quiz, and so forth. What do you do?

Scenario 3: The Desk

Bryan, one of those brilliant but angry types in your third period class, frankly creeps you out. He invades your space whenever he has the opportunity, looming large with his testosterone-radiating aggressive stance and demanding your attention. You can't really put your finger on it—he hasn't done anything specific that you could call *wrong*—but there's just something threatening about his demeanor toward you. The other day while you were getting class started, he made a big production of looking you up and down and then saying, "Daaaang, your...fingernails...sure look good today." No amount of clothing would have been a barrier to his probing gaze; you could just tell he was imagining you naked and getting off on making you uncomfortable. You gave him a withering glare and carried on with class.

Bryan's class is the last one you have before lunch, and a few days later you notice what looks like a note peeking out from beneath your desk as you go to grab a Diet Coke out of your mini-refrigerator. Curious, you pick

it up...and then wish you hadn't. It contains rather graphic and violent language, complete with a crude sketch, about what the writer would like to do to you on your desk. The writing is in block letters, so you'd have a difficult time proving the author's identity—but your gut tells you it's Bryan. What do you do?

Scenario 4: He's a Hottie

As an experienced teacher, you've had your share of intelligent, attractive, wise-beyond-their-years students in your classes over the years. You've enjoyed the personal and lasting connections you've made with them, and their *joie de vivre* has helped to energize your classroom. However, you've never contemplated crossing the teacher/student barrier that is so indelibly a part of your ethics. That is, until Cameron came into your Senior English classroom. Even though he's not attractive in the conventional sense, there's something about him that gets to you. Try as you might, you can't make yourself stop looking forward to the little rush you get when he walks into your room every day. The other day when he came up to ask you a question, you could feel your face starting to flush; you were very aware of his cologne-smell as you focused your attention on his fingers idly drumming a cadence on your desk. You avoid his eyes now because there have been a couple of times when you've held each other's gaze a little too long, a little too significantly. You constantly second-guess yourself to make sure you're not treating him differently from the other students. On the one hand, you feel there's nothing wrong with indulging in your fantasies about teaching him more than British literature, but on the other hand, you don't know what to do with these feelings you're having and you're worried that they're bordering on obsession. What do you do?

2004 Promising Researcher Winners Named

Maisha Tulivu Fisher, Teachers College, Columbia University, and **Aria Razfar**, Whittier College, have been named the 2004 NCTE Promising Researchers, an award for articles based on a dissertation, thesis, or initial independent study after the dissertation. In commemoration of Bernard O'Donnell, the Promising Researcher Awards are sponsored by the NCTE Standing Committee on Research. Fisher's research is entitled "*Every City Has Soldiers*": *The Role of Apprenticeship in Participatory Literacy Communities.*" Razfar's research is entitled "*Repair: A Practice of Language Ideologies in English Language Learner Classrooms.*"
