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An Embodied Education: Questioning Hospitality to the Queer

Clio Stearns

“Are you a boy or a girl?” the second grader asks. It is not an unfamiliar question—not to me, not to many of us—but it disarms me each time in this context. I am here to observe one of my own students, a pre-service teacher learning about literacy instruction. The class is busy with their reading workshop; children are lying on scrappy cushions with their feet up on shelves, huddled into cubbies, or sitting at the horseshoe-shaped guided reading table with their teacher. My interrogator is reading from the Nate the Great series and has been tasked with documenting three of Nate’s character traits. She is distracted.

My student looks embarrassed and uncertain. She tends to be anxious when I sit with her, and I’ve tried to handle this by making my presence unobtrusive, but clearly I have failed. My student points down at the chapter book, saying, “Come on, do you think Nate is kind?”

“Is that a boy or a girl?” the child asks again, nodding toward me.

In fact, I’m not a boy or a girl but a woman, a white person, a mother, a lesbian, a graduate student, and a teacher educator. I have short hair and prefer clothes designed for men, and I assume these characteristics are at the root of the conundrum. At the same time, I know, or at least think I know, what the child is asking. Eager to help my student in her moment of uncertainty, I answer, “I’m a girl.” The child is satisfied and resumes reading.

This is an essay about hospitality and the ways we must question frameworks telling us to welcome the queer in educational contexts. I will show how educational scholarship as well as programming for schools, teachers, and students have emphasized the interconnected concepts of hospitality and welcome as a way of keeping queer bodies legislatively, physically, and psychically safe. While acknowledging the importance of hospitality as a starting point, I examine its limits with the hope of showing how it might foreclose the curiosity that surfaced in the example above. I argue that a fundamental problem with hospitality and welcome toward the queer is the way they disembody individual and collective existence.

My goal is not to critique efforts at queering education but rather to offer an alternate vision of the relationship between queerness and education, one that takes the body seriously. An aspect of my aim is indeed to provoke; while I understand that an embodied vision for education is unlikely to come to fruition quickly, I think that urging queer educational discourse and even programming in this direction might create new possibilities for mutual coexistence and discovery.

This article is organized around the concepts of hospitality, welcome, and embodiment. I offer autobiographical interludes that engage with each of these concepts, beginning with analyses and examples of hospitality and welcome and continuing with an articulation of embodiment as a more desirable concept. I close by contemplating future possibilities, wondering whether a turn away from aspirational hospitality might establish a sense of hope for queerness and education by eliciting an ambivalent but steadfast orientation toward the other.

Here I rely on Ahmed's (2006) sense that one purpose of queer theory is the offering up of an orientation rather than an analysis of momentary experience. By considering the ways we are oriented toward thought and to each other, Ahmed explains, we take up a queer way of being and thinking that is willing to live with constant flux and an iteration of queerness that, like education, disrupts a drive toward comfortable stasis.

The research methodology is both conceptual and autobiographical in nature, taking up Salvio's (1990) claim that exploring our own stories as educational artifacts offers meaningful material for theoretical reflection. I also borrow insight from feminist researchers like Lather (1991), recognizing my own positionality as an inescapable contributor to my scholarship. My queerness and my identity as a mother have an obvious and abiding effect on the way I interpret the interactions I describe in this essay. At the same time, my whiteness and socioeconomic privilege provide me with a degree of power that both enables and limits my critique; I reflect on these limitations at various points in the paper.

Hospitality

Hospitality is a concept with great discursive baggage, in large part because it was taken up by Derrida as a way of dealing with questions of otherness, strangeness, and foreignness. In his 1996 seminars on hospitality, Derrida considers hospitality, a term with Latin roots, to be that which the owner or lord of a house or nation may confer. The master must first assert ownership and then may be hospitable to the other, but even then, hospitality has limits embedded in ownership. Because hospitality includes a

giving over of one's self and one's home to the stranger, it is something that cannot be done completely if the underlying ownership is to be maintained.

Derrida describes as unattainable but still conceptually valid, “the law of unlimited hospitality (to give the new arrival all of one's home and oneself, to give him or her one's own, our own, without asking a name or compensation, or the fulfilment of even the smallest condition)” (1996/2000, p. 77). I work with the understanding of hospitality as the assertive, temporary, and ostensibly loving taking-in of the other. It reifies otherness and strangeness and is needed by “exiles, the deported, the expelled, the rootless, the stateless, lawless nomads, absolute foreigners” (Derrida, 1996/2000, pp. 88-89). Hospitality is also needed by hosts, because it renders the foreign less frightening or threatening.

In the context of relating queerness to education, hospitality is explicitly evoked in scholarly work that argues for schools to escape heteronormative and cisgender-normative assumptions embedded in curriculum and practice and take up uncomfortable and even painful conversations. Gilbert (2014) articulates what she calls a “reluctant manifesto” for education as hospitality. Drawing on Derrida, she considers the ethical obligation to talk of sexuality and queerness as part of the educational project. As an example, she presents the tale of a transgender student whose school managed to work through the discomfort generated by her body and identity. According to Gilbert, educators ought to demonstrate their hospitality by recognizing that queerness need not be controversial and accept that anyone who enters a school belongs there.

In a different paper, Gilbert (2006) constructs a call to see hospitality as necessarily emerging from the conflict between what we imagine and what we can do, and to insist that our commitment to justice and human rights does not, and indeed cannot, lie flush with social practices. (p. 33)

Here, she acknowledges conflicts embedded within the concept of hospitality but assumes that it will lead educators along a general path toward justice. Lee (2012) has written similarly of hospitality in the educational context as a way of moving beyond heteronormativity. She describes hospitable situations in which gay mothers are welcomed by early childhood teachers in New Zealand who make space for their experiences and family traditions as part of the curriculum in spite of an overall heteronormative frame. That the word hospitality is largely absent from queer educational work outside of a scholarly context has much to do with the conflation of hospitality with welcome, which I address in the next section.

I find two fundamental and conceptual problems with hospitality as a normative structure. The first is definitional: as Derrida makes clear, hospitality shares a root with hostage, and to be hospitable to the other is to change both the host and the stranger in irrevocable, frightening, and potentially problematic ways. “The host,” he writes, “becomes a retained hostage, a detained addressee” (p. 107). As Westmoreland (2008) explains, “The host has welcomed into his home the very thing that can overturn his sovereignty. In welcoming the new arrival, the host has brought about that which takes him hostage” (p. 7). At the same time, the foreigner, in order to be understood and treated hospitably by the host, must relinquish some of his or her language and the subjectivity it contains: “In what language can the foreigner address his or her question? Receive ours? In what language can he or she be interrogated?” (Derrida, 1996/2000, p. 131).

In absolute hospitality, Derrida maintains, questions are of course unnecessary, but therein lies an important paradox: the foreigner cannot be welcomed if he or she does not grasp something of the language of the person doing the welcoming. A mutual hostage holding begins to unfold, one that undermines absolute hospitality. In Derrida’s understanding, absolute hospitality must be constantly sought, but with an implicit understanding of its limits. Is it then possible for the school to be hospitable to the queer if the queer does not take up the heteronormative language and epistemology of the school?

Another problem with arguments for hospitality is often overlooked. If education owes hospitality to the queer, why does it not owe a similar hospitality to all individuals and communities? Why are we not ethically obliged to construct schools that are hospitable to the anti-Muslim extremist who preaches hate and xenophobia? Why not to the evangelical Christian who insists on damning gays?

Bindewald and Rosenblith (2015) exemplify an assumption widely accepted in academia that there is no such obligation, questioning how the presumably left-wing and secular teacher ought to handle problematic “spontaneous utterances” from students and families of the religious right. Gilbert (2006), in condoning an ethic of hospitality, considers the obligation of curriculum regarding gay marriage to be “to hold open the tensions that contested conversations will provoke” (p. 10). In other words, a discussion of gay marriage must leave space for conflict and diversity of perspective. Yet at what point does the acknowledgement of conflict with an implicit, predetermined, morally right endpoint from the perspective of the school render the real difficulties of any controversy shameful and silent, leading to festering anger and even vitriol?

In other words, the articulation of hospitality as a normative structure assumes an evolutionary chain of sorts and becomes little more than an extension of liberalism that opens its doors of accepting beneficence to a slightly larger range of human behavior but does not confront the truly knotty issues inherent in mutual coexistence.

Allen (2004) has shown how in the history of racial politics as they play out in education, this sort of mandated acceptance of the other ultimately reifies mutual mistrust, forecloses conversation, and misses opportunities to consider the painful sacrifices of privilege and even self required for coexistence amid difference. “Distrust,” she writes, “can be overcome only when citizens manage to find methods of generating mutual benefit despite differences of position, experience, and perspective. The discovery of such methods is the central project of democracy.” This discovery is quite different from that which emerges from even provisional hospitality, for it requires a greater effort at leveling power gradients and an acknowledgment of bias as an extant (if troubling) perspective rather than something that will be gradually overcome with the salve of time.

I do not mean to argue that the school, the teacher, or the individual ought to extend hospitality to people with damaging and even violent behaviors and beliefs, but on a theoretical level, I find it impossible to endorse a hospitality that does not acknowledge its paradoxical liberal assumptions. Jackson (2011) and Noddings (1995) are two very different examples of serious thinkers who have argued that “education... is fundamentally a moral enterprise” (Jackson, p. 92), oriented toward facilitating moral and intellectual discovery rather than foreclosing it because it fails to answer the demands of liberalism. Working with these definitions, we can see that it is precisely the limits of hospitality that can be most educational, for we can learn about ourselves and our capacity to truck with difference when we work with that which disrupts our hospitable impulses.

At bedtime, my daughter wants to know, “What is hell? Are we really going there?” Taken aback, bereft of a simple answer, I wonder where the idea took root. Her best friend told her during math today that our family does not make sense: it is impossible for us to live properly without praying, and likewise impossible that she has two moms and no father. She should pray, her friend told her, to find her father, because he is somewhere out there and we, her mothers, are consigning ourselves to eternal damnation by withholding him from her. I feel an odd calm as I remind her of what she knows about her conception and our family and tuck her in to sleep. The next morning, I ask my daughter’s teacher to talk with me for a moment at drop-off. She is busy, of course, as first graders are squirrely when they get to school. Still, she steps into the hall with me and I repeat what my daughter told me, asking only for some help. She looks stricken. “Did she really say those things?” The teacher promises to speak with the girls and explain that all families are different.

“Here at school, we value all families,” she tells me. She wonders aloud if she ought to speak privately with the parents of my daughter’s friend: “I will tell them that they can believe whatever they want, but that she can’t say such things here at school.” I nod but begin to feel hesitant, worried about what is a real and maybe unusual friendship between two very different children.

The teacher has been hospitable to me, and our interaction has acknowledged both the challenges posed by my family’s queerness and the school’s institutional message that we belong and are not creating undue problems for them. But what about the other family, I wonder? What about the parents who will sit uncomfortably in a conference and be asked by a figure of authority to quiet their seven-year-old daughter? What about the message they will receive that their beliefs are private—tolerable, maybe, but not to be brought to school? Most importantly, what about the recognition that the two girls might be unalterably strange to one another yet find a game to play at recess? The game does not make the difference easy, but does that mean they should not be allowed to play? I was the one who brought it to the teacher, though. I could not have reasonably expected more.

When school personnel are required, practically legislated, to be hospitable to the queer, certain conversations are foreclosed before they have a chance to materialize. The evangelical fundamentalist Christian is put to shame in this context, as is anyone who questions the basic precept that “it’s okay to be gay.” This is a difficult argument to make, for there is no level on which schools ought to let hateful language or even hateful thought go unchecked. But nor does telling teachers or children they may not talk a certain way in school do anything to ameliorate those thoughts or to address the question of how very different people might coexist without hiding or compromising aspects of themselves, or perhaps most importantly, allow for genuine curiosity and moral discovery. A vision of education that allows for hostility and hate to exist openly, as artifacts for study and discussion but never to be legislated away or brushed aside, is a less hospitable vision, to be sure—but it is a more educational one, with greater potential for discovery of new truths and construction of knowledge inaccessible to preceding generations.

Welcome

The major distinction between welcome and hospitality is the connotation of pleasure embedded in welcome. To be welcoming, an individual or school must not only be hospitable but must do so while experiencing joy and internal warmth (Merriam-Webster, 2015). Mandated positive affect has left its mark in other educational areas, including the ubiquitously taught “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006; Dweck, 2015) and the myriad social-emotional learning programs that aim to teach students about

“managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals” (CASEL, 2015). This “hegemonic positivity” (Stearns, 2015) mandates that we not only get along with one another but feel incessantly good about it and train ourselves out of experiencing socially unacceptable feelings. To welcome the queer is to let queer bodies exist in a space that does not belong to them but whose host is pleased that they are there and will not acknowledge, indeed may not even experience, any ambivalence about their presence.

Welcome is seen in the titles and missions of such organizations as Welcoming Schools, a project of the Human Rights Campaign, which offers “keys to success” for schools interested in “embracing family diversity, creating LGBTQ-inclusive schools, preventing bias-based bullying, supporting transgender and gender-expansive students.” “Welcoming schools,” the website explains, “empower children rather than limit them” and “provide students the opportunity to learn and succeed” (HRC, 2012).

Teaching Tolerance, the magazine of the Southern Poverty Law Center, includes welcome among its “best practices (for) creating an LGBT-inclusive school environment”; it publishes a poster that reads, “This school welcomes...students of all races and ethnicities/ students with diverse abilities/ students who are LGBT/ students of all family structures/ students who are English language learners... YOU!” (SPLC, 2016).

The Welcome Friend Association is another group that draws upon the importance of welcome; it runs seminars and programming to “educate and promote awareness in society regarding gender, sexual identities and expressions” and conducts training for faith-based communities to learn to “become more welcoming and inclusive, particularly of LGBTQ2SA persons” (WFA, 2014). The concept of welcome is widespread among organizations seeking to play a role in determining the relationship between queerness and education, functioning as an iteration of hospitality that is perhaps more anxious and more comprehensible to a public longing to improve itself.

Like hospitality, welcome positions the queer as a permanent outsider, but in this case one whose identity as guest is evocative of self-satisfied pleasure for the educational host. More explicitly than hospitality, welcome attempts to legislate pleasure and particularly the taking of pleasure in the other.

What becomes of accounts of queerness that assert that queer identities are lives lived in relation to shame and negative affect? As Love (2007) writes, “Not only do many queers, as I suggest, feel backward, but backwardness has been taken up as a key feature of queer culture” (p. 11). To the extent

that this is true, welcoming the queer in education undermines their very queerness, replacing it with a mandatory bringing of joy. The queer is the feel-good body in this formulation, the eternal child whose presence reminds a host how much better the world is constantly becoming.

Embodiment

I sit in a meeting with the two principals of the schools where my undergraduate students will be conducting their practicum. We have gone over their schedules and the names of the teachers they are working with. I explain some of my hopes and goals for the practicum, and they share some of the curricular changes they have been working on. Then one of them asks, “Is it a good group?”

I have only met the student teachers twice but already feel impressed; I say that they are knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and curious. “Are they all girls?” one principal wonders. I tell her what I know of the demographic breakdown, wondering whether my 22-year-old students would indeed identify that way.

The principal whose office we are in glances worriedly at her clock. I ask if there is anything else they want me to know before we adjourn. “No,” one principal says. “Well... just one thing. Make sure you talk to them about professional dress.” The other nods in vigorous agreement. “No yoga pants,” she puts in, “we don’t let our teachers wear them either.” I jot this down and she continues. “And... I don’t know how to put this, but... they should watch the cleavage. The tight pants. It’s... distracting. Especially for our fifth grade boys. Just... remind them they are professionals.” Not knowing what else to do, I nod my assent.

It is my daughter’s second day of school and she is upset when I pick her up. “Leila said something really bad about you,” she tells me. “She said you’re a man. She said you have short hair and no boobs and you’re a man. She said, “Ha ha, your mom is a man. And then she told me not to tell you.”

I go twenty rounds that night in my mind and talk with the teacher the next morning. Later that day, I get an email from the assistant principal. She met with my daughter and Leila, she writes, and Leila apologized; they went back to class looking happy. She reminded Leila that it’s never okay to say something about another person’s body at their school. The takeaway message from this incident, she tells me, is, “That’s Body Talk. And we don’t do that here.”

Education, like many aspects of social and cultural life, places bodies in close proximity to one another. The two principals took the risk of recognizing this, but anxiously and through an intense lens of

worried heteronormativity. All bodies ought to be covered up and decentralized; the queer body, however, does not exist. No one needs to worry about the fifth-grade girl who is staring down her student teacher's bra; this is unmentionable and even unthinkable. The principals implicitly asked me to ensure the erasure of heterosexual desire as we brought my students into contact with theirs, but simultaneously reified just such desire as the presumptive norm. That children—perhaps boys in particular—are in some sense dirty, excessively sexual, fearsome, is assumed but not to be mentioned in this rendering; even more silenced, though, is the idea that girls might long for other girls, or that boys might turn shamefully away, or that my students might have bodies that defy easy categorization.

That school is a place where the body is alternately disavowed or approached with the greatest of anxiety is not a new observation (e.g., Silin, 1995; Taubman, 2011; Tobin, 2007). Here though, I would like to show that discourse placing hospitality and welcome at the fore widens a gulf between children and adults, works counter to educational purposes, and makes hostage of the queer in addition to the host in education.

The most insidious way that queer identities are held hostage by a hospitable norm is via a process of disembodiment. Of course queer people and communities construct our identities based on a number of characteristics, beliefs, and sensibilities. But how can we ignore the fact that on some level queerness is, as Winterson's (1992) eponymous novel reminds its readers, "written on the body"—connected with feelings about and within our physical selves? When curriculum describes the gay person as a sort of sexless creature with bountiful love for someone with the same gender label, describes the transgender individual as someone whose "gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth" (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2015), when it instructs adults who are answering "What is gay?" to "focus on love and relationships" (HRC, 2012), it contributes to a disavowal of the body, of sex, and of desire.

Under the mandates of hospitality and welcome, it is understandable to address hateful language like Leila's by silencing it; after all, it is frightening and deeply unwelcoming to critique the queer's body or to consider the simultaneous potential queerness of Leila herself as child comfortable talking casually about "boobs." A less hospitable response to this event might allow the two girls to talk to each other frankly, each explaining her understanding of the body, the mother, the negative emotions that a confusing body can evoke. "Body talk" is quite possibly not welcoming, but if it does not happen, where do questions and anger about otherness in general go for children, and what becomes of curiosity? There is a deeply problematic epistemological message here, for the repression of curiosity,

discomfort, and sexuality is strikingly anti-educational. Questions of racial and economic privilege, both of which my daughter carries in relation to Leila, become similarly silenced via the process of disembodiment, and both questions and lessons about intersectionality and power are left unspoken.

When sex itself is held in such low regard by the school, the queer, though welcomed, is hostage. Queer identities are discussed in educational settings as void of bodily existence. This is how we are rendered safe and likable—but sanitized. Much as the education that allows for hostility to stay, even fester, gets worked through but not worked on, an education that is more embodied is not a hospitable one.

I find myself at times the ideal figure to be welcomed: a married, white, educated lesbian with two children, who volunteers at bake sales and feels comfortable e-mailing teachers. Yet this version of myself requires significant internal sacrifice—the erasure of my body and the ways it has defined my identity and life. I wish not to be welcomed in that particular way. The very concepts of hospitality and welcome have bodily metaphors rife with risk: What does it mean for a body to be absolutely hospitable to another? How can we ask this of each other without acknowledging desire and aggression?

Toward Discomfort

What then, is the relationship between education and queerness I propose, if not a hospitable one? It is more negative than anything we currently have, and it focuses less on maintaining individual happiness and conflict-free classrooms. To articulate the vision I am considering, I return to the autobiographical excerpts at the beginning of this essay. The second-grade child asks about my gender. My student looks on, embarrassed, recognizing that there is something vaguely unsuitable about posing the question, which is both derisive and evocative of the body. The child has not yet internalized these norms. If moments like these are allowed to extend as beginnings of curriculum, we can find a place where queerness—as interconnected with sex and the body and education—can intersect, a site for ongoing moral discovery and the troubling of previously held assumptions.

I do not mean sitting children down for a one-off lecture on why it's okay for girls to have short hair. It does mean relentlessly probing assumptions about the morality we draw on in encounters with the other and bringing internalized aggression, drive, and frustration to the fore of the educational project. It also means using words like vagina and masturbation in school, acknowledging that neither our minds nor those of the students are floating vessels without corporeal selves. Listening to each

other, watching each other, thinking about each other, and talking to each other: these are not original ideas, but in the context of mandated affects and legislated welcome, they have the potential to seem revolutionary.

An embodied and inhospitable education takes up moments of questioning, curiosity, meanness, and discomfort as sites for exploration and discovery. It does not mandate acceptance of the queer but requires careful articulation and analysis of rejection. This version of education cannot be codified into a packaged curriculum of welcome; instead, it interconnects autobiography, embodiment, and emotion and requires that teachers listen to each other, families, and students without predetermined liberal ideals. It requires speaking the body, noticing the body, and maintaining an albeit uncomfortable awareness of the ways bodies and identities constantly intersect.

This vision of education is a hopeful one whose hope lies precisely in its negativity. It is by turning away from false visions of legislated positivity, absolute hospitality, and ever-cheerful welcome of the queer that we can allow education to entail seeking and creativity. It is by turning away from an acceptable but disembodied vision of queer individuals and communities that we can make space for queerness in schools and in education. Taubman (2000) implores educators to let go of the desire to cure or rescue, to sit with the pain that compels us to reach for quick reforms...to reframe the standards in terms of our ability...to articulate and reflect on what we are feeling and experiencing, to face the terrors that gnaw at us, and to work through the fantasies that structure our existence (p. 31).

Acknowledging the limits of hospitality and learning within these limits is potentially more frightening than declaring hospitality as a normative goal, because this acknowledgment releases an idealistic vision of acceptance and smoothness. An inhospitable answer to “What’s gay?” might be “What do you think it is?” or it might be, “Some people think it’s one way of wanting another person’s body,” or it might be, “Some people think it’s a way of being that means you’re going to hell.” Only by allowing these understandings to be articulated and explored can the violence that sometimes underlies them be mediated and contained. An inhospitable answer to “Are you a boy or a girl?” might be “Why do you ask?” or “Well, I have a vagina,” or “What do those words mean to you?” or “Is there something about me that makes you wonder?” Are these answers defensive, damning, evocative of discomfort? Certainly. Yet to forge a continuing relationship between education and the queer, we must turn toward this discomfort and away from legislated responses that force us to cover up what we really mean or that circumvent placing opposition at the fore.

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