Howlett, Caitlin. "Violent Straightening and the Function of the State." *Against Sex Education: Pedagogy, Sex Work, and State Violence*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 69–87. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350178472.0007>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 15:20 UTC.

Copyright © Caitlin Howlett 2022. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Violent Straightening and the Function of the State

The absence of any consideration of sex work and sex workers in contemporary sex education policies amounts to an erasure that is particularly concerning if we consider, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, what it suggests about who exists in the imagined communities sex education is to serve. More specifically, this erasure seems to me to be particularly troubling precisely because sex work itself has seen a proliferation of new types, modes, forms, and participants, as well as more complicated defenses of its legitimacy, and even some legal wins that point to subtle shifts in the winds around the meaning of sex work's, and sex workers', value in the world today. Indeed, sex workers themselves are very much *part of* the communities we imagine, even if our imaginings do refuse to include them. In *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, the author Mireille Miller-Young shares a story one sex worker shared with her that makes this quite clear. In this interview, Carmen Hayes says,

I was a nurse. I went to nursing school. I did in-home care, urgent care, front office, and back office work, [and worked] in the field. I started dancing to help pay for school. Because my aunties [and family] couldn't help me along the way. . . . I was also trying to be independent on my own. But I also had an itching for it, because I was always the good girl doing everything I was supposed to. I was always on honor roll and student council. I graduated with honors in school; I graduated with a yellow tassel and a yellow robe, the whole nine.¹

Sex workers are *good* students, too.

Of course, this is not to say that sex work is by any means normalized now, and it is also not at all to say that there are not serious issues, including safety issues, facing sex workers of various kinds today. What I am interested in,

then, is what we can learn about sex education by returning to what I have described as an “original” impetus for federal sex education—the need to control prostitution—and exploring the significance of the complete erasure of the sex worker within contemporary policies. This also implicates more contemporary policy *critiques*, and, to this point, this chapter interrogates the relationship between sex education and sex work today, including scholarly critiques of sex education.

To do this, I will first explore how the logics exposed in the previous chapter rest upon a normative and thus exclusionary concept of the human, which suggests that the processes of subjectification at play in sex education are themselves inherently exclusionary. I will then compare the sexual subjectification that takes place in contemporary sex education policies to what Sara Ahmed calls “straightening” and argue that because of the subjective straightening sex education requires in order for a student to be deemed “educated,” sex education can be seen as a form of violence. Additionally, I will offer a reading of this straightening as a form of *state* violence and, from this view, point to what I see as inadequacies in even the more seemingly liberatory or progressive or comprehensive critiques of sex education circulated today.

Rationalizing the Human

Despite all the blatant dehumanization espoused in the aforementioned policies, such policies depend upon a view of the human that is specifically defined so as to justify this dehumanization. To unpack and analyze this concept of the human, I will pay attention to three epistemological assumptions, or assumptions about knowledge creation, that are necessary to believing that sex education as a federal project is one that we ought to value. These assumptions regard what it means to be “rational” and what that definition means for how the body is judged as a result. Ferguson describes epistemology as the study of “an economy of information privileged and information excluded, and the subject formations that arise out of this economy.”² Rather than taking the exclusion of sex work from sex education as a negligible or innocuous, irrelevant point, exploring the epistemological assumptions at play in this exclusion offers a way of understanding what processes of subjectification are at play themselves. This is both a rejection of the narrowing of epistemology

that is enacted through “sociological and national depictions” of knowledge and by the depersonalization of epistemology that occurs in the reliance upon such sources of inquiry.³ This approach allows us to resist decontextualizing what is happening in these moments by recognizing the raced, gendered, sexual, and classed lines that the claims to knowledge made in these policies draw. I take as primary the idea that knowledge is always a political, ethical, and social construct that exists as a way of distributing power, recognition, and worth, and that it is best understood via a consideration of those excluded from these resources on the basis of their so-called lack of knowledge, intelligence, or education. In doing this work, we arrive at a different take on the erasures under examination here.

In the abovementioned policies, the logics I have described as contiguous with sex education’s initial relationship to colonialism, slavery, and capitalism, and the racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and heteropatriarchy they traffic, also depend upon epistemological assumptions themselves. First, then, we can inquire into these assumptions by interrogating the claims being made about what is rational. Time and time again, these policies link rationality and intelligence with a particular set of behaviors related not just to sexuality but to participation in the economy, too. It is not new to point out how rationality has historically been a source for all kinds of marginalization and oppression, and this has been shown to be particularly true for colonizing practices. One way to think of this is in terms of overdetermination: in general, the justifications for colonial violence and the normalization of its continued existence through settler logics were constructed by overdetermining, or narrowing, what constitutes knowledge so that anyone who doesn’t fall into that category can be seen as legitimately in need, or as deserving, of colonial control. Andrea Smith’s depiction of this is both classic and powerful. She writes that the logic of white supremacy, as the foundation of colonialism, requires that “colonizers must first naturalize hierarchy through instituting patriarchy. In turn, patriarchy rests on a gender binary system in which only two genders exist, one dominating the other . . . the colonial world order depends on heteronormativity.”⁴ This is an imposition of an epistemological system built on binaries and hierarchies that are themselves claims about gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, and ultimately about who ought to be granted access to full “humanity.” Lungones adds that studies of colonialism that reject the heterosexualist and patriarchal nature of colonialism encourage

an “epistemological blinding” that hides this role of gender and sexuality in colonial power.⁵ This points to cyclical relationship between the establishment of these norms around what it means to be rational and therefore human and the lack of consideration of those norms in the very use of the definition of rationality. A different iteration of this phenomenon is seen in slavery, too, and not only because of the relationship between colonialism and slavery but because of the extent to which the idea of rationality was taken to be so connected to such a narrow view of intelligence that those without it could be used to further the wealth of those who are deemed human, precisely because the idea of rationality was defined *for* them.

In the case of sex education, one of the most prevalent examples of this use of an overdetermined concept of rationality to limit who is considered “human” can be seen in the powerful Cartesian, Western division between mind and body, and the attribution of intelligence to the mind, and the mind only. The concept of rationality inscribed in sex education’s history is very much aligned with a particular kind of rationality that intentionally and explicitly locates irrationality, and all of the sin and evil that comes with it, in the body. As Smith shows, these assumptions about belonging in the United States were first established through the erasure and displacement of indigenous peoples, which included the rape of indigenous women, the theft of indigenous children, the killing of indigenous men, and the eradication of indigenous models of kinship, sexuality, and community. That part of this colonizing was furthered through the use of stolen African peoples cannot be understated, either. Central to the function of slavery in the United States was taking land from others, taking bodies from other lands, and putting the latter on the former and calling it “natural.” Lest those new occupants of the stolen land be deemed legitimate owners, they too had to be dehumanized, stripped of their culture, traditions, education, and spirituality, and violently redefined as mere tools, always disposable and always replaceable, for economic growth. Again, whereas African men were deemed stronger workers (or stronger animals, without human status), African women were often deemed as having little knowledge so that they could be hypersexualized and therefore physically controlled and dominated, and, ultimately, raped. This was essential to maintaining the labor force. Here, patriarchy, sexism, racism, and colonialism again converge and set the stage for a political and economic system that

would be legitimate so long as the very idea of rationality, and therefore the human, remained legitimate itself.

There is plenty of evidence from the history of sex education as a mechanism for managing sex workers to support the idea that this mechanism depended upon, and indeed continues to rely on, a view of the human that is intentionally exclusionary. It is women's bodies that are toxic; it is their bodies that are merely vessels for disease, and sex workers are described as irrational consistently in the process of continuing to see them as such. Fosdick himself regularly used the language of rationality, depicting the soldiers as rational and thus those who threaten their viability as soldiers and men as irrational.⁶ Morrow, too, expressed sexual health as a kind of "enlightenment,"⁷ and the educational material at the time, including "Healthy Happy Womanhood" and "Keeping Our Fighters Fit," similarly attached the ideal of education to the formation of "normal and wholesome attitudes and ideas in relation to sex."⁸ The policies discussed earlier therefore only extend the logics that set sex education into action in the first place.

Together, the concept of the human assumed in sex education policies can be read as defined in such a way that some will never be extended admission into that community. This is arguably the most important connection between sex education's founding and the policies that remain in place today and contributes to the idea that not only is the exclusion of the sex worker in these policies significant, but it can more accurately be seen as marking a more active complicity with her dehumanization. Of course, the trick is that her exclusion does not matter—does not *have to* matter—to the effort to improve sex education, but it was there precisely to ensure she did not matter.

Straightening Violence

There is plenty of justification for interpreting these assumptions as marking sex education as a way of enacting violence upon those left out of Western concepts of the "human." More specifically, the use of the idea of the human in sex education is akin to what Ahmed calls a device for "straightening." Through an exploration of the project of phenomenology, Ahmed argues that

our experiences of the world can be understood through a consideration of the way orientations toward objects structure both bodies and spaces in ways that create normative lines for humans to follow. That is, the social norms that are most readily rewarded, as well as those ways of being that are most seriously penalized, socially, economically, and politically, can be understood as the result of continual work, by people and institutions. The nature of this work is what she terms “straightening,” or the directing of behavior along certain pathways by idealizing particular objects and offering certain rewards and privileges for orienting oneself toward them. In order to understand the processes of normativity, then, we must understand both how and why certain objects are privileged within certain spaces, and how this privileging then structures what orientations, or ways of proceeding through and existing in the world, are determined as being in line, and others are determined as needing to be fixed. She says that this understanding requires considering what objects exist within close enough proximity to people to be considered as directing one’s orientation, paying particular attention to those objects that promise the conferral of a particular identity marker when the orientation toward it is well established.⁹ To this, she adds, “We can ask what kind of objects bodies ‘tend toward’ in their tendencies as well as how such tendencies shape what bodies tend toward.”¹⁰ Objects thus provide direction for orientation and, in doing so, establish normative pathways for those seeking particular forms of recognition, inclusion, or acceptance through the attainment of certain identities that follow.

This process shapes bodies by requiring the repetition of certain actions over others, wherein any failure to repeat the actions required for staying on course is deemed a failure. This is the moment of normativity: “What is at stake in moments of failure is not so much access to properties but attributions of properties, which become a matter of how we approach the object.”¹¹ That is, value judgments, particularly of character and worth, are made, by other people and by institutions, not on the basis of one’s ability to actually attain the object, but on the basis of one’s ability to stay in line with its purpose, and to direct one’s actions and thinking toward it. Again, this is understood as “straightening.” She says,

Spaces and bodies become straight as an effect of repetition. That is, the repetition of actions, which tends toward some objects, shapes the “surface” of spaces. . . . Our body takes the shape of this repetition; *we get stuck in*

*certain alignments as an effect of this work. . . . Spaces as well as bodies are the effects of such straightening devices.*¹²

Straightening devices are thus those socially, politically, and culturally reinforced ways of being that produce normative social forms against which the value of one's life is determined.

For example, compulsory heterosexuality

diminishes the very capacity of bodies to reach what is off the straight line. It shapes which bodies "can" legitimately approach as would-be lovers and which ones cannot. . . . Hence, the failure to orient oneself "toward" the ideal sexual object affects how we live in the world; such a failure is read as a refusal to reproduce and therefore as a threat to the social ordering of life itself.¹³

Compulsory heterosexuality offers people particular objects, including certain bodies and ways of life, as the North Star of action and thought. If I stay on course, pointed in the right direction, I give value to the path itself, thereby signaling my own value. Likewise, racism, as a well-trodden path, is loaded with promises and rewards for those who perform and enable white supremacy through hostile gazes,¹⁴ requirements of submission,¹⁵ objectification, and domestication.¹⁶ This thus establishes a "political economy which is distributed unevenly between others, and an affective economy, which leaves its impressions, affecting the bodies that are subject to its address."¹⁷ Simply put, straightening devices are ideas and institutions that help keep one on track, in line, moving forward, through normative rewards and punishments. As ideological, emotional, and material constraints, these devices can enact a certain kind of violence on those who resist their straightening. The word "violence" is used by Ahmed here in terms of the felt and experienced consequences of dehumanization and delegitimization that attend the requirements that such straightening devices demand. To carry the example of compulsory heterosexuality further, Ahmed contends that queer orientations reveal "the everyday work of dealing with the perceptions of others, the 'straightening devices' and the violence that might follow when such perceptions congeal into social forms."¹⁸ Compulsory heterosexuality, as a straightening device, sets limits on knowledge and behavior in order to cause anything from discomfort to physical violence, or even extermination, for those who resist or refuse to take up the path set by orienting themselves toward heteronormativity.

The organization of human subjectivity around particular norms regarding intelligence and reason in sex education suggests that it is, itself, a straightening device. This rationality takes knowledge to be that which can be understood objectively, universally, and primarily through the human capacity to reason, especially given its demand that it also be understood as distinct and separate from emotion and the body. To be good is to act in accordance with reason and therefore to deserving of recognition as human, and thus of moral value. To be bad is to deviate from these norms, to be irrational, to be consumed by the body, and thus to relinquish any claim one might have to humanity and, with it, any moral value. If you want to be treated like a human, then you must make a choice to be good, it tells us, which means living a monogamous, white-heteronormative, married, child-oriented sexual life and calling it love. Exhibit something otherwise, and you've landed yourself outside of the protections assigned to humans. That is, participate in nonmonogamous, nonwhite, non-heteronormative, nonreproductive pleasure outside of marriage, and reap what you sew. However, Ahmed argues that since straightening devices are put in place to direct, or orient, people around certain objects through promises of well-being, success, and safety, they are ultimately violent insofar as they punish deviation from this orientation. Sex education's existence as a straightening device is therefore precisely what marks its own relationship to violence. Granted, sex work has been, for so long, assumed by sex education, and most of any public education in general, to be so bad, so deviant, that it is almost entirely naturalized as such. This is why sex education doesn't need to address sex work: we've already learned what to think, what to feel about sex work. The very concept of "sex education," then, holds the federal government's interest in normalizing sex work as evil—even when it profits from it—in place. Even if this function is purely "ideological," even if the funding streams run thin or dry, these policies show, perhaps more than anything else, the insidiousness of its hatred for sex workers.

Finally, as a straightening device, sex education can be said as operating through a system of rewards and punishments. Adherence to the ideal object promises happiness: attainment of this form of sexual life is rewarded through money and social status. To marry, to own a home, to have children all offer tax breaks; to be monogamous, to be reproductive, to be domesticated is to be deemed a functioning adult human. We see the language of straightening in any drift away from this norm. For instance, to be in a long-term relationship

without marrying is understood as living an “alternative” lifestyle; to be polyamorous is to be “lacking direction” or to be “unwilling to/afraid to commit”; to be “single” is to be “on one’s own.” These are all deviances, and they make someone “deviant.” To not have children is often seen as revealing an incapacity to move forward properly. To not be able to have a child or to not want a child, to have an abortion or to adopt, is almost always translated as a loss, a misstep on the path to happiness; it is not the case that one cannot be happy without a child, particularly for women, but instead that one will never be able to experience the supposedly penultimate experience of happiness and love: the miracle of birth. Always orienting behavior, these statements signal the existence of a proper path for social status; each an act of straightening, these words teach students how to stay on the well-trodden path toward happiness. Sex education teaches that to deviate from the ideal is to take a risk, though it is a risk with virtually no possible reward. In this way, sex education is violent because it forecloses possibilities, demands coherence to a particular set of norms, and stigmatizes and silences all those who resist such coherence.

Human Limits and State Violence

The view of violence offered here is somewhat distinct from more traditional understandings of violence that are particularly easy to circulate within education circles. That is, violence is often thought of, particularly within education, as physical injury. Physical violence, or the threat of physical violence, is the most prominent concern and responsibility of the space, and thus discussions of violence in schools are often reduced to a concern with the physical. I think this framing is particularly prevalent regarding sexuality and race in education. Here, it is bullying, suicide, fighting, and gun violence that overwhelmingly occupy such conversations. This pattern is exemplified in sex education discourses, wherein conversations on bullying and suicide are highlighted as uniquely urgent problems facing those experiencing violence, particularly when it is grounded in anger toward, fear of, or hatred of non-heteronormative or nonheterosexual students. Without intending to diminish the seriousness of these physical violences, I seek to argue for the need to address violences that go beyond physical and visible acts of violence. Instead, I argue for the necessity of addressing epistemological violences, or those

violences that justify the more overt and physical ones and thus can easily perpetuate the existence of such violence in its many varieties.

Of course, there are those in education who do pay attention to nonphysical kinds of violence. Paulo Freire is perhaps one of the best examples of someone concerned with both physical and nonphysical forms of violence. In some ways, he helps show how this dichotomy is itself problematic. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he famously asserts that violence occurs in “Any situation in which ‘A’ objectively exploits ‘B’ or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person. . . . Such a situation itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human.”¹⁹ This is why all forms of oppressions are inherently violent regardless of their physicality, though certainly inclusive of it, as is any attempt to disrupt one’s project of becoming more fully human. This can, on Freire’s account, take the form of prescription, or the imposition of one’s own views or ideals upon another in a way that affects their consciousness,²⁰ the treatment of another or oneself as a mere object,²¹ or the general submission of oneself or others, or in many cases both, to the reality of the oppressors.²²

However, the distinction I make here is one between addressing dehumanization with humanization as opposed to directly addressing violence. For Freire, as well as the works of the likes of bell hooks, Henry Giroux, and Maxine Greene, the solution to violence is almost always a deep affirmation of the value of the human. I will instead put Ahmed’s work in conversation with Sylvia Wynter’s critique of the idea of the human in order to make a case for the potential value of wandering off the “human” path in working to bring about breaks within and away from dominant systems of knowledge. As such, it is not the case, I argue, that the labeling of dehumanization as violent means that it is humanization that is the solution. It is necessary to consider the ways in which dehumanization is not encapsulating of all forms of violence a being can undergo. Rather, I will argue that the reduction of the experience of violence to solely the feelings associated with having one’s humanity questioned misses the ways in which humanity itself may be understood as the problem.

Sylvia Wynter’s critique of rationality is essential to understanding how the concept of the human motivates violence around the world. For her, the disruption of the various and intertwined systems of oppression that structure the lives of the marginalized, including the systems of colonialism, slavery, and

capitalism discussed earlier, depends upon a disruption in the order of knowledge upon which such oppression rests. And this is a task that requires a radical reconsideration of the way such an order defines what it means to be human. More specifically, Wynter argues that part of the way in which marginalization happens is through the grounding of particular determinations of what it means to be human in claims about human nature, which, she argues, has come resulted from a shift from religious justifications to secular ones. With this shift also came a turn toward race-based distinctions and away from gender-based ones. In this ideological history, the ordering of meaning in the Western world erased an entire group of people for whom neither distinction offered systematic power: women of color, particularly non-Western women, who were instead relegated to the status of native savage other.²³ This means that the epistemological assumptions upon which sex education depends, a hundred years ago and today, are where violence thrives. It is in the assumptions about rationality and humanity that made those who were most likely to engage in sex work at the turn of the twentieth century inherently unfit for literal existence, and therefore *at least* justified the construction of sweeping policies to mitigate the threat they posed to the nation itself, including sex education policies. If the nation is at stake, though, it is the federal government that bears at least some responsibility for this violence.

To take this one step further, I would like to argue that, given its relationship to the federal government, this legacy of sex education points to its existence as a form of *state violence*. The concept of state violence has its own history; however, I will remain committed to theoretical framework upon which I have been dependent thus far. In his work on the history of governmentality, or the history of the processes and practices that allowed for a reorganization of power that resulted in various forms of population control and disciplining, Foucault describes the “state” as something that itself has been “governmentalized.”²⁴ Whereas the family had previously done the work of governmentalizing, the emergence of “population” as something to be measured, surveilled, and controlled, turned this work over to the state.²⁵ The management of the population is the practice of government that coalesces into an idea of the state, though he importantly notes that the state is not really a tangible thing. On this he writes, “But the state, no more probably today than at any other time in its history, does not have this unity, this individuality, this rigorous functionality, nor, to speak frankly, this importance; maybe, after all, the state is no more than a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction, whose importance is a lot more

limited than many of us think.”²⁶ The state can and does have real effects on our lives, and its effects are also unevenly distributed and experienced. Nonetheless, it is “an order of things” that is itself governed by that which upholds it.

Additionally, Foucault writes that the individual is essential to the state, as of course is the population, and maintains its own power by requiring adherence to a particular norm in order to benefit from what the state has to offer. He, therefore, writes that the individual is in a unique relationship to the state because individuals are only important to the state to the extent that they engage with its power. That is, individuals can impact the state, then, but the significance of that impact is always interpreted by the state as making that individual valuable or disposable: “It is only insofar as an individual is able to introduce this change that the state has to do with him. And sometimes what he has to do for the state is to live, to work, to produce, to consume; and sometimes what he has to do is to die.”²⁷ This rationality of the state is what Foucault labels biopolitics—it is a political rationality that administers human life.²⁸ It is not accurate to say that all biopolitical practices are violent, but we can consider biopolitics to be the essential logic through which the state justifies violence. This is the meaning of “state violence” that I am invoking in interpreting sex education’s own relationship to violence. As a straightening device, sex education enacts a biopolitical rationality that directly supports the governing of the population that upholds the power of the state itself. Because this rationality depends upon a purposefully drawn line about who, quite literally, gets to live (and how well they can live) and who should die based on what it means to be a good, rational, human, sex education helps govern the population by institutionalizing state interests. To call upon humanization to remedy this violence is therefore more likely to redraw the line in a different way, if it has any impact on this rationality at all. This does not mean such work is not important, but it does suggest that it is not sufficient.

On Resisting the Need to Throw the Baby Out with the Bathwater

To conclude this chapter, I want to explore some of the more powerful contemporary critiques of sex education that have shaped modern-day understandings of the limits of sex education by mobilizing this view of sex

education's relationship to violence. The purpose of doing so at this moment in my discussion of sex education is because it is precisely the relationship to state violence that I have centered here that makes sex education so concerning as a federal project and therefore is the measure of understanding the efficacy of other critiques and proposals attempting to address violence themselves. There are other ways of interpreting and measuring these critiques, to be sure, and situating them within a discussion about state violence may be unfair given that state violence is not typically a concern within these discourses. Instead, these scholars largely set out upon their studies of sex education with the aims of understanding its limits within a liberal democratic society and of proposing ways of readjusting sex education in order to make it either more amenable to contemporary identity issues or less stigmatizing itself. As such, these scholars have shaped my thinking in ways that are not captured here. Before offering my own critique of these critiques, then, I want to simply say that my own commitment to understanding sex education and to trying to figure out what the hell to do about all the sexual, and always racialized, violence in this country was formed through serious engagement with this scholarship and is only possible because of the doors these scholars opened for me. The concerns I have with this scholarship are the result of the permission to feel fed up and frustrated that I found validation in while engaging with them.

Within education studies, the prevailing discourse around sex education has traditionally been one rooted in liberal democratic theory. That is, attention to sex education as a legitimate topic for educational theorists specifically emerges late in the twentieth century as an attempt to understand how education about sex, gender, and sexuality could (or could not) be justifiably kept as an essential part of compulsory public education within a "democratic" society. For example, David Archard and Amy Gutmann's research on the relationship between democracy and education situates sex education as a theoretical problem for democratic education. Archard, who importantly set out to justify sex education's very existence, argues that sex education is necessary for a democratic society because, in teaching about sex and sexuality, citizen's own autonomy would be "maximized," and this maximization is essential to a key principle of a liberal democratic theory: liberty itself.²⁹ Gutmann also locates the "controversial" nature of sex education as resting in a tension between "individual freedom and civic virtue": How do we, in a democratic society, balance the desires and values of the individual with the collective "good"?³⁰

As it relates to democratic education, then, she argues that the most “wise and legitimate” approaches to sex education will require sex education in public schools, with the provision that parents can exempt their children on the basis of principled opposition.³¹

In response to these approaches to studying sex education, many educational theorists since have challenged, and continue to challenge, this discourse by challenging the inherent legitimacy, or the normative value, of liberal democratic theory, and its traditional principles of autonomy and liberty, itself. Josh Corngold, Paula McAvoy, and Lauren Bialystok, each working within this area, present their own distinct and nuanced arguments about the relationship between sexuality and education in public schools in ways that represent this kind of challenge. Corngold specifically resists the deference afforded to parents within traditional liberal discourses, especially that of Gutmann, offering a justification for sex education through a concern for the rights of children and their developmental needs.³² Further, in a critique of liberal conceptions of autonomy, particularly those resting upon an understanding of autonomy as individual sovereignty, he argues that sex education presents an important opportunity for helping students understand their autonomy as “embedded,” or as connected to their ability to be a democratic citizen.³³ While perhaps less a condemnation of liberal theory than an attempt to redefine its key principles, Corngold offers valuable critiques of this tradition that have helped call that tradition into question more broadly.

Similarly, McAvoy raises questions about the *content* of sex education and concerns about the lack of engagement with such questions within the liberal tradition. Like Corngold, McAvoy is skeptical of the efficacy of defining autonomy through individual choice-making and of the narrowing of sexual activity to what she says is merely a consideration of “whether or not to have sex, with whom to have sex, and what kind of sex we have with them.”³⁴ She attempts to expand human sexual behavior to include all other experiences that relate to one’s life as a sexual being, including how one dresses, the variety of other intimate relationships one engages in, and those sexual behaviors that do not put students at risk for pregnancy and disease at all.³⁵ Instead of teaching strictly about sex acts, she argues for what she calls “structured paternalism,” or state determination of some aspects of sex education, given the extent to which children, especially girls, experience sexual exploitation.³⁶ Speaking with a more concrete concern for the role of parents in sex education practices

in a liberal democracy than McAvoy does, Bialystok explores the ways in which parentally determined exemption allowances, which allow parents to remove their children from any mandated sex education provided in schools, align with the values of such a society. Bialystok is herself situated in the Ontario, Canada, context, and her exploration of sex education controversies in Canada offers an important addition to the way the so-called global West attempts to mitigate the tensions that emerge around rooting democratic aims in rights-based discourses, particularly when attempting to extend rights to both parents and children. Her argument is that, at some point, “when there is good cause to believe that respecting parental rights will violate the rights of at least some children, a blanket solution is in order.” This blanket solution equates to something akin to what McAvoy defends, albeit for different reasons and with different purposes: a defense of the state’s own right to make sex education, when guided by liberal principles, compulsory.³⁷

More skeptical of the promise of liberal democratic principles and practices, there have been, especially in the past two decades, many significant interventions into such discourses. Essential to moving sex education scholarship within, and often beyond, education studies into new, promising spaces, these scholars have opened new doors for considering the many aspects of sexual identity that make liberal frameworks for justifying and detailing sex education unsatisfactory if not damaging. Cris Mayo’s critiques of liberalism’s commitment to freedom and equality have arguably led the way in these conversations. Mayo shows how such a commitment has continually failed sexual minorities in at least three ways: by limiting discussion and understanding of sexuality to “a matter of private freedom,” by failing to account for the way such structures benefit some more than others, and by remaining uncritically attached to the institution of marriage.³⁸ At stake in each failure is the recognition of non-heteronormative ways of being and a disruption of the constant deference to both “male power” and “traditional gender roles.”³⁹ A passionate advocate for challenging such structures—and this includes those enforced in schools through law—Mayo has targeted not only the institution of marriage but gender binarism and heterosexism, too. This work is bolstered by detailed research showing the influence of the Christian Right on sex education, not merely through its idealization of heterosexual marriage and the traditional gender norms it depends upon. Instead, as Janice Irving shows, the Christian Right’s ability to redefine talks *about* sex as sexual

acts themselves, establishing a mood of fear and paranoia that inhibits the willingness of teachers to teach sex education adequately.

In order to articulate a vision of sex education that resists these pressures and opens up spaces for a more liberatory kind of sex education, a turn to desire and ambiguity has dominated scholarship in education studies on the subject. Most compelling has been Mayo's call for centering conversations of "pleasure, perversity, and community" in sexuality education, a practice that might undermine normative notions of female sexuality, call attention to the role of sexuality in capitalist markets, and move us toward a more nuanced and complicated conception of education itself.⁴⁰ Arguing that "desire is the bridge between what is and what might be, disrupting stale patterns and creating new formations," Mayo adds that desire is also necessary to *education* because it is what ultimately "binds communities, and stimulates learning."⁴¹ When human sexuality is more fundamentally related to desire, or Eros, it can thus be seen as making possible both a different kind of education and political action. This argument echoes Deborah Britzman's own call for understanding that sexuality is "central to the capacity for human curiosity, for living a vital intellectual and social life, and for our capacity to attach passionately to knowledge, other people, and life projects."⁴² Sexuality, Britzman argues, ought to be understood as "the first condition for human curiosity and hence the first condition or force for human learning. Simply put, without sexuality, the human would not desire to learn."⁴³ Likewise, Jen Gilbert's work in *Sexuality in School* reflects these same commitments and further adds to this conversation about the underlying tensions present in attempts to eradicate sexuality from education, as well as the anxieties attached to doing this work. Gilbert utilizes Derrida's concept of hospitality to illuminate the inherently disruptive nature of sexuality in education and therefore the necessary requirement that education work to unconditionally welcome, however imperfectly, those who resist its rules and assumptions about truth, knowledge, and human rights.⁴⁴ The introduction of strangeness, especially in the form of queerness, amounts to an important resistance to education's dependence on legibility and predictability and is thus a risk worth taking: "Passion is not only about sexual desire; it also characterizes the energetic desire for more learning, for finding new ideas, and helps bind together communities of inquiry."⁴⁵

The significance of this introduction of a kind of strange, queer curiosity and desire also lies in its use to justify emphasis on pleasure as a constitutive

element of sexual experience. Some, like Fine and McClellan, highlight the place of discourses of desire, or, more accurately, the lack thereof in sex education and in public schools in the United States more broadly. Reflecting on Fine's work from the 1980s that asserted the necessity of adequately addressing desire in sexuality education, Fine and McClelland argue decades later that not only has this not happened but also that this failure is having more drastic and widely felt effects on women.⁴⁶ Others, including Louisa Allen and Moira Carmody, posit that acknowledgment and inclusion of queerness within sex education depend upon the "re-conceptualization of the potential of pleasure in sexuality education. In particular, we identify the need for wedging open spaces for the possibility of ethical pleasures, in forms that are not heteronormatively pre-conceived or mandatory."⁴⁷ This also requires acknowledgment of the "sexual subject," Allen argues, which has been made all but impossible by the way schools define students as "children" despite also situating them as at least somewhat sexual insofar as they engage with sex education at all.⁴⁸ Again, this is the radical potential that introducing an expanded understanding of sexuality might bring about in education should it itself be welcomed. Cognizant of the many challenges facing this kind of education, however, Vanessa Cameron-Lewis and Allen argue that the pervasiveness of narratives of danger, and the fear they often explicitly aim to produce, within sex education must be met with an exploration of "the interrelatedness of pleasure and danger in sexual intimacy."⁴⁹ The concluding suggestions that represent a majority of this research assert that fundamental to any attempt at cultivating these discourses is the need for student-centered approaches, which, as Nancy Kendall has described, are ones that allow for debate and deliberation over the issues, questions, and experiences that are most relevant to students' lives.⁵⁰

Despite the import of these critiques, they can be read as limited specifically because, even when critiquing liberalism, they overwhelmingly leave the liberal state intact. At stake here is the power of recognizing and understanding the extent to which liberalism has historically and still is ideologically one of the most powerful mechanisms through which marginalization and exclusion are produced. This point has been made across many disciplines and for many reasons; however, its ability to permeate educational scholarship more broadly has remained weak. Though I could speculate as to why that might be, what is most relevant here is that there is a fundamental contradiction in relying on

an institution that, by definition, creates patterns of inclusion and thus also exclusion that has been, up until this point, primarily utilized for the purpose of maintaining biopolitical boundaries between citizens and noncitizens, those deserving of rights and those not so deserving, and, in many ways, life deserving of life and life deserving of something less than life. Related to the problem of liberalism's insidious framing of sex education discourses is the general lack of structural analysis in the attempt to make sex education more inclusive within a liberal state. Not only does this liberal framework go unquestioned, but its relationship to violence also remains unquestioned in the move toward inclusion. The purpose of this project is therefore, in part, to demonstrate the dangers in leaving this framework unquestioned, and how those dangers are also unevenly distributed, particularly as they perpetuate colonial, racist, and capitalist logics. In neglecting a structural analysis, these connections go untheorized and, as a result, are left free to operate as they did—there is no mitigating mechanism put in place to address, let alone eradicate, these systematic and structural interdependencies, a cost that is felt by some much more than others.

Further, given what has been said thus far about sex education's relationship to colonialism, racism, and capitalism, it is clear that there are issues to be raised about the inability to maintain distance from state. When these critiques aim at inclusion or expansion of categories and content, then, they serve only to adjust the distance between what is good rational thought and behavior and irrational thought and behavior, moving those figures of diverse sexual identity into the realm of what constitutes good, valuable ways of thinking and being. Inclusion may expand that realm and decrease the realm of what constitutes bad ways of thinking and being, and it may even change how those realms are understood and described, but it does not in and of itself challenge the hierarchy underlying such adjudications of human value, nor does it end the processes of stigmatization and violences connected to it. This is the key lesson of intersectionality for sex education, then: in revealing the intricate and complicated relationship sex education has to violence, historically and ideologically, it helps us see the ways in which the language of inclusion and expansion fails to address the structures normalizing this violence. These authors of course *do* open up space for theorizing sex education differently, and this project reflects the fecund nature of that space. Again, I do not mean to suggest that any of these authors *intend* any kind of violence. My

interest and concern lie instead with the desire to see more intentionality in how the category of the human is used in these spaces, as well as to see such intentionality as a way of both deepening the practice of destabilization that these scholars have helped to cultivate and working toward something more explicitly destructive.

While each contribution to this literature certainly *could* intervene upon the epistemological assumptions that define the “human” in such violent ways, my skepticism and concern related to the efficacy of them for doing so relates primarily to their dependence upon the state itself. Taken together, this body of scholarship almost completely hinges on arguments based on expansion and inclusion and, in the process, can be understood as attending more to a desire to move the dividing line between stigmatization and marginalization on the one hand, and respectability and state-centered recognition on the other. In privileging this approach to improving sex education in schools in the United States, these arguments overwhelmingly leave unaddressed the concept of the human that is desired in sex education, particularly as it relates to exploring the problematic closeness between reason, rationality, and intelligence and racism, capitalism and neoliberalism, colonialism, and, of course, state violence. To use the analogy of the ever-reliable weed, we might say that while these scholars do indeed help weed the garden, its roots remain and, as it turns out, the weed becomes more fickle and intelligent despite the weeding, learning how to survive in even the strangest of places. The conditions that produce the problems that are supposedly addressed remain themselves undisturbed, if not even more powerful. As one sex worker told an interviewer from the Urban Institute Report on the “underground commercial sex economy” in major cities in the United States, “A girl is never forced.”⁵¹