'When You Don't See Yourself on the Page, it's Harder to Imagine Yourself as a Person' - Gender and Sexuality in ELT

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Abstract

Despite decades of progressive social reform with regard to LGBTQ protection in many countries around the world, demands that the ELT curriculum addresses queer absence, or LGBTQ erasure, have fallen largely on deaf ears. In this paper I address key issues surrounding representation, identification and erasure, and I explore some of the reasons for the systematic editing out of non-normative genders and sexualities from English language teaching. My contention is that LGBTQ erasure is a double injustice—on the one hand an injustice against LGBTQ people who are denied recognition in the curriculum and on the other an injustice against those who are not LGBTQ and who are denied the opportunity to see the world through different eyes. I conclude by offering some suggestions as to how we might redress this situation.

Keywords: LGBTQ, Representation, Identification, Erasure, ELT

The quotation that I have used in the title of this paper is taken from an interview with the young queer Indonesian poet Norman Erikson Pasaribu, in which he reflects on the kind of books he was able to read when he was growing up:

> As a kid, the books I read portrayed typical heterosexual love. When you don't see yourself on the page, it's harder to imagine yourself as a person. It's like the heteronormativity is pushing everything down—you don't feel comfortable with your body and your being. I want to resist the idea of queer absence. I think absence triggered me to write (Pasaribu in Carpenter, 2019, para. 3).

This raises very vividly a number of issues that I want to address in this paper—namely representation, identification, and erasure, or what Pasaribu refers to as absence and what those of us who work in education can do about it. It is now almost 30 years since Cynthia Nelson (2016) and colleagues convened a colloquium at the 1992 international TESOL conference that the topic of what we might call queer erasure was first addressed in our field. And it is now 20 years since Alistair Pennycook (2001) re-drew our attention to what he called the 'major silence' with regard to sexual orientation in English language teaching. The fact that we are still talking about it today—in a vastly changed world since that of the early 90s—is an indication of the particular challenge that lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) visibility in the curriculum continues to pose for the education sector as a whole. UNESCO (2016) recently produced a report on violence against LGBTQ students in schools drawing on data from 94

countries in both the Global North and the Global South. The executive summary concluded:

- A significant number of LGBT students experience homophobic and transphobic violence in school;
- LGBT students report a higher prevalence of violence at school than their non-LGBT peers;
- Students who are not LGBT but are perceived not to conform to gender norms are also targets; and
- School-related homophobia and transphobic violence affects students' education, employment prospects and well-being (UNESCO, 2016, 14).

My contention here, and indeed the contention of the UNESCO report, is that this state of affairs correlates with the major silence in the curriculum and that as educators we need to think about how we can address this and rise to the challenge it presupposes—difficult though that may be.

I would like to begin then by saying something very briefly about representation and erasure and then to look in some detail at the complex set of factors that contribute to this major silence—some of which were already in place in 1992 and some of which, such as the spread of a dangerous new politics of the right in which gender diversity and non-normative sexuality are key targets, are more specific to the current moment. I will then consider briefly two approaches for addressing queer erasure in the English language classroom.

Let us begin then with representation and erasure. By representation I refer to the multiple semiotic processes whereby meanings are made and received—how individuals, groups, and events etc. are positioned, imaged, and linguistically constructed in the curriculum. These processes are inherently political matters, exemplifying, as Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith (1991, p. 4) put it a *selective tradition*—in which "someone's selection, someone's vision of legitimate knowledge and culture, [...] in the process of enfranchising one group's cultural capital disenfranchises another's." The flip side of representation is erasure, which refers to the systematic editing out of the curriculum of certain categories of person, identities, events, injustices, and histories—as well as varieties of language—for ideological, cultural, or commercial reasons. As Judith Irvine and Susan Gal describe it:

> Erasure is the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away. So, for example, a social group or a language may be imagined as homogenous, its internal variation disregarded. (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 38).

Such practices with regard to particular social groups can serve to make certain topics literally unspeakable in the classroom. In addition to making topics unspeakable, erasure is also a denial of recognition. Recognition has been widely theorised by scholars such as Axel Honneth (1992), Nancy Fraser (1995) and Andrew Sayer (2005), and we know its denial is experienced as a form of symbolic violence by those on the receiving end of it. Pasaribu's comment that the denial of recognition made it harder to imagine himself as a person is a case in point. Honneth (1992, 188–189) comments on this as follows:

> We owe our integrity … to the receipt of approval or recognition from other persons. [Negative concepts such as "insult" or "degradation"] are related to forms

of disrespect, to the denial of recognition. [They] are used to characterise a form of behaviour that does not represent an injustice solely because it constrains the subjects in their freedom for action or does them harm. Rather, such behaviour is injurious because it impairs these persons in their positive understanding of self – and understanding acquired by intersubjective means.

How then is it, we might ask, given the raft of progressive legislation across much of the world, particularly over the last 20 years, that the social revolution this represents, and the recognition it accords, is erased from the English language teaching (ELT) curriculum and indeed from the curriculum generally? It is to that question that I now want to turn.

It seems to me that there are at least four inter-related factors at work here. These are the concepts of 'reproductive futurism' as understood in the work of the queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004); 'hyper-reactionary neoliberalism' as theorised by Nancy Fraser (2017) and also by Wendy Brown (2019) (although she does not use that term); 'postfascism' as described by Enzo Traverso (2019) and my own view of the commercial logic of ELT as a global edu-business with little in the way of any serious educational remit (Gray, 2013). Let us begin with the first of these.

Edelman's book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* argues that the figure of the child, as a symbol of innocence and the embodiment of all that is potentially good and worth preserving about the future has been, and is, repeatedly mobilised in the stigmatisation of the queer as someone who has no investment in the future and whose very existence is an affront to reproductive heterosexual family life, often understood in religious terms. Edelman quotes Donald Wildmon, the founder of the American Family Association, who says:

Acceptance or indifference to the homosexual movement will result in society's destruction by allowing civil order to be redefined and by plummeting ourselves, our children and grandchildren into an age of godlessness. Indeed, the very foundation of Western Civilization is at stake (Edelman, 2004, p. 16).

Unlike gay activists who argue that same-sex partners can also build families and rear children, Edelman invites his readers to consider that Wildmon is in fact speaking the truth, that queers are indeed the enemy. It is only by embracing the ascription of negativity and denying the appeal of futurity entangled with the figure of the child who, he asserts, "remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (p. 3) that the dangers of a politics of assimilation can be avoided. While there are, in my view, serious problems with Edelman's politics—in particular its insistence that "the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past" (p. 31), his understanding of the ways in which the figure of the child is mobilised and made to function politically by the right is astute.

Indeed, as Maria Brock (2019) from the London School of Economics shows, the collection of transphobic and homophobic lobbies found across the world from Brazil to Poland who oppose what they refer to as 'gender ideology,' all focus on the nuclear heterosexual family as the last bastion of protection for the innocence of the child. In Gabriele Kuby's (2015) polemic the child is held to be at risk from a range of forces that include feminists, the United Nations, LGBTQ activists, the European Union, the porn industry, those in favour of sex education in schools—who it is suggested contribute to the inappropriate sexualisation of children—, and finally, singled out for particular mention, the philosopher Judith Butler. Kuby's work is also

interesting in that her adherence to reproductive futurism is articulated with other concerns of the European far right that might not seem to have much to do with gender and sexual diversity. Thus she writes:

> The crisis ensuing from the uncontrolled mass immigration to Europe since autumn 2015, mainly of young Muslim men and primarily to Germany, will reveal the gender agenda to be the delusion of a decadent society and put us back on the solid ground of human reality – man and woman, father, mother, and children. It is the family that sustains human life, especially in times of crisis. The victory of evil only sets the stage for the triumph of good. (Kuby, 2015, p. 280).

Kuby's point seems to be that the very presence of young Muslim men in Europe—while in itself uncontrolled and crisis-provoking—may paradoxically help to unmask the so-called gender agenda for the fraud she believes it to be and return people to the solid ground of heteronormative families. Just what it is about these young Muslim men that will bring people to their senses is not made explicit—but it is clear that the crisis they have provoked needs families if the threat they pose is to be resisted. Here we see a feature common to several of the factors I am focusing on, namely the extent to which they overlap with one another.

And we see this again in hyper-reactionary neoliberalism. This is term used by Nancy Fraser (2017) to refer to the recalibration of neoliberalism ushered in by Trumpism. For Fraser, neoliberalism is understood as entailing an alliance between libertarian and reactionary elements—both equally signed up to the same economic agenda—but in which the libertarian element and the cultural change to which it was committed initially held sway. Thus we see some of the most progressive pieces of legislation with regard to LGBTQ rights—certainly in the UK—being introduced by governments fully committed to economic neoliberalism. Fraser comments on neoliberalism's progressivism as follows:

> Prior to Trump, the hegemonic bloc that dominated American politics was *progressive neoliberalism*. […] The progressive-neoliberal program for a just status order did not aim to abolish social hierarchy but to "diversify" it, "empowering" "talented" women, people of color, and sexual minorities to rise to the top. […] Skewed as it was, this politics of recognition worked to seduce major currents of progressive social movements into the new hegemonic bloc. Certainly, not all feminists, anti-racists, multiculturalists, and so forth were won over to the progressive neoliberal cause. But those who were, whether knowingly or otherwise, constituted the largest, most visible segment of their respective movements, while those who resisted it were confined to the margins (Fraser, 2017, The Hegemony of Progressive Neoliberalism section).

Having proceeded on the basis of a politics of recognition but with no concomitant politics of redistribution—rather one of austerity following the economic crisis of 2007/2008—the ensuing period entailed a recalibration of neoliberalism in which its progressive aspects and those who had visibly benefitted from them— those who had been accorded recognition—came increasingly under attack. Shorn of its libertarian veneer, those forces of reaction are today in the ascendant and increasingly vocal in their condemnation of their project's erstwhile progressivism. Hence we saw the Trump administration's repeated attacks on trans people throughout his presidency. The US National Centre for Transgender Equality listed over seventy actions

against trans people from January 2017 to December 2020. These included the widely publicized ban on membership of the military to less well-publicised actions such as the attempt to remove specific references to trans people from UN human rights documents to the nomination of openly transphobic individuals to the judiciary and other public offices. Similarly, in the UK plans to allow trans people to self-identify as their chosen gender without a medical diagnosis were halted by the Johnson government in 2020 in what was widely seen as capitulation to conservative lobbying and a largely hostile media.

The idea that democracy might be the problem and in need of some kind of authoritarian reset and that certain kinds of liberty—deemed excessive—that have accompanied it in recent times it might in fact be a form of slavery (Kuby, 2015) raises the spectre of fascism. This, as Enzo Traverso (2019, p. 178) points out, was in its early to mid-twentieth century European guise, "born as a reaction against democracy" and it is to his thesis that I now turn.

In his recent book *The New Faces of Fascism: populism and the far right*, Traverso (2019) states that the rise of extreme right-wing, xenophobic, nationalist parties characterised also by their homophobia and transphobia across much of the world means that "the concept of fascism seems both inappropriate and indispensable for grasping this new reality," adding that "'[i]n the twenty-first century, fascism will not take the face of Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco'" (pp. 4–5). Therefore, he argues, "I will call the present moment a period of postfascism. This concept emphasizes its chronological distinctiveness and locates it in a historical sequence implying both continuity and transformation" (p. 4).

Thinking then about gender and sexuality, what are these points of continuity and transformation? Traverso (2019) argues that although the constitutive elements of classical fascism are disparate, there is an emphasis on the traditional gender roles associated with the heterosexual nuclear family, in which women occupy a subservient position to men who are expected to be active and virile. If we look at some of the authoritarian right-wing regimes and their leaders around the world today, there are very clear differences between them and those of the early- to mid-twentieth century. Traverso (2019) points out that "[c]lassical fascism was not neoliberal; it was statist and imperialist, promoting policies of military expansion" (p.22). But many of these regimes are led by individuals whose toxic masculinity is proudly displayed and whose attitudes to those who are gender and sexuality non-conforming are openly hostile. Jair Bolsonaro (President of Brazil at the time of writing) is a particularly good example of this, going on record to say he was proudly homophobic, and regularly using misogynistic language, as well as homophobic and transphobic slurs to attack opponents. At the same time the right-wing government in Hungary refuses to legalise same-sex marriage, has just legislated against same-sex parental adoption and has just passed a law forbidding the use of materials making any mention of homosexuality or gender reassignment in schools, while local authorities in around a hundred towns and regions across Poland have passed resolutions declaring themselves free of what they call 'LGBT ideology.' So although these regimes are not fascist in the classical sense there are, I would suggest, clear indications of their fascistic lineage.

But of course is not only Polish towns that are free of so-called 'LGBT ideology'—if that is taken to mean an absence of recognition of the legitimacy of gender diversity and non-normative sexuality. Commercial ELT was there long before the current Polish government. Moving on then to the fourth factor, the commercial logic of global edu-business. My own (Gray 2013)

study of a sample of commonly used ELT textbooks produced in the UK found that there was a blanket avoidance of any LGBTQ representation in terms of characters and reading and listening activities. And that remains unchanged today. The issue here is that UK-produced ELT materials are sold globally in countries which offer legal protection to LGBTQ people but also in countries whose governments are hostile to sexual and gender diversity in which state-sponsored homophobia may be actively promoted. In such a situation LGBTQ recognition does not get a look in. There is also I think little hope for change in this regard as sales for ELT materials produced by leading publishers such as Oxford University Press and Cambridge University press are, as reported by the sociologist John Thompson (2010), used to subsidise their more prestigious academic lists. Given the economic risk involved, the silence mentioned by Pennycook (2001) is unlikely to be addressed any time soon. That said it is noteworthy how apps for language learning such as Duolingo do include LGBTQ representation, although there is no engagement with any broader educational issues—and of course such apps are for individual learning and not designed for use in schools.

Having outlined the nature of the forces that contribute—whether directly or indirectly—to the perpetuation of queer erasure in the curriculum I now want to turn to how we might think about addressing this. It is important to point out that while there is a considerable amount of right-wing backlash globally to the gaining of rights, rights have been won, protective legislation has been passed and lives have been improved. But as the UNESCO report I referred to earlier underlines, publishers have preferred to carry on as though such change had not occurred. UNESCO's point is that this is unsatisfactory as recognition is not embedded though protective legislation, it also requires the education sector to play its part as well.

One way forward is through the use of well-chosen literary texts in the classroom (Gray, 2021). Literature, as a high-status type of authentic material, is particularly useful in this regard as it has the potential to allow the teacher to do several things. On the one hand, there is the potential to include LGBTQ characters and perspectives—and on the other, to make it possible for those students who are not LGBTQ to come to a greater understanding of those who are, and for all students to be enabled to explore the ways in which gender and sexual normativities work—as well as the ways in which these may be linked to other aspects of identity. Useful and easily exploitable short engaging texts can be found online in sites such as Gay Flash Fiction (https://gayflashfiction.com/). Another way forward is through the use of teacher-generated materials – the case for which was made by David Block (1991) many years ago. What he had to say then still stands. Block argued for the use of such materials on the basis that they 1) allowed for the **contextualization** of language in ways which were relevant to the lives of students; 2) that they had the potential for **timeliness**; and 3) that their **personal touch** provided evidence of the teacher's commitment to the actual group of students they were teaching. We might add that such materials can, if sensitively designed, provide much needed **recognition** for LGBTQ students, while at the same time enabling those students who are not LGBTQ to gain an **understanding** of, and **empathy** for, those who are. A good example of teacher-generated materials can be found in the resource for teaching English to migrants created by a group in Scotland. *Engaging with LGBT and migrant inequalities: activities for the ESOL classroom* (Stella et al., 2018) is a learning resource that emerged from a research project on LGBTQ migration to Scotland and is based on interviews with migrants. It represents a unique coming together of

ethnographic sociological research and ESOL teachers. Informants' stories have been edited and used in the making of the resource in such a way that Block's criteria of contextualization, timeliness and the personal touch are evident—as well as catering for LGBTQ recognition and having the potential to develop understanding and empathy more generally. What is particularly interesting about this material is its recognition of intersectionality in the lives of those depicted, in which there is no avoidance of racism, homophobia and transphobia. There is also a wealth of background information for teachers about gender and sexual diversity along with visual materials and ideas for classroom activities—all of which could be customised by teachers working in different settings.

These are just two suggestions out of many possible options. Given the unwillingness of publishers to address the ongoing issue of queer erasure in the textbooks they produce, we have to consider doing the necessary work ourselves. As educators committed (I would argue) to addressing not only the linguistic needs of our students but also to their developmental, cultural and affective needs, it is incumbent on us to begin to take action, given that protective legislation on its own is not enough if social change is to be brought about. The challenge may be great—but the rewards are surely greater.

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