SEXING THE TEACHER: SCHOOL SEX SCANDALS AND QUEER PEDAGOGIES
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SEXING THE TEACHER: SCHOOL SEX SCANDALS AND QUEER PEDAGOGIES

Sheila L. Cavanagh
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REVIEWED BY MARY J. HARRISON

In *Sexing the Teacher: School Sex Scandals and Queer Pedagogies*, Sheila L. Cavanagh invites us inside recent sex panics involving white female teachers in Canada, the United States, and Britain, such as Mary Kay Letourneau, Annie Markson, Amy Gehring, and Heather Ingram. Through a sophisticated analysis incorporating psychoanalytic, queer, feminist, film, postmodern, and postcolonial theories, Cavanagh suggests that our collective fascination with white, female teachers who engage in flirtations or sexual contact with "underage" boy students has everything to do with defending against our heteronormative anxieties and queer desires, and very little with concern about actual 'harm' to the boys themselves. In none of these cases did the boys involved identify with the "victim" label enforced upon them by what Cavanagh calls "the master narrative of child sexual abuse." Yet, in spite of the boys' explicit denial of their victim status, their respective teacher-lovers faced personal, professional, and, in some cases, legal reprimands which, according to Cavanagh, exceeded the consequences for men teachers in similar (or non-consensual) cases. Cavanagh's investigation into this phenomenon plunges us into the underbelly of the sanitized, white/colonial, heteronormative social order to reveal a swirling mass of complexities, disavowals, queer desires, and desperate fears.

Much is at stake for education and society when we interrogate school sex panics. As Cavanagh explains, the school is the site where we expect students to be exposed to "a higher order of learning," including the demands of the future-oriented, heteronormative social order and the unjust myriad of exclusions upon which it relies. It is the white, female teacher who is charged with the social reproduction of white, heterosexual norms, ushering her students into what education and the moral majority imagine to be a "proper" future as productive citizens of the nation. When the white, female teacher— positioned in the cultural imaginary as maternal paragon of virtue, pedagogical saviour, and humble servant to the colonial mission—avows and acts upon her non-normative desires she queers the pedagogical encounter, the educational space and mission, developmental time, and what Jan Jagodzinski (2002) calls "the family romance in education." Further, her transgression provides threatening evidence that heteronormativity is culturally, not naturally, mandated.

In a chapter that focuses on lesbian teacher/student relationships, Cavanagh introduces a clever concept she calls "postmodern eugenics." This refers to the moral majority's fear of the "proliferation of queers" through homosexual "contagion" (her use of "eugenics" highlights the colonial and racist overtones of this fear). We may usefully apply this concept to Cavanagh's whole study insofar as the moral panic is partly fuelled by the fear that female teachers who behave in queer ways will inevitably rub off on children whom we imagine (paradoxically) to be both heterosexual and innocent. Importantly, Cavanagh does not condone sex between students and teachers, clearly stating that she considers such infractions unprofessional. Yet she makes the crucial distinction between what is unprofessional and what is criminal. Agreeing that sexual abuse of male and female students unfortunately can and does occur by male and female teachers, Cavanagh nevertheless insists that we must develop ways of thinking beyond the "master narrative of child sexual abuse" to allow that some relationships between students and teachers, if unprofessional, are sanctioned by what she calls "social consent." Students who engage in socially consensual sex with their teachers are hurt not by those relationships, Cavanagh argues, but rather by sensationalized media coverage, official silencing and denial of their sexualities, and enforced separation from their lovers. Concluding her study, Cavanagh reflects on her writing process and the resistance she encountered to her queer analysis of school sex scandals. Courageously, she causes a stir by insisting that the teachers featured in her book ought not be labelled—nor persecuted as—"pedophiles." This chapter demonstrates the insidious workings and discursive restrictions of the moral panic: to the anxious and moral majority unable or unwilling to think beyond its investments in its current "master narratives" and cultural imaginings, Cavanagh's notes on some scandals become scandalous in their own right. Where she calls for the development of a queer pedagogy which embraces the role of Eros in the pedagogical encounter—for "[w]ithout Eros, there would be no incitement to learn or to teach"—the moral majority hears only the threat that Eros seems to pose within the confines of the "master narrative of child sexual abuse." I fear there is currently little room for the kind of radical queer pedagogy that Cavanagh's study wistfully envisions, but certainly *Sexing the Teacher* represents a step in the 'right' direction.

Mary J. Harrison studies Education as a Ph.D. student at York University. She is interested in the social and political functions of moral panics especially as they relate to adult constructions of the innocence of youth, and to sex education in public schools.