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Alternatives, Not Adjustments; Imagination, Not Intervention

Acknowledging the way that sex education facilitates the seeping and spreading of violence across spaces, borders, and lives necessarily demands the imagining of alternative intervening possibilities. As Margo St. James once said, “what my goal is, is the complete decriminalization of sex for human beings, even commercial sex.”¹ The future of sex education is, therefore, implicated by this demand, given its role in this violence. In this chapter, I explore the limits of advocating for new state-sponsored *policies* in bringing about different, nonviolent futures, and instead argue for the cultivation of alternative, imaginative, sexual *pedagogies*. It is only through the development and use of such pedagogies, when they are grounded in ways of knowing and being that challenge the intricate relationship between sexuality, race, capital, labor, and knowledge that we might begin to address the insidious ways in which sex education, as a federally funded institution, perpetuates violence. Considering this, then, what might education do with sexuality?

This chapter ultimately offers an argument for ending sex education as it currently exists. Despite being a regular target of neoliberal policy frustrations that demand immediate “action,” I understand critique as essential to the possibility of any kind of liberatory praxis and as an act itself.² As such, I offer this critique by homing in on common educational refrains about policy, progress, and imagination that enact powerful limits to radical imaginative processes. Following this, I offer what is merely meant to serve as an example of how one *might* proceed, or a provocation for something different, given the understanding of federal sex education policy detailed throughout this book, and, therefore, *not* a requirement, a demand, or any kind of prescriptive dictate about what should be done next. Though the project thus far has already

had a connection to imagination, I aim to use this space to experiment with imaginings that culminate in a simple proposal: that we try something else. In fact, I am deeply reluctant to suggest in any way that I can or should imagine *for* others; instead, because of my commitment to opening possibilities, I resist the likely call to explain with any kind of normative specificity what should follow this. Doing so would foreclose the very possibilities that I also humbly imagine to be out there, somewhere else, waiting to be called into existence by others. What is offered here may spark something new or different in the reader that itself alters their presence in the world and their praxis toward liberation and justice, or, of course, it may not. The possibilities are truly always evolving and infinitely developing, so this chapter ought to be read as nothing other than an attempt to legibly articulate my own feelings and understandings that lead me to desire very different and novel possibilities for what education might look like, sound like, and feel like.

In what follows, then, I offer a critique of policy reform, with a view into the value of pedagogical interventions into the relationship between sexuality and education in schools. Next, I call upon debates in education and beyond regarding the radical possibilities inherent to the cultivation and practice of imagination in order to detail the potential in letting imagination guide pedagogical theorizing and practice. Given imagination's relationship to utopian thought and hope, I offer a discussion of the resistance to optimism, or optimistic hope, within discourses on queer futurity and think through the value of creating space for a different kind of hope, grounded in "negative" affect and even apathy, to suggest the latent, rich possibilities inherent to walking away from sex education. In opposition against, and even defiance of, the pressure to outline "practical" and "productive" paths toward change, I will purposefully rest in the much more ambiguous space of what I refuse to accept.

Against Policy

Calling into question the necessity of something like sex education as it currently exists is often met skeptically, if not with laughter and disdain, particularly because of what I read as a deep faith in policy-oriented movements toward justice. This faith has resulted in decades of research and advocacy

for policies that police the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. However, these practices neglect at least two underlying epistemological issues. First, when it comes to adjudicating and organizing human life and its value, the turn toward policy always enacts what Sara Ahmed terms “straightening.”³ That is, policies only ever *differently* organize difference, but also through the *same* commitment to Western Enlightenment rationality itself. Imagining new ideals and new objections that demand adherence to such values in exchange for being seen as a legitimate being only reaffirms the very idea of rationality that I have named as violent throughout this book. Second, the implementation of such a rearrangement is an act that, in and of itself, reifies the logics and epistemological grounds that we must challenge.

Apart from these blind spots, there are at least four other reasons to problematize the turn to policy in attempting to challenge the violence inherent to contemporary sex education. First, policy-oriented change does not in and of itself promise experiential or epistemological change. Changes in policy, or using policy to enact change, can only do so much when it comes to guaranteeing adherence. They enact foreclosures no matter the intention, delineating what should not be done just as much as what should be done and construct narratives around what is “bad” as much as what is “good” without being clear about the underlying normative assumptions. This means that policies tend to perpetuate certain normative frameworks without having to be explicit about whose experiences, voices, and desires are guiding their construction. State-sponsored policy is almost always treated as disembodied in this way, distanced from its creators, the historical context out of which it emerged, and the material conditions to which it refers. Wanda Pillow clearly outlines the way policy, including educational policy, approaches embodiment and offers a valuable critique of “institutionalized policies”:

institutionalized policies often have many shortcomings and may even serve to debilitate the exact condition they wish to advocate. Yet, despite this influx of critique and critical discussion, the arena of policy studies remains dependent upon a technical-rational assessment framework to predict, influence and explain the policy process from development to implementation and outcome, even while those involved in the policy process find it to be highly politicized and even irrational.⁴

Through Pillow’s work, we can more readily understand the limited value of reliance upon state policy for addressing the violence of sex education,

particularly because it creates a void wherein the voices and embodied experiences of marginalized individuals ought otherwise exist. So, the possibility of advancing any kind of material change through policy is neither ensured nor likely to the extent that state policy works primarily at the level of disembodied, institutionalized norms.

Second, I want to explicitly resist the assumption that education is merely a formalized system of policies and doctrines which grounds the common practice of promoting new policies and doctrines in order to “improve” education. When educational research and scholarship is oriented primarily around policy, it perpetuates, or reinvests in, an understanding of education as a system of policies. The appeal of policy-oriented research is understandable; making policy recommendations grounded in critical research is both important and rewarding, in all senses of the word. It offers a sense of agency that is so often absent in such research, particularly in a political climate that remains generally uninterested in research that does not ultimately affirm the status quo. However, as recent history suggests, it is that policy changes are limited in substantive efficacy. The *why* of this is, I think, latent in the narrow definition of education that policy-oriented research depends upon. Education can and must be understood as a much more diverse set of experiences, physically, mental, and affective, that is always already implicated in and through logics of sexuality, race, class, ability, nationality, and ethnicity.

These *logics* can always resist foreclosure in the face of formalized policy adjustment, even as they make it difficult for so many *people* to do the same. Education remains, in many ways, untouchable, unreachable, inaccessible to state-sponsored policy, as it is always overflowing and meandering beyond what policy can promise. For all that it delineates, there is always excess in both directions due to the natural variety of individuals, locales, social and political contexts, and of economic situations of school districts, schools, classrooms, or classes. If we grant this, then at least some energy ought to be given to this excess, to those moments that policy does not reach, to the experiences that cannot be either dictated or avoided given any particular policy. Policy therefore offers something more akin to an illusion or, to use the language of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, a trick. They argue that, because policy aims at changes in management, so to speak, it is more aptly described as “resistance from above;” the

act of making policy for others, of pronouncing others as incoherent, is at the same time an audition for a post-fordist economy that deputies believe rewards those who embrace change but which, in reality, arrests them in contingency, flexibility, and that administered precarity that imagines itself to be immune from what Judith Butler might call our undercommon precariousness.⁵

Policy reform can cause an almost anesthetizing experience, creating a “willingness to be made contingent and to make contingent all around you. It is a demonstration designed to separate you from others, in the interest of a universality reduced to private property that is not yours, that is the fiction of your own advantage.”⁶ Resisting the urge to locate the possibility of new worlds—or, refusing to succumb to the allure that is resigning to this world as the pinnacle of progress—is, therefore, essential to any kind of liberatory praxis.

Third, if policy is an attempt to capture, it is worth considering escapist praxes, or to “invent the means in a common experiment launched from any kitchen, any back porch, any basement, any hall, any park bench, any improvised party, every night.”⁷ I want to be escapist in the face of sex education’s inherent violence, and to plan for something different. I am also interested in allowing this project to create a space for exploring the conditions under which different interventions might take place without adhering to the normative structures to which state policy is always committed. By advocating for change that is located more at the experiential level, or that enacts epistemological shifts in experience and the psyche, I am expressing my own desire to participate in something that cultivates alternative subjectivities that themselves might, even momentarily, escape state containment.

This is my final concern with policy-oriented research, then: it is limited to the demands and desires of the state. If, however, it is precisely the state that is using sex education to enact and normalize violence, then reliance on the state must be refused. Or, at the very least, more time, energy, and resources need to be invested into exploring the informal, non-state-run, unhinged practices, experiences, events, and relations that are always at play despite policy’s enactment. To be clear, I am not suggesting here that *all* state-sponsored policy is unimportant or ineffective. My contention is that the ways in which they are effective do not always, if ever, align with the stated intentions for which they were conceived, and thus their importance and their effects rarely have the desired results that are assumed to be promised when

policies are institutionalized. Further, when entrenched within a state that can only be maintained through violence, this dissonance can be especially dangerous if ignored. All federal sex education policies explored in previous chapters attempt to delineate, through lists and expectations, what is to be taught and for what ends (and of course, how much money is to be allotted for the tasks being addressed). At best, they aim to create conditions under which certain outcomes can both be created and tracked. And we should be careful and attentive to the impossibility of acting outside the state, especially when the relationship between the state and capitalism leaves little room to imagine the former without the latter.⁸ However, because of the overwhelming amount of research dedicated to the sliver of the state, real or not, that is potentially nonviolent and/or operating independently of market interests, I want to be stubborn and uncompromised in committing my energy to aim at refusal.

Within sex education policy, these limits are particularly salient as proposed policy-oriented changes are always articulated as requirements for particular kinds of discussions to take place, specific topics to be covered, and certain attitudes toward difference to be encouraged. Within the liberal tradition more specifically, the hope is that students come to feel free and open to new perspectives and undergo an educative experience that allows for comfort and vulnerability, growth, and engagement with others. However, no policy does this, and, even if any did, they can provide no guarantee. We know, for instance, that abstinence-only or -centered programs largely alienate or solidify students' views, both of which can be understood as a kind of violence. Further, politics of inclusion can require violence as well, as in the way that the promise of inclusion always demands some kind of straightening. In this way, policy-oriented changes are often ill-equipped to undermine violence. For this reason, though, continued recognition of the state will *always* be necessary; the cultivation of something beyond the state, if it is possible, requires acknowledgment of it, but it is my hope that the previous chapters support cultivating a practice of attempted refusal.

If there is an alliance that I do have with policy studies, however, it is with those within policy studies who are critical of the relationship between policy and power. For example, Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead argue, "Policy often has the status of a governing text, and this text is variably successful in binding people to its mandates when actually circulated through a social field."⁹ In challenging the "normative sense of policy," the authors point to the role of

power in determining how policy is created, and by whom it is created, and seek an understanding of policy that aims at democracy as opposed to merely maintaining the power of particular groups.¹⁰ They argue that policy ought to be seen as a practice—or, through a practice approach. They therefore distance themselves from traditional concerns with creating guidelines for enacting policies by situating policy implementation as about “the making of meaning;” policy is instead “always negotiated in social life; values are never fixed but rather contingent on the mobilization of meaning in specific situations.”¹¹ This understanding of policy immediately implicates the community out of which policy is created, as it is only with a shared language, material existence, and culture that policy comes to have cohesive import to any individual goal. While this understanding of policy formation and implementation is far more grounded in community than one merely created by the state, it is unclear how such a policy framework might undermine or disrupt state power when the issue at hand is one that is contingent upon state doctrine, as is the case of sex education. Moving forward, then, I want to revel in the other ways in which education and politics might be harnessed for nonviolent purposes.

Turning Toward Pedagogies

The question of this chapter—what are we to do now?—requires cautious answering, especially because of my reticence to *do* much of anything in the way action and resistance are defined through neoliberal discourses advanced by contemporary comprehensive sex education policies and advocates. The need for caution is bound to the ease with which resistance and reimagining can be violent, too. I am thinking specifically of Reddy’s claim about the ways the very concept of knowledge can be defined so as to refuse certain groups’ access to the realm of the “knowledgeable;” the incitement must therefore begin with the everyday experiences of those whose ways of knowing and being are excluded from such institutions, though also always implicated by them. Reddy argues,

To the degree that the norms exist and present themselves as transhistorical, and promise temporal perpetuity, the “other”—the people excluded from the norms—will always be the face of those norms. . . . These norms powerfully shape what we seek to know when addressing the excluded faces of the

norm, and how we apprehend that excluded face, as well as which gives that face its unity and representative coherence for us.¹²

This point is crucial: Reddy challenges us to resist idealizing what we discover in others' epistemological blind spots and shadows because of the blind spots that doing so creates. Instead, *inspiration* for new epistemological frameworks ought to be sought in the blind spots, not *solutions*. And one way of navigating this is by playing with pedagogy.

To summarize, then, this turn toward *sexual pedagogies* is different than proposing an alternative form of sex education in three important ways. First, it *resists* an understanding of education as a formalized system of policies and doctrines that can only be improved through new policies and doctrines. Second, it *refuses* from the get-go the logic that one's sexual education can be adequately addressed in classes and experiences separate and distinct from all other aspects of one's education, as if sexuality is not present in other aspects of education and schooling and as if such classes are sufficient spaces for being sexually educated. Instead, this understanding of pedagogy points to an understanding of education as a diverse set of experiences that is always already implicated in and by logics of sexuality, race, class, economy, and nationality, thus allowing for the creation of alternative educative practices that work to redefine, challenge, resist, and survive such logics in creative, always changing ways. Ultimately, at stake is being able to navigate the water between critique and possibility, or between refusal and demand, or between the present and the future. No matter how the jump is framed, it is only imagination that can make the leap, and therefore the heart of cultivating alternative sexual pedagogies lies in the ability to imagine something different.

Imaginative Impossibilities

When it comes to those ideas most important to my own understanding of how to cultivate these new pedagogies, I am indebted to those working to theorize and practice radical imagination. Radical imagination is necessary for the task of conceiving new, alternative sexual pedagogies insofar as it, as an academic practice and discourse, creates new possibilities for the future by understanding the present differently. There is plenty of scholarly work on imagination in education, but I turn to its radical form, particularly as it emerges out of Queer

of Color scholarship, insofar as it is only here that race, class, and sexuality are taken seriously in the *work* of imagining, rather than merely as *subjects* of imagination, as will be discussed later in the chapter. Given that imagination has a rich history in educational theory, I want to distance myself from such traditions by addressing the work of Maxine Greene and Henry Giroux.

For Greene, a lack of imagination in education is evidenced by the “sense of repetitiveness and uniformity” which works to “discourage active learning.”¹³ Imagination thus plays a constructive role, enabling the possibility of “becoming different,” or of “the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise.”¹⁴ Imagination, for Greene, begins with an openness to these possibilities and is followed by an action based upon them: only by being open to different futures and to imagining that things could be different does the work of imagination take place. Further, imagination is important, according to Greene, at all levels of education, and for anyone from parents to administrators to students to teachers. What imagination does, she argues, is enable empathy between and for difference, resist processes of normalization, and help to “decenter” participants in ways that are necessary for breaking such normative processes.¹⁵ She relies heavily on art and aesthetics as spaces for imagination and risk, because it is in art, she argues, that one can experience each of these aspects of imagination and produce new social visions. Greene grounds knowledge production in the conscious questioning of what others offer us as reality and in the naming of obstacles or problems that perpetuate student oppression or limit the possibility of freedom.

It is imagination, on Greene’s account, that is crucial to this initial step of becoming conscious, and then to being able to name the obstacles to one’s freedom. She says, “To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively, independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or ‘common sensical’ and to carve our new orders in experience.”¹⁶ Though imagination as a way of thinking is essential in general to breaking with the status quo, which is assumed to be oppressive, it is specifically imagining that things could be other than they are that opens up what she calls a “space of freedom” in which one can exercise agency as a free human.¹⁷ In this way, imagination is a privileged form of knowledge creation and way of knowing because of its potential to create new understandings of the world, new knowledge of one’s situation, and new solutions to the obstacles one faces to their liberation. I do not think that

Greene is wrong about the possibilities inherent to teaching through and for imagination in general in education; however, it is striking that her analysis only addresses oppression vaguely, as an object for imagination. Nowhere does Greene explore or analyze the way oppression and violence can interact with imagination, and how imagination might relate to the material world differently for different people.

Giroux's work delves deeper into imagination's limits in education, primarily because he situates his analysis of the relationship between education and imagination within the context of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, he argues, is a logic based on the marriage of capitalism to liberal values such that freedom, value, and equality are determined largely through market value. In education, these logics reduce students to "consuming and marketable subjects." Further, he notes that an effect of this reduction is the relegation of students who deviate from the norms asserted by that logic to marginal and exploitable positions. Neoliberalism also represents the replacement of creativity, imagination, and, in many ways, education itself, with market-driven reform, standardization, instrumental rationality, and the "pursuit of profits." Challenging neoliberalism is thus best done through pedagogies that posit a view of the student as an active co-investigative agent capable of participating in the naming of their reality and as capable of imagining different futures. Again, it is not the case that I disagree with this perspective; however, it remains insufficient to the task of addressing the violence I have described. We need more than a rethinking of our view of the student, or even ourselves. Instead, we need a radical rethinking of the structure of our society and education's place within it. This is what the work of radical imagination does.¹⁸

Located within discourses around both Black studies' and Queer of Color studies' efforts to engage in futuristic thinking, radical imaginative endeavors shamelessly catapult us into the impossible while still maintaining an intimate relationship to the here and now, especially the political here and now. Robin G. D. Kelley's work is especially inspiring on these points.

For Kelley, radical imagination is inherently creative, poetic, and powerful and is aimed specifically at new understandings of identity. Speaking of the kind of imagination his mother cultivated within him, Kelley says,

She simply wanted us to live through our third eyes, to see life as possibility. She wanted us to imagine a world free of patriarchy, a world where gender

and sexual relations could be reconstructed. She wanted us to see the poetic and prophetic in the richness of our daily lives. She wanted us to visualize a more expansive, fluid, “cosmos-politan” definition of blackness, to teach us that we are not merely inheritors of a culture but its makers.¹⁹

The role of radical imagination is to bring to fruition a relationship between oneself and a different future, to disrupt one’s imaginary attachments to the realities of everyday life, and instead locate them in a future “nowhere,” a place that is not here, but a place that exists solely in the imagination.²⁰ This means that, on Kelley’s account, radical imagination does not envision what is possible but creates new worlds that motivate political action: “My point is that the *dream of a new world*, my mother’s dream, was the catalyst for my own political engagements.”²¹ A resistance to imagination that is limited by the present, combined with an understanding of the impossible novelty as an instigator of political action, makes radical imagination itself inherently political.

This understanding of imagining new worlds, which then orient and motivate political action, also takes seriously the affective or felt aspect of such work. This aspect of radical imagination is where one’s experiences in the world come into play most powerfully—the affective experience of imagining radically is deeply rooted in one’s experiences with race, gender, class, and sexuality. This brings to mind Phillip Brian Harper’s argument about “felt intuition”: or “evidence of things not seen.”²² For Harper, felt intuition is the answer to an essential, ever-confounding question: “How [do we] consider the meaning of an experience no concrete evidence of which exists, and of which we can therefore claim no positive knowledge?”²³ The possibility of disrupting the current epistemological order requires beginning with a view of experience that itself is scorned by such an order, and this is what the affective can offer.²⁴

At stake in the centering of the affective are new “nowheres.” Kelley turns to both love and surrealism, particularly as they emerge from and exist in Afrodiasporic culture, to articulate this. Love and surrealism are crucial to the task of radical imagination insofar as they explicitly act against calls for practicality and rationality, and against dominant systems of power and state violence, thus marking them as central to the actual, tangible, felt work of making “nowheres” possible. The entire purpose of surrealism, in fact, is transformation: “[The surrealists] are speaking of new social relationships, new ways of living and interacting, new attitudes towards work and leisure and

community.”²⁵ A surrealist- and love-inspired understanding of imagination is thus perfectly situated for the task of dismantling the violence within federal sex education by creating an environment within which radical imagination might bloom.

There is a sense of utopianism at play here that deserves attention. Kelley’s work is explicitly utopian in nature insofar as it understands the relationship between imagination and political change as located in the possibility of imagining new futures. The creation of different worlds depends first on being able to imagine them. As Kelley argues,

Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way. It is *that* imagination, that effort to see the future in the present, that I shall call “poetry” or “poetic knowledge.”²⁶

As such, radical imagination inaugurates utopian considerations insofar as it requires the creation of different pasts and new futures that we can imaginatively and affectively move ourselves from and into, just as a poem does. It also posits an intimate relationship between the past, present, and future and enacts affective and real changes that spark the need for something different. For Kelley, it is hope that is at stake, and that hope is a collective one. In the following excerpt from his reading of Grace Lee Boggs, Kelley offers a clear description of what the process of utopian imagination might look like:

What we need to do . . . is encourage groups of all kinds and all ages to participate in creating a vision of the future that will enlarge the humanity of all of us and then, in devising concrete programs on which they can work together, if only in a small way, to move toward their vision. In this unique interim time between historical epochs, this is how we can elicit the hope that is essential to the building of a movement and unleash the energies that in the absence of hope are turned against other people or even against oneself. . . . When people come together voluntarily to create their own vision, they begin wishing it to come into being with such passion that they begin creating an active path leading to it from the present. The spirit and the way to make the spirit live coalesce.²⁷

It is this view of utopia, I am arguing, that ought to ground our reimagining of education, and of its relationship to sexuality, in the task of conceiving of nonviolent sexual pedagogies in public schools.

That being said, the specific kind of evocation of utopian thought that I am most compelled by is motivated by Kathi Weeks's understanding of utopian demands, an understanding that I believe aligns well with Kelley's own utopian interests by virtue of their shared use of the idea of hope. Weeks sets out to develop, based significantly on the work of Ernst Bloch and Friedrich Nietzsche, an alternative vision of utopia and hope, more immune to liberal critiques of utopianism as naive. Her aim is to "explore hope as a mode of temporality, a cognitive and affective relation to time and a way to approach the relationships among historicity, presentism and futurity."²⁸ For Weeks, following the work of Bloch, hope is "a cognitive faculty and an emotion" and must be so in order to prompt utopian thinking that is itself both oriented toward *both* the possible and the impossible, the real and the beyond, the "new that is familiar."²⁹ However, this means hoping for what we do not know. Acknowledging this, Weeks argues that if "wanting a different future and making it may not hinge on knowing what it might be," then the affective dimension of hope can act as a political and epistemological force, fueling participation in the project of hope and also the envisioning of the radically different and other future.³⁰ This affective dimension of hope, though, is somewhat paradoxical, because it ultimately asks the subject to "create some distance between the present and the sometimes crushing determinative power of the past in order to be strong enough to will a new future, in which the self we affirm would no longer exist."³¹ The idea of "willing to become otherwise" is thus central to this affective dimension of hope; one must want or desire that which does not exist so that one remains open to the possibility that such a future does not include the self that exists now. Loving and perishing, creation and destruction, guide hope's affective task.³² In tune with each other here, both Kelley and Weeks understand that affirming the role of affect in conceptions of utopia strikes a nerve for some attempting to rationalize utopian possibilities by challenging the assumption that the only *useful* or *rational* view of the future is one that can be analytically described and mapped. Instead, when rooted in epistemological assumptions about the centrality of affect to understanding and knowledge creation, the experiences of contradiction, paradox, and

indetermination can be invaluable in the work of *envisioning*, not *knowing*, what is to come.

The idea of utopian demands, then, emerges as Weeks's way to "stimulate the imagination of what might become rather than nostalgia for what once was; and also mobilize on the basis of hope for a different future, rather than only an outrage and resentment over past and present injustices."³³ This kind of hope itself provokes that Weeks calls "breaks," which do just that: they split off from what we are supposed to cling to. These ideas affirm the concerns with policy-oriented change under interrogation here, as utopian demands project desires that are incapable of being contained by "policy proposals" because they do not need to rationally explain the aims of the break they intend from the present.³⁴ It is the provocation that such demands create, *not* the mere implementation of what has been otherwise articulated as the "way forward." If no policy or reform can ever fully encompass the power and potentiality of the utopian demand, then those invested in the role of education in inciting breaks need not confine themselves to the administrative or curricular demands of our current age of reformism. Instead, we might look to the ways in which we can engage with our students' subjectivity, regardless of, or perhaps even within, current or future policy plans. In this way, a turn toward pedagogies coincides with utopian demands in the move to understand and focus on the everyday educative experiences. If the task is to conceive of nonviolent pedagogies in public schools, then utopian demands become an important source for cultivating the imagination needed to do so.

Hope, not Happiness, not Humanization

The centrality of hope within the kind of utopian demands that I am advocating for here begs an important question, specifically important given its relationship to education, about the *kind* of hope that might foster such demands: Might hope bring us happiness? Education in general, and schooling in particular, so often posits happiness as the intended goal of the experiences it provides that speaking of hope in relation to education makes it particularly susceptible to a kind of optimism that I want to explicitly reject. There is an important difference between the kind of hope that drives radical

utopian imagining and demanding and the kind of hope that constitutes the cruel optimism discussed earlier.

In a discussion for *Women & Performance*, Lisa Duggan shares with José Esteban Muñoz that she is “interested” in the idea shared by a friend that “Hope is the worst thing.”³⁵ Reflecting on this, she writes that “When I think about *hope*, I set it alongside *happiness* and *optimism*, which I immediately associate with race and class privilege, with imperial hubris, with gender and sexual conventions, with maldistributed forms of security both national personal,” which leads her to ask: “Can collective hope without delusion or guarantees generate future possibilities beyond any present expectation? Can those of us without happiness or optimism (however otherwise ecstatic we might nonetheless be) generate collective hope now? Or can such hope be a sop, a con, a misdirection of collective energies?”³⁶ These questions are echoed in what Sara Ahmed writes about “the promise of happiness,” or a “conditional happiness,” a shared object of desire that allows us to “get along” so long as we are “willing and able to express happiness in proximity to the right things.”³⁷ Though each does so differently, both Duggan and Ahmed express a concern for the ways that happiness—and the hopes or promises it carries—enact the very violence that I am arguing sex education makes possible.

Muñoz, sympathetic to the concern, offers a remedy that is similarly valuable in light of this interpretation of sex education: educated hope. Careful to resist creating a “strangling binary between good hope and bad hope,” he argues that educated hope is one that “helps escape from a script in which human existence is reduced.”³⁸ In *Cruising Utopia*, we find a more elaborate explanation of the reasons such a hope matters. Here, Muñoz famously argues that “queerness is not yet here”; instead, it is a “longing that propels us onward, beyond the romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.” The point is, in part, that educated hope is inherently queer because of its political orientation away from the scripts provided by a society structured through violent logics. Educated hope is not a bad-feeling hope, they both argue, as it is better understood in opposition to complacency, or to a riskless acceptance of the “constraints of the present conditions.”³⁹

Of large concern throughout this project is how sex education attempts to enact a kind of subjectification oriented toward the legitimization of violence has been and remains attached to the idea of the human and the process

of humanization. Educated hope, however, also offers a way to crack these attachments and enables the utopian demands I am arguing ought to be considered as pedagogical necessities for those who desire even a less-violent future. This idea of educated hope offered in Muñoz's work therefore helps get us out of some of this humanism.⁴⁰ He writes,

To think the inhuman is the necessary queer labor of the incommensurate. The fact that this thing we call the inhuman is never fully knowable, because of our own stuckness within humanity, makes it a kind of knowing that is incommensurable with the protocols of human knowledge production. Despite the incommensurability, this seeming impossibility, one must persist in thinking in these inhuman directions.⁴¹

Queerness, according to Muñoz, and in line with other Queer of Color critiques, including Ahmed's, is a necessary component of antiviolent utopian thought insofar as it can be used to dismantle normative constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and class, and also insofar as it can push us to imagine nonhuman or inhuman ways of being that transgress each of these categories and thus betray the idea of the human itself. This is why educated hope is also a *critical hope*: it resides in ways of knowing and meaning-making that negate the assumption of Western rationalism that all opposition is acknowledgment and thus impossible. Muñoz therefore helps guide the imagining of alternative sexual pedagogies by offering a view of queer, educated, critical utopian hope that is especially prepared to motivate the construction of utopian demands that might actually destabilize education's relationship to violence.

Stuplimity, Pessimism, and Clandestine Pedagogies

Though I find much that is desirable in Muñoz's educated hope, I want to briefly offer a version of critical hope that is more associated with negative emotions. The danger of aligning hope with normative subjunctivization is always lurking nearby, and the work of clarifying a hope that is unlikely to slide into something akin to Berlant's cruel optimism, or what Terry Eagleton calls the lapse of "hope into self-delusion," is never inherently effective; it is *no* promise. This danger is always haunting hope, threatening to impede the process of imagining alternatives and desiring new futures. Grounding

hope in queerness does not itself protect against this, either. I think this is especially true in educative spaces, wherein the restraints placed on queerness and the orientation towards happiness or other overly “positive” emotions are so endemic and undermine the political possibilities lying in wait in radical hope. Meeting such positivity with “inappropriate” affect is thus a compelling possible response. More accurately, exploring the experiences and arguments of those who respond to positivity in a way that is likely to be perceived by others as “strange” or “wrong” or “abnormal,” not merely “negative,” offers an inciting and exciting glimmer of novelty.

Following Sianne Ngai’s account of what she calls “ugly feelings,” the significance of locating political potential in responses to the world that are incongruent with the norm is helpful in refusing the deeply normative notion of happiness in education. In discussing the “critical productivity” of these “dysphoric affects,” Ngai details how transnational capitalism, with its trend toward affective homogenization around race and sexuality, produces excess and failure, both spaces within which lie lessons about politics.⁴² The harder it gets to see, hear, and sense these failures, though, the more important they become: “The evidence here would suggest that the very effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together—a task whose urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in a [*sic*] increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society—is a prime occasion for ugly feelings.”⁴³ Case in point: *stuplimity*.

Stuplimity references an affective response comprised of two seemingly “antithetical” experiences: shock and boredom.⁴⁴ Indeed, envisioned in relation to aesthetics, and derived from Ngai’s work within literary theory, the concept of *stuplimity* is always political and thus, considering it alongside education’s demand for happiness despite its crumbling existence, is provocative of what might appear in the midst of this crumbling. There is, Ngai notes, a relation to the sublime here, though not just as a shared experience of terror, awe, and/or serenity (following Kant); the sublimity conjured in this aesthetic experience can also evoke an “*inability* of other mental activities, including reason, to overcome an affective state.”⁴⁵ In moments of shock and astonishment, then, experiences of exhaustion, fatigue, and even boredom, or *stuplimity*, can exist, too.

Stuplimity refers, then, to a resistance to romancitizations of the sublime, a resistance that is derived from the fatigue sublime can induce by virtue of its

overwhelming and often incomprehensible nature.⁴⁶ The “dysphoria of shock and boredom,” however, creates what Ngai describes as

an “open feeling” of “resisting being”—an indeterminate affective state that lacks the punctuating “point” of an individuated emotion. In other words, the negative affect of stuplimity might be said to produce another affective state in its wake, a secondary feeling that seems strangely neutral, unqualifies, “open.” . . . Yet in generating a form of “open feeling” in its wake, stuplimity leaves us precisely in a place to [imagine].⁴⁷

And, because of this openness, the almost free for all that is made possible by such fatigue and boredom, “this final outcome of stuplimity—the echo or afterimage produced by it, as it were—makes possible a kind of resistance.”⁴⁸ Stuplimity can open moments of possibility and difference. I want to be careful here: nowhere does Ngai suggest that these moments are signals of “solutions” or secret portholes to new worlds. Her final words on stuplimity are, instead, telling of the breaks it can cause, not its resolutions. She writes of “going limp or falling down” as affective ugliness that requires different attention and praxes than what we are typically prepared for.⁴⁹ That is, in the face of the demand to succumb to the promise of a beautiful and happy future that is offered by sex education, Ngai’s stuplimity points to ruptures and refusals that are likely to seem absurd, nauseating, harmful, and even insane.⁵⁰ But, if we take this work seriously, if we leave open for even a moment the possibility that something different lies in, to call upon Christina Sharpe’s imagery, “the wake,”⁵¹ what else might emerge?

Alas, who am I to say? I, myself, remain embedded in many of the very systems that keep us distant from something different. Academic critique itself, such as what I’ve laid out here, is overwhelmingly limited by the demand for the kind of rationalization that I have described as violent. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten argue in *The Undercommons*, even when housed in academia (perhaps even *especially* when housed here), and even when touted by “critical” scholars, critique “endangers the sociality it is supposed to defend.”⁵² Again, to be clear and careful, my own position in the academy, among other positions that I occupy related to my identity and material experience, undermines my own ability to move beyond critique, in the sense that Harney and Moten point to as necessary, and I have no intention of pretending this is not the case. But, in invoking this work, this destruction of what I have been sold and have bought into as the horizon of critical, radical, academic politics, perhaps

a crack is made somewhere, somehow. Again, Harney and Moten remind us, “it’s evil and uncool to have a place in the sun in the dirty thinness of this atmosphere; . . . the house the sheriff was building is in the heart of a fallout zone.”⁵³ Our reliance, however critical, on sex education policy reform to address systematic violence, in and beyond schooling, is merely a commitment to the illusion of safety, comfort, and progress, and to the luxury promised, that holds up this house and I hope only to do what I can to participate in the cracking of its foundation.

To this end, the ideas of radical imagination, utopian demands, queer critical hope, and a kind of apathetic-to-your-expectations pessimism inspire within me something like a demand for clandestine pedagogies. At least, that is what I desire in my head, in my body, in my experience in the world as a result of the free, spontaneous interplay I have tried to allow them in my engagement with them over the years. I will, of course, change, and so will my relationship to these ideas, and, in the process, my understanding of the quality and content of clandestine pedagogies will also change. And, as promised, I will *not* tell you what to do with this idea. I will not tell you how to define it. I will not tell you what it looks like. I will not tell you anything more than what I already have. Instead, in what follows, I offer potentially motivating ideas, each one suggestive of what might become, somehow, a utopian demand for those driven by a desire, in whatever ways, to bring about different relations between education and sexuality and to do so with a similar pedagogical desire: to become clandestine.