

Queer QBodies

sexualities, genders, & fatness in physical education

Heather Sykes

Heather Sykes

Queer Bodies

Sexualities, Genders,
& Fatness in Physical Education



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sykes, Heather Jane.

Queer bodies: sexualities, genders, and fatness in physical education /
Heather Sykes.

p. cm. — (Complicated conversation; v. 36)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Physical education and training—Canada. 2. Gay youth—Canada—
Social conditions. 3. Overweight teenagers—Canada—Social conditions.
4. Human body—Social aspects—Canada. I. Title.

GV225.A1S95 613.7086'64—dc22 2010033976

ISBN 978-1-4331-1162-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-4331-1161-7 (paperback)

ISSN 1534-2816

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data is available
on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

Cover design by Zeena Hamzeh

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council of Library Resources.



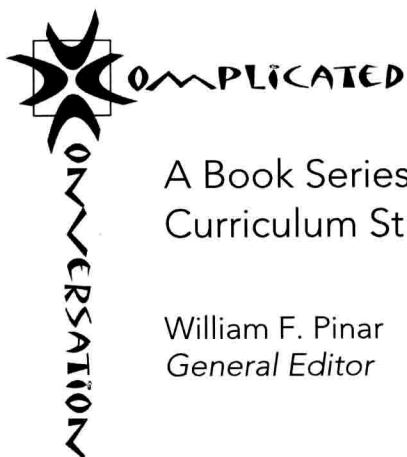
© 2011 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York
29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

All rights reserved.

Reprint or reproduction, even partially, in all forms such as microfilm,
xerography, microfiche, microcard, and offset strictly prohibited.

Printed in the United States of America

Queer Bodies



A Book Series of
Curriculum Studies

William F. Pinar
General Editor

VOLUME 36

The Complicated Conversations series is part of the Peter Lang Education list.
Every volume is peer reviewed and meets
the highest quality standards for content and production.



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

For Nan and Manal

who teach me to

read and move

in this world

Acknowledgments

First, I am extremely grateful and eternally indebted to all the people who shared their perspectives and experiences during interviews for this project. Without your willingness to share your voices, perspectives and politics this project would not have happened. I hope that I managed to, at least, come part way towards representing your perspectives and contributions in ways that resonate with and respect your intentions.

Second, this project would not have materialized without a research and interview team of inspirational, politicized and radical educators and activists at OISE. I deeply acknowledge the contributions made by each member of the SSHRC Queer Bodies Research Team, Tonya Callaghan, Shaindl Diamond, Tammy George, Deborah McPhail, Vanessa Russell, Ricky Varghese, Michael Wallner and Les Marple. I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to have worked with you all at various stages of this project, and to have learned so much from each one of you. Without each of your insights and political commitments, the project would not have followed the routes it did and this book would not have taken the directions and detours it has. In particular, I would like to recognize Deborah McPhail's contribution to my theoretical understanding of feminist fat theories and her major contribution in co-authoring chapter four. Also, I would like to thank Ricky Varghese and Shaindl Diamond, who conducted most of the interviews discussed in chapter five. Your involvement was vital and transformative in this project. I know I have been blessed by your collective and individual presence in the graduate programs at OISE, and it has been my honor to work with each of you in different ways on this project.

Also, I owe gratitude to the students who have taken my graduate course Queer Theories, Bodies and Curriculum for the ways, over the ten years of the course, you have contemplated, dialogued, critique and extended my understanding about the potentials, limits and ethics of queering theory and embodiment. This course has been the most significant theoretical space of my own thinking about the ideas in this book. I thank each of you for the often deep and ethical work of engaging with my offerings, vulnerabilities and transferences in that course.

My own ideas and politics have been nurtured and extended by the vibrant conversations with many friends and colleagues. My thinking for this book has been buoyed by political and intellectual conversations with the following friends and colleagues—Bernadette Baker, Natalie Beausoleil, Deborah Britz-

man, Jayne Caudwell, Gill Clarke, Katie Fitzpatrick, Janice Forsyth, Michael Gard, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, Katherine Jamieson, Kerrie Kauer, David Kirk, Vicky Krane, Pirkko Markula, Lance McCready, Mary McDonald, Lauren Moromoto, Sheila Scraton, Geneviève Rail, Mary Lou Rassmussen, Jan Wright. Special thanks to Larry Locke and Inez Rovegno for your insightful, adventurous and patient discussions of sections of this work that were presented at AERA. Also, tremendous thanks to the fat-positive physical educators in the Western Society for Physical Education of College Women who hosted me at the Asilomar conference—Laura Chase, Terry Coblentz, Shelley Lucas, Maureen Smith and Rita Liberti. Beyond the edges of these pages, I have been nurtured by ongoing conversations with Jennifer Chapman and Anne Swedberg about how to bring the ethnographic toward performance and drama. In many different ways, I value how each of our intense encounters or meandering exchanges seeped into my thinking and acting, often belatedly and across distances.

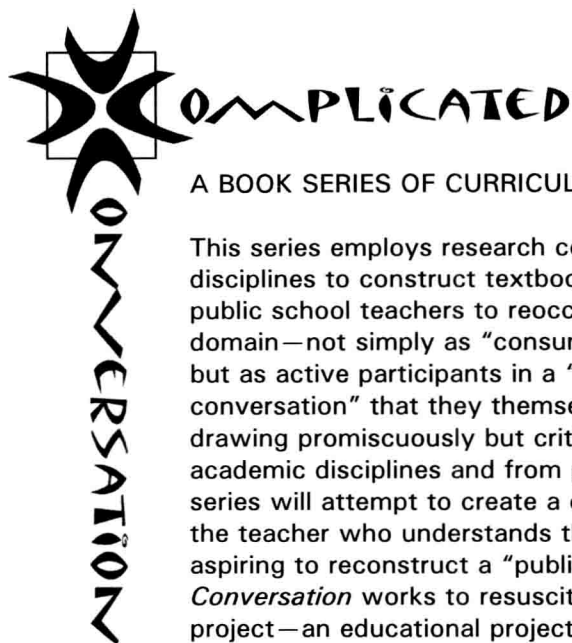
For both his institutional and intellectual support of my work, I am indebted to Dennis Thiessen, who, from the beginning, understood and protected my teaching and researching of queer theory as physical education curriculum studies. Thanks to Joannie Halas, who guided me through the grant application process with freely given mentoring and political insight. My thanks also go to Frances Tolnai for your wonderful formatting, mentoring my editorial abilities. Also, my warmest thanks to Zeena Hamzeh for the artful cover design and our wonderful conversations about bodies, images and books.

Heartfelt thanks to my giving and forgiving friends in Toronto, Louise Cowin and Nicky Monahan, for being such patient and genuine friends. You have been savvy archives and advisors for my journeys into, and beyond, this book. I have relied deeply on Tara Goldstein for friendship, mentorship and unwavering collegial support throughout this project, especially when I needed to work through doubts and setbacks. Thank you all for being there, time and time again. From the beginning, my mother, Nan, has nurtured my curiosity, movements and confidence with a love wider than the heather moors. I could not have found my way, nor my questions, without feeling your compassionate presence throughout my life. Thank you to my partner, Manal Hamzeh, for nourishing my work throughout our movements and translations, for breathing wisdom into our ethical encounters, and for sliding joy between every page. Without your hand on my back, I would not have reached these in/conclusions. *Inti omri.*

For permission to print the following article, I thank both Deborah McPhail and the Editors of the *Sociology of Sport Journal*:

Sykes, H. & McPhail, D. (2007). Unbearable lessons: Contesting fat phobia in physical education. Special Issue on Social Construction of Fat, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25, 66-96.

I would also like to acknowledge the research support provided by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto in Canada, and the funding granted by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).



A BOOK SERIES OF CURRICULUM STUDIES

This series employs research completed in various disciplines to construct textbooks that will enable public school teachers to reoccupy a vacated public domain—not simply as “consumers” of knowledge, but as active participants in a “complicated conversation” that they themselves will lead. In drawing promiscuously but critically from various academic disciplines and from popular culture, this series will attempt to create a conceptual montage for the teacher who understands that positionality as aspiring to reconstruct a “public” space. *Complicated Conversation* works to resuscitate the progressive project—an educational project in which self-realization and democratization are inevitably intertwined; its task as the new century begins is nothing less than the intellectual formation of a public sphere in education.

The series editor is:

Dr. William F. Pinar
Department of Curriculum Studies
2125 Main Mall
Faculty of Education
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z4
CANADA

To order other books in this series, please contact our Customer Service Department:

(800) 770-LANG (within the U.S.)
(212) 647-7706 (outside the U.S.)
(212) 647-7707 FAX

Or browse online by series:

www.peterlang.com

Contents

Acknowledgments.....	ix
1 Introduction	1
2 Sexualities: See(m)ing Normal	19
3 Genders: Beyond Girls and Boys	35
4 Fatness: Unbearable Lessons.....	49
5 Teachers: Love and Loathing	75
6 Phantasy, Imaginary and Anxiety.....	89
7 Curriculum Reform and Body Ethics.....	105
Appendix A.....	119
Appendix B.....	123
Appendix C.....	125
Notes	129
Bibliography.....	133
Index	151

Introduction

Queer Bodies in Physical Education explores how students negotiate heterosexism, transphobia and fat phobia in physical education. The book illuminates how students form embodied subjectivities within particular constellations of ableism, heterosexism, racism and body discrimination during physical education within Canadian schools. The book offers a new way of thinking about the connections between physical activity, student embodiment and these forms of discrimination in physical education. It is based on participants' narratives about how they experienced their bodies during physical education and their adult insights about how they would change physical education practices in schools. Chapters in the book oscillate between re-narrating students' experiences and identifying the wider institutional discourses in which students' subjectivities are recognized, misrecognized or erased. This book also draws attention to the importance of psychic phantasies and anxieties about the body, normalcy, athleticism and health. Thinking about heterosexism, transphobia and fat phobia in both social and psychic terms aims to open up new ethical questions about curriculum reform, inclusive teaching and more expansive politics of the body for the future physical education professionals. Ultimately, the book offers an analysis of the how discrimination against queer bodies¹ in physical education serves to maintain widely held illusions about healthy and normal bodies.

The 2001 National School Climate Survey reported that 68% LGBT students felt unsafe in U.S. schools because of their sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2001). In physical education, middle and high schools students experience homophobic and heterosexist behaviors on a daily basis (Morrow & Gill, 2003). In some sport and physical education contexts, lesbian and gay sexualities have been gradually recognized and offered some protection from discrimination. Overt homophobia is, perhaps sporadically, being addressed through formal and informal education and social changes. Nevertheless, heterosexuality is still the privileged and normative sexuality expected of most students. Bisexuality remains a confusing and diminished subject position. Homophobic attitudes about lesbian girls and women, especially if they are too

masculine, still seem commonplace within physical education settings while gay male sexuality is all too frequently used as a put down or slur. There are too few physical education places where gay and lesbian students and teachers are encouraged to come out, or where homophobia is directly addressed as a problem.

Gender issues have been a central concern throughout the history of physical education. 'Gender equity' has been the central way of challenging sexism, discrimination and advocating for equal opportunities. Yet, ironically, gender equity has also been a highly normative discourse. When gender equity is limited to binary ideas about boys and girls, or male and female, it can actually work as a very normative and exclusionary discourse for trans and gender non-conforming students. The debate about co-education versus single-sex groups in physical education actively works to ignore the needs of trans and gender-queer students. Gender non-conforming students have to deal with emotional and physical violence each time they get changed for physical education or sport in boys' and girls' locker rooms. Even the skilled movements of the human body, perhaps the very essence of physical education, are continually labeled as masculine or feminine.

Being transgender or doing one's gender differently is hard in most schools. In the United States, 89% transgender students felt unsafe because of their gender expression (GLSEN, 2001). Within Toronto schools in Canada, where this study was located, feminine boys and masculine girls reported harassment more frequently than feminine lesbians and masculine gay boys because the former group had gender self-presentations that differed from heterosexual norms (Rice & Russell, 2002). Yet, being trans is especially difficult in physical education because binary discourses about gender permeate so many aspects of the profession from ideas about the body, the curriculum and even the built environment. The book provides narratives about variations and, sometimes changes, in students' gender identities. These narratives give a sense of the risks, assaults and discrimination facing students in physical education whose gender expression or identity falls outside the norms for either becoming a boy/man or a girl/woman. In most physical education contexts it is still very rare, if not impossible, for students to decide about, develop and live their transgender subjectivities.

The notion that people have more than two forms of gendered bodies is a very marginal discourse in physical education. The problem is not merely a matter of a lack of information about transgender, transsexual or intersex people and not knowing how to provide support for gender non-conforming students and teachers. These are important factors, of course; however, I suggest the notion of more than two categories of gender causes considerable psychic

anxiety for the profession. So many aspects of gender need to be reconsidered and reevaluated once the limitations of binary gender are recognized. That is, normal ways of doing gender, of being male or female, are at stake. This implicates everybody, most especially those bodies and discourses which have never paid attention to the privileges of doing gender normally. The lack of understanding about, and resistance to embracing, gender diversity indicates a high degree of transphobia within physical education as a profession. When transgender experiences and issues are silenced, dismissed and even denied I argue that, in psychic terms, this indicates that a widespread 'transphobic imagination' has a hold in physical education.

Issues of body size have preoccupied physical educators at different times over the past century. In the mid-1980s critical scholars warned about a 'cult of slenderness' in physical education. Twenty-five years later, physical education is in the grip of a discourse warning about an 'obesity epidemic' affecting children worldwide. Students who are perceived to be overweight or fat rarely have positive learning experiences in physical education classes. Racialized youth, especially girls, experience varying degrees of estrangement or disembodiment in physical education lessons (Williams & Bendelow, 1998), and the majority of women in the United States reported being dissatisfied with the size and shape of their bodies (Cash & Henry, 1995; Cash, Winstead & Janda, 1986). In fact, Deborah McPhail and I suggest that physical education is typically an unbearable lesson for most fat and overweight students, just as Susan Bordo (1993) showed that being fat is an unbearable weight in mainstream contemporary Western and North American cultures. McPhail elucidates how the current discourse about an obesity epidemic rests upon other taken-for-granted, yet, spurious discourses: fatness is equated with being unhealthy; fatness is all too readily equated with being unfit; the human body is thought of as a machine, in which fatness is a causal result of metabolic calculation between eating (energy-in) and exercise (energy-out). Many more discourses gender fat as feminine, racialize fat bodies as non-white and, in mainstream gay male communities construct the fat body as un-gay. All too frequently, these commonsense cultural ideas about fat bodies filter down and are played out within physical education classes. This book illustrates how students who identified themselves as overweight or fat dreaded physical education and found it almost impossible to create a livable fat subjectivity in this area of schooling.

Many educational critics, such as Jones, Bennett, Olmsted, Lawson and Rodin (2001) suggest that adult role models—including parents, teachers, coaches—who treat those who are overweight with scorn and disdain contribute to the problem; indeed, Canadian sport policy explicitly states that physical education teachers can positively influence self-esteem by rejecting all dis-

crimination based on gender, race, age, ethnicity, body size, ability or sexual orientation (CAAWS, 2004). However, the call for teachers to be positive role models and simply reject discrimination fails to acknowledge that psychic investments in self-other relations make discrimination a difficult social dynamic to fully eradicate (Britzman, 1992; Kumashiro 2001). This book goes beyond the customary explanation of role modeling to investigate how psychic dynamics between students and teachers complicate the process of body-based discrimination. Chapter five examines the psychic impact of teachers on the formation of students' embodiment, taking into account the intersecting effects of racialized heterosexism, ableism and body-based discrimination.

Yet, difficult as it was for many people with non-normative sexualities, genders and body sizes who were interviewed for this book to feel valued and be taught well during physical education, their recollections do provide valuable insight into how they negotiated these highly oppressive ideas about gender, sexuality and fatness. Their narratives document how some students managed to avoid or resist the heterosexism, the transphobia and fat phobia that confronted them during physical education. The book seeks to place the experiences of students who were marginalized because of their body size, their gender and/or their sexuality in the surrounding context of what the profession of physical education regards as normal, educational and healthy. Thus, the analytic focus turns from the individual distress experienced by countless students during physical education to the institutionalized discourses that define and confine what counts as a normal body, a queer body and ultimately an unintelligible body. I argue that to understand social change in physical education we need to consider not only the social but also the *psychic* aspects of bodily difference.

Each chapter poses questions about what is at stake, in psychoanalytic terms, in these boundaries and limits between normal and queer bodies. Questions such as: How are anxieties about health and nationalism read into the sexuality and size of bodies at school? Why does a student who transitions from male to female seem to endanger, rather than enrich, mainstream masculinity or femininity? How does the fat body both enable and jeopardize commonsense notions about the healthy body? What does physical education imagine to be the ideal, the educable and impossible forms of embodiment that give the profession its very *raison d'être*? Towards the end of the book I contend that, in psychic terms, the profession of physical education has a phantasy of the athletic and healthy child that relies upon, even as it excludes, the presence of queer bodies.

Acknowledging the importance of the unconscious, with its phantasies and anxieties, within physical education opens up new types of ethical ques-

tions. For instance, how do some students and teachers come to recognize intersecting forms of discrimination and, furthermore, go on to develop different body politics? Why do some teachers and students become lodged in, and others dislodged from, their normative subject positions of whiteness, fitness, healthy citizenship and straightness? Individual commitments to social justice are not neatly or solely determined by social identities and identity politics. Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2003) who call for:

a rigorous awareness of the constructing activity of social processes and an equally potent analysis of the agentic struggles of individual subjects, that is needed in order to explore how specific subject positions come to be held. (p. 41)

This is a matter of seeking insight into how subjects—as teachers, as students—become inscribed in racialized discourses of sexism, gender and bodily discrimination but are never entirely determined by these normalizing forces. Body politics, and pedagogical ideals maneuver around, and are maneuvered by, psychic dynamics.

The book provides a groundbreaking account of normative imaginaries about the moving body. The chapters that follow provide new ideas about the whitened transphobic, heteronormative and fat phobic imaginaries that haunt the physical education profession. I show how the ways in which the body is imagined, and idealized, plays a crucial role in maintaining the illusions of compulsory heterosexuality, unremarkable whiteness, everyday able-bodiedness and healthiness. One of the implications of this, in psychic terms, is that queer bodies are needed by, and continually produced by, mainstream views about the body within physical education. Suriya Nayak (2009) writes about how an external object, such as the racialized Other, may be filled with not only racist anxieties but also a host of other psychic anxieties. This book articulates how queer bodies in physical education are sites for the projective identifications of so many psychic anxieties about the body. I hope to encourage physical educators to think about what exceeds sociological and poststructural insights, by taking up recent work that places psychoanalysis in relation to postmodern social theory (Elliott, 1996). Thus, my motivation for writing *Queer Bodies in Physical Education* is to offer new interpretations about what is at stake, both socially and psychically, in the forms of heterosexism, transphobia and fat phobic that are commonplace in physical education. I hope this will complicate the conversation about curriculum reforms in physical education about how to value, respect and educate students with ‘queer bodies.’

Theoretical Framework of the ‘Queer Body’

Embodied Subjectivity

The theoretical framework takes into account how students form subjectivities, how their subjectivities materialized through the body and how power relations permeate bodily subjectivities in both social and psychic ways.

Embodiment refers to a “certain mode of being in one’s body and of living that body” (Benhabib, 1992). The term ‘body image’ is also commonly used to refer to a person’s feeling about their body although it has specific meanings within neurology (Head, 1920; Schilder, 1950), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), psychoanalysis (Freud, 1914, 1923; Lacan, 1977) and contemporary feminist body studies (Grosz, 1994; Weiss, 1999). Embodiment is a broader concept involving biological, social and psychic processes (Weiss, 1999). *Embodied subjectivity* refers to the intersections between the body, the unconscious and identity. Embodied subjectivity is constructed within a normative gender-sex system (Benhabib, 1992; Prosser, 1998) that is racialized (Eng, 2001) and overvalues productive, thin bodies (Bordo, 1993; Evans, 2004; McRuer, 2004).

Identification plays an important role in the development of subjectivity. Simply put, identification refers to “how we make ourselves through and against others” (Luhmann, 1998: 153) and relate to others on the basis of our psychic histories and social locations. The theories about identification used in the book are informed by theorists such as Franz Fanon (1994), Homi Bhabha (2004), Adam Phillips (1997), Judith Butler (1993, 1997), Jan Campbell (2000), Kaja Silverman (1995), David Eng (2001) and Jay Prosser (1998), all of whom have reworked Freud’s early work about identification to take into account the complex intersectionality of racialized sex/gender and other social relations. There has been considerable scholarly interest in the unconscious aspects of student-teacher relationships (Britzman, 1998a; Benjamin, 1995, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; McWilliam, 1999; McWilliam & Taylor, 1996; Pitt, 1996; Todd, 1997) and identification has been an emergent theme within discussions of queer pedagogy (Britzman, 1998b; Luhmann, 1998; Pinar, 1998). Psychoanalytic studies of identification, therefore, have the potential to provide more complex understandings about the impact teachers have on students than role modeling research that focuses only on conscious aspects.