COMING OUT IN COLLEGE

The Struggle for a Queer Identity

Robert A. Rhoads

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In order to keep this title in print and available to the academic community, this edition
was produced using digital reprint technology in a relatively short print run. This would
not have been attainable using traditional methods. Although the cover has been changed
from its original appearance, the text remains the same and all materials and methods
used still conform to the highest book-making standards.

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Series Foreword

Within the last decade, the debate over the meaning and purpose of education has occupied the center of political and social life in the United States. Dominated largely by an aggressive and ongoing attempt by various sectors of the Right, including "fundamentalists," nationalists, and political conservatives, the debate over educational policy has been organized around a set of values and practices that take as their paradigmatic model the laws and ideology of the market place and the imperatives of a newly emerging cultural traditionalism. In the first instance, schooling is being redefined through a corporate ideology that stresses the primacy of choice over community, competition over cooperation, and excellence over equity. At stake here is the imperative to organize public schooling around the related practices of competition, reprivatization, standardization, and individualism.

In the second instance, the New Right has waged a cultural war against schools as part of a wider attempt to contest the emergence of new public cultures and social movements that have begun to demand that schools take seriously the imperatives of living in a multiracial and multicultural democracy. The contours of this cultural offensive are evident in the call by the Right for standardized testing, the rejection of multiculturalism, and the development of curricula around what is euphemistically called a "common culture." In this perspective, the notion of a common culture serves as a referent to denounce any attempt by subordinate groups to challenge the narrow ideological and political parameters by which such a culture both defines and expresses itself. It is not too surprising that the theoretical and political distance between defining schools around a common culture and denouncing cultural difference as the enemy of democratic life is relatively short indeed.

This debate is important not simply because it makes visible the role that schools play as sites of political and cultural contestation, but because it is within this debate that the notion of the United States as an open and

democratic society is being questioned and redefined. Moreover, this debate provides a challenge to progressive educators both in and outside of the United States to address a number of conditions central to a postmodern world. First, public schools cannot be seen as either objective or neutral. As institutions actively involved in constructing political subjects and presupposing a vision of the future, they must be dealt with in terms that are simultaneously historical, critical, and transformative. Second, the relationship between knowledge and power in schools places undue emphasis on disciplinary structures and on individual achievement as the primary unit of value. Critical educators need a language that emphasizes how social identities are constructed within unequal relations of power in the schools and how schooling can be organized through interdisciplinary approaches to learning and cultural differences that address the dialectical and multifaceted experiences of everyday life. Third, the existing cultural transformation of American society into a multiracial and multicultural society structured in multiple relations of domination demands that we address how schools can become sites for cultural democracy rather than channeling colonies reproducing new forms of nativism and racism. Finally, critical educators need a language that takes seriously the relationship between democracy and the establishment of those teaching and learning conditions that enable forms of self- and social determination in students and teachers. This not only suggests new forms of self-definition for human agency, it also points to redistributing power within the school and between the school and the larger society.
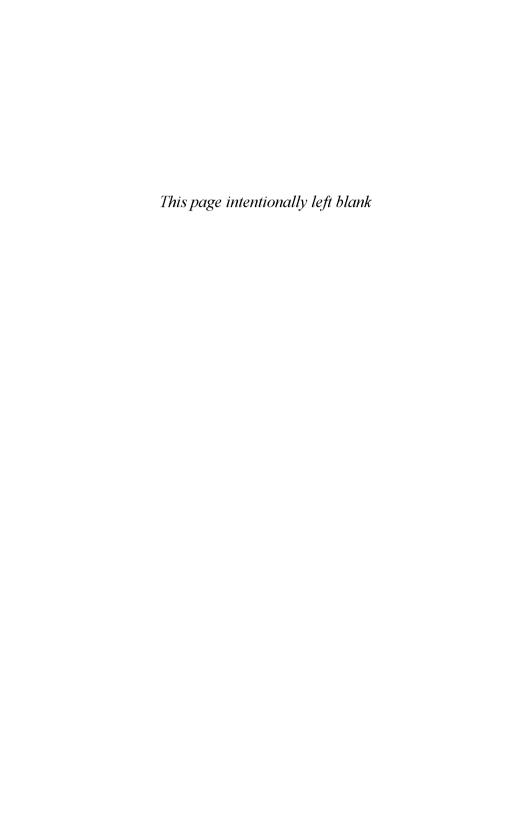
Critical Studies in Education and Culture is intended as both a critique and a positive response to these concerns and the debates from which they emerge. Each volume is intended to address the meaning of schooling as a form of cultural politics, and cultural work as a pedagogical practice that serves to deepen and extend the possibilities of democratic public life. Broadly conceived, some central considerations present themselves as defining concerns of the Series. Within the last decade, a number of new theoretical discourses and vocabularies have emerged that challenge the narrow disciplinary boundaries and theoretical parameters that construct the traditional relationship among knowledge, power, and schooling. The emerging discourses of feminism, post-colonialism, literary studies, cultural studies, and post-modernism have broadened our understanding of how schools work as sites of containment and possibility. No longer content to view schools as objective institutions engaged in the transmission of an unproblematic cultural heritage, the new discourses illuminate how schools function as cultural sites actively engaged in the production of not only knowledge but social identities. *Critical Studies in Education and Culture* will attempt to encourage this type of analysis by emphasizing how schools might be addressed as border institutions or sites of crossing actively involved in exploring, reworking, and translating the ways in which culture is produced, negotiated, and rewritten.

Emphasizing the centrality of politics, culture, and power, *Critical Studies in Education and Culture* will deal with pedagogical issues that contribute in novel ways to our understanding of how critical knowledge, democratic values, and social practices can provide a basis for teachers, students, and other cultural workers to redefine their role as engaged and public intellectuals.

As part of a broader attempt to rewrite and refigure the relationship between education and culture, *Critical Studies in Education and Culture* is interested in work that is interdisciplinary, critical, and addresses the emergent discourses on gender, race, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, and technology. In this respect, the Series is dedicated to opening up new discursive and public spaces for critical interventions into schools and other pedagogical sites. To accomplish this, each volume will attempt to rethink the relationship between language and experience, pedagogy and human agency, and ethics and social responsibility as part of a larger project for engaging and deepening the prospects of democratic schooling in a multiracial and multicultural society. Concerns central to this Series include addressing the political economy and deconstruction of visual, aural, and printed texts, issues of difference and multiculturalism, relationships between language and power, pedagogy as a form of cultural politics, and historical memory and the construction of identity and subjectivity.

Critical Studies in Education and Culture is dedicated to publishing studies that move beyond the boundaries of traditional and existing critical discourses. It is concerned with making public schooling a central expression of democratic culture. In doing so it emphasizes works that combine cultural politics, pedagogical criticism, and social analyses with self-reflective tactics that challenge and transform those configurations of power that characterize the existing system of education and other public cultures.
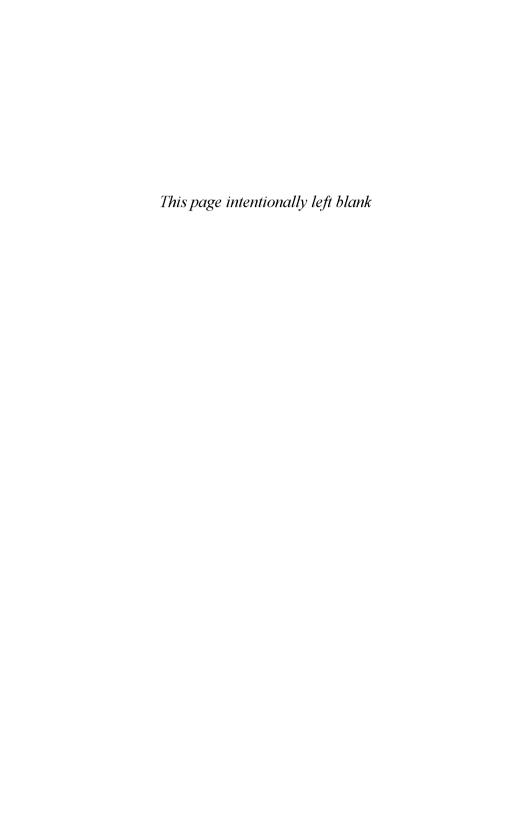
--Henry A. Giroux

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Key Characters

Jerry Sandaval--senior who identifies as gay/queer but occasionally has attractions for women

Tom Beal--closeted first-year student who identifies as a homosexual, fears coming out because of the "traditional values" of his family

Branden Conners--gay sophomore, closeted in his hometown but out at school, from a conservative area near Clement University

Shane McGuire--bisexual junior, closeted in the beginning of the academic year 1992-1993, later steps forward to assume a leadership role in a gay student organization

Roman Washburn--gay African American junior, "pulled out" of the closet by a friend

Karsch Palmer--gay/queer senior, came out his first year in college, out to his mother but not to his father

Roger Desko--serious-minded senior, identifies as gay/queer, a military brat, came out his first year in college

Tito Ortez--Puerto Rican senior who identifies as bisexual/queer, came out his sophomore year

Ben Curry--gay/queer graduate student, came out his first year in college to his roommate who also was gay

Andrew Lempke--gay/queer senior, came out his first year in college, sees everything about being gay as political

Deandre Witter--unidentified senior who acknowledges having mostly same-sex attractions, out to only a few friends

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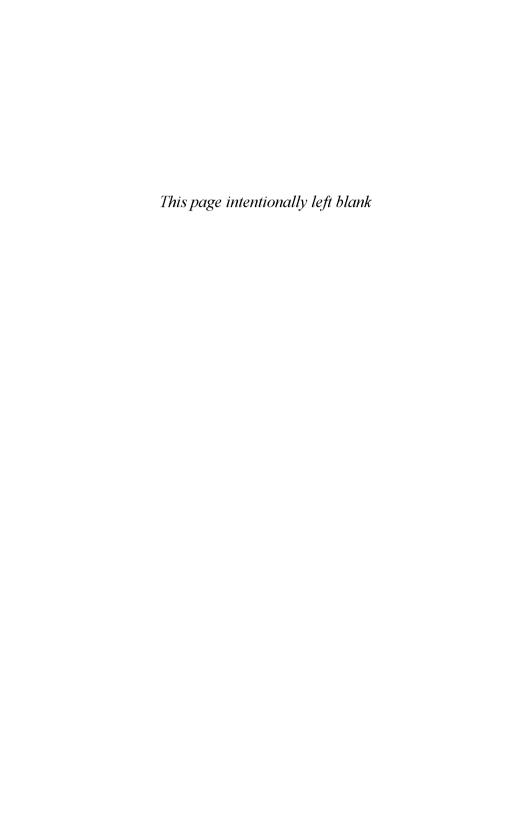
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I

CONSTRUCTING CULTURAL BORDERS

> The gay community is essentially a sense of connection and identity with other people who you have something in common with--a similar sexual orientation.
>
> --Roger Desko, 25-year-old senior

Cultural borders serve to divide people; they separate "us" from "them" (Anzaldua, 1987). Yet, at the same time, borders enable people to connect, to identify with others in a similar position. For Roger Desko, who identifies the gay community as his family of choice, the sense of connection he has with other lesbian, gay, and bisexual people shapes much of his college life. In what follows, I explore the borders of sexual orientation and what these borders mean to students such as Roger as they struggle to develop a sense of identity.

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The Struggle for Identity

> Gay men and lesbians are orphans and our community is a collection of orphans. . . . We are like strangers who have been dropped on an island together.
>
> --Brian McNaught, *On Being Gay*

A fog-like drizzle steadily fell upon a crowd of pink and lavender. The temperature was in the low 40s, but a cold north wind made the October day seem almost wintry. It was certainly no day to be standing outside for any length of time. Despite the cold and dampness, some thirty or so students had gathered on the steps of the auditorium on the campus of Clement University[1] for a local celebration of National Coming Out Day. Another 200 students stood on the adjacent sidewalk; they were there to offer support or to venture out of their closets in their own way. Shane, a handsome junior who majors in engineering, commented after the rally: "It was so exciting just to be in the crowd. The whole rally was very emotional, even just standing there watching." On this chilly day in 1992, Shane was content to be a silent voice, listening and offering support to others as they talked about what it was like to be queer and proud.

The term "queer" is an identifier adopted by a majority of the gay students who will be heard throughout this work. For these students, identifying as queer connotes a sense of pride and openness about one's same-sex desires as well as a degree of hostility toward heterosexism. Among other characteristics, being queer involves a certain attitude about one's sexual identity. This attitude was expressed by Shane some nine months after participating in National Coming Out Day: "Sometimes I feel like being very out and telling people who have a problem with it to piss off!" As another student explained, "To be queer is to be open about your sexual orientation. It means not being ashamed in any way." These students offer one

interpretation of what it means to be queer. Other students argue that "to be queer means to be political" (in the sense of engaging in gay/queer politics). Still others use "queer" rather loosely as a unifying term for all lesbian, gay, and bisexual people regardless of whether those individuals identify as queer or not. Queer is a contentious term within the gay community. Gay authors such as Frank Browning (1993) discuss queer in terms of power and projecting that power in public settings. "Mall actions" are examples of Browning's conception of what it means to be queer:

> Gay men and lesbians, usually in a three-to-one male-to-female ratio, mount "queer visibility" expeditions, walking hand in hand into stores, shopping a lot, buying a little, and engaging in exaggerated mimicry of the straights who surround them. Occasionally, there is a kiss-in. The look is punk, drag, leather, bleached hair, dyed hair, earrings, ear cuffs, nipple rings, nose pins, scarves, streamers, and balloons. It's demonstration as picnic, picnic as political action. (p. 33)

For Browning, queer involves a degree of "rage" toward heterosexism and is often expressed in organized political activities. Alexander Doty (1993) offers a different conception of queerness when he writes that his notion of queer "does not limit queer expression to a certain political agenda. Any 'queerer than thou' attitude, based on politics, style, sexual behavior, or any other quality, can only make queerness become something other than an open and flexible space" (p. xv). For Doty, queerness "is a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight" (p. xv). One of the points of this text is to highlight how various students think about queerness and how their construction of a queer identity might differ from others within the gay community.

Although Shane was content to take a first step and simply be seen at a pride rally, other students at Clement University were there to be heard. These lesbian, gay, and bisexual students would be silent no longer.

> Hi. I'm Toni. I'm one of the co-directors for the department of Womyn's Concerns. I've come out to speak because lots of us are here and some of us are queer. Not to mention the fact that I've fucking had it up to here. There are people who feel justified in teaching and preaching the suppression of love. There is a lot of shit that goes on in our world, therefore we need all the love we can get. So, how do they justify it all? By calling this love bad love, sinful love, the wrong kind of love. To them I say that's a fucking oxymoron. There's no such thing as bad love. I speak for all of us, and I mean all of us everywhere, when I say that love feels good. As for those who say that queer love isn't love at all, you simply have no idea how very wrong you are. But no matter what anybody else says or thinks or does, I, as a bisexual/sensual womyn with a "y," reserve the right to love and to receive love on my terms. And so help me goddess above and below, no one will ever take that from me!