CRUISING UNCERTAINTY: QUEERING DEWEY AGAINST HETERONORMATIVITY

Mark Tschaepe
Prairie View A&M University
MDTschaepe@pvamu.edu

ABSTRACT: Dewey's philosophy of inquiry and criticisms of the quest for certainty align well with concepts from queer theory. In the following, I draw Dewey's work together with that of queer theorists, especially that of José Estaban Muñoz, Jack Halberstam, and Kathryn Bond Stockton, as a step toward developing queer pragmatism beyond the vernacular notion of practical political compromise. In the spirit of the work of Charlene Seigfried, Shannon Sullivan, Barbara Thayer-Bacon, Mary Vorsino, and others who argue for connecting Dewey's work with feminist theory, I argue for re-reading Dewey through a queer lens. Extending Dewey's criticisms of certainty to include heteronormativity provides a view of his work as a form of queering that coheres with Muñoz's utopian concept of queer futurity, Halberstam's positive notion of failure, and Stockton's idea of growing sideways. Imagining pragmatism and queer theory together proves fruitful for both. Dewey's philosophy of inquiry helpfully subtends queer projects and advocacy. Concepts from queer theory help advance Dewey's philosophy into inquiries concerning oppression and identity, including issues concerning gender and sexuality. As Shannon Sullivan has indicated, Dewey's ideas of habituation, as well as his concepts of doing and undergoing, align well with Judith Butler's concept of performativity and apply to reconfiguring gender to undermine essentialism. I build upon Sullivan's work through queering Dewey's philosophy. Although Dewey is writing from within a heteronormative framework, his philosophy is not necessarily delimited by adherence to a male-female, heterosexual-homosexual, or masculine-feminine binary system when reconstructed as queer. Queering helps open Dewey's work beyond the confines of heteronormativity that have restricted the scope of his philosophy. This ongoing process provides tools that help solidify an argumentative phalanx against authoritarian ideology that is based upon unfounded, absolutist, and heteronormative assumptions concerning gender and sexuality. Dewey's pragmatism provides a critical perspective for undermining absolutist and essentialist ideology that are being used to police identity, desire, and growth. Queering Dewey's work provides a significant contribution to the development of queer pragmatism beyond the politics of compromise.

Keywords: gender; identity; inquiry; LGBTQIA+; pragmatism; queer; sexuality

> One of the reasons why so many people have started using the word 'queer' is that it is a way of saying: 'We're not pathological, but don't think for that reason that we want to be normal.'" (Warner 1999, 59).

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Estaban Muñoz's book devoted to queer futurity, he argues against what he calls "the extremely pragmatic agenda that organizes LGBT activism in North America today" (Muñoz 2009, 19). Muñoz adds the caveat that he is "not referring to the actual philosophical tradition of American pragmatism of Charles Peirce, William James, or John Dewey" (21). Rather, he is using pragmatic in a vernacular sense that refers to a practical, compromising approach that applies to sociopolitical movements. Naming Peirce, James, and Dewey is his only mention of the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism within the book, and he mentions it only in passing as a form of distancing—Muñoz is neither identifying nor rejecting the work of these thinkers. But I cannot help being struck by how well Muñoz's work aligns with that of American pragmatism, especially Dewey's criticism of philosophy's quest for certainty.[1] Dewey's criticisms of presumptive certainty and related adherence to absolute concepts also support Jack Halberstam's arguments concerning gender and sexuality as consistently complex categories of identity and action that do not adhere to underlying universality. Dewey's focus on uncertainty as a key component of inquiry also supports Halberstam's concept of failure as an important component of growth apart from heteronormative strictures and Kathryn Bond Stockton's related concept of growing sideways, which breaks with the fixed, vertical, and heteronormative conception of growth in favor of experimental, queer forms.

In the following, I draw Dewey's work together with that of Muñoz, Halberstam, Stockton, and other queer theorists. In the spirit of the work of Charlene Seigfried, Shannon Sullivan, Barbara Thayer-Bacon, Mary Vorsino,

---

[1] Muñoz's work coheres with pragmatic work beyond that of Dewey. For example, Cornel West's concept of *prophetic pragmatism* aligns well with Muñoz's ideas of queer futurity and utopia (West 1989). Within this essay, I am unable to examine many connections for developing queer pragmatism, although I acknowledge that there are numerous fruitful intersections and disidentifications for growth beyond heteronormative conceptions of pragmatism.

and others who argue for connecting Dewey's work with feminist theory, I argue for re-reading Dewey through a queer lens, i.e., queering Dewey beyond the confines of traditional heteronormative philosophy and framing his work as promoting the related concepts of queer futurity, failure, and growing sideways. On a broader level, I encourage synthesis between pragmatism and queer theory that proves fruitful for both, as Dewey's philosophy of inquiry helpfully subtends queer projects while queer theory advances Dewey's philosophy into inquiries concerning gender and sexuality. This combination provides a significant contribution to the development of queer pragmatism beyond the politics of compromise within activism of which Muñoz is critical.

My argument consists of four phases that work across the eight remaining subsections of the essay. First, I explain Muñoz's concept of queer futurity and how it relates to concepts within the work of Halberstam and Stockton. Second, I discuss Dewey's iconoclastic philosophy of inquiry briefly, focusing on how change and uncertainty function in his work even as he writes within the confines of heteronormativity. Within this section, I summarize work that draws Dewey's philosophy together with feminist thought and use that as inspiration for queering Dewey's philosophy. Third, I revisit Sullivan's reconfiguration of gender with Dewey's notion of habituation and Judith Butler's ideas about performativity. Finally, I discuss Dewey's work as cohering with that of Muñoz, Halberstam, and Stockton. I conclude that considering Dewey's philosophy in tandem with concepts from queer theory provides argumentative strength against absolutist and essentialist ideologies concerning gender and sexuality.

Queer

Like the word pragmatism, *queer* is an elusive term without a single, settled definition. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's early notion of queer as referring to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" is a helpful introduction to the concept (Sedgwick 1993, 8). As Heather Love remarks, "queer sidesteps traditional identity categories such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual in favor of a more general category of social marginality" (Love 2021, 137). According to s.j. Miller, who argues for a queer literacy framework in education, the term "refers to a suspension of rigid gendered and sexual orientation categories and is underscored by attempts to interrogate and interrupt heteronormativity, reinforced by acknowledging diverse people across gender, sex, and desires, as well as to foreground the sexual" (Miller 2016, 38). *Queer theory* is a broad class of critical work that includes inquiry concerning sexuality, gender, race, disability, and other categories of identity that is in opposition to the essentialism of heteronormativity.[2] I follow Toomey, McGuire, and Russell in defining *heteronormativity* as "a societal hierarchical system that privileges and sanctions individuals based on presumed binaries of gender and sexuality; as a system it defines and enforces beliefs and practices about what is "normal" in everyday life" (Toomey et al. 2012, 188). This definition includes *both* gender and sexuality norms. In my use of heteronormativity, I

---

[2] *Queering* is a general term that subsumes more specific processes regarding normativity and power dynamics related to minoritized, marginalized, alienated, and ignored identities. Gust A. Yep provides helpful categories for distinguishing between types of queering. *Quaring* "focuses on the examination of the discursive and material effects of sexuality with particular attention to race, class, gender, and the body." *Kauering* involves "how sexuality, race, class, gender, and nation operate simultaneously at local and transnational levels, within particular geopolitical and historical contexts, to create domination and inequality, and celebration and opportunities for other bodies and subjects." *Crippin'* interrogates "assumptions about sexuality and able-bodiedness in an era of neoliberal capitalist domination." Finally, *transing* "generally refers to the process of examining gender embodiment in relation to other modes of difference through new forms of biomedical and communication technologies that circulate in the global world" (Yep 2013, 119-120). My focus here is on queering as it applies to connections between aspects of Dewey's philosophy and specific concepts from work in queer theory, but I believe that queer pragmatism—or the continual process of queering pragmatism—would include quaring, kauering, crippin', and transing pragmatism.

include *cisnormativity*: the assumption that cisgender is the norm and should be valued over and above all other forms of gender identity (Potter 2022). In stark terms regarding heteronormative sexuality, Michael Warner's diagnosis is fitting: "Heterosexual desire and romance are thought to be the very core of humanity" (Warner 1999, 47). Monique Wittig writes in "The Straight Mind," "although it has been accepted in recent years that there is no such thing as nature, that everything is culture, there remains within that culture a core of nature which resists examination, a relationship whose characteristic is ineluctability in culture, as well as in nature, and which is the heterosexual relationship" (Wittig 1992, 27). Wittig points to assumptions concerning nature that undergird normative standards and values that are presented as indubitable and ineluctable knowledge. As a normative principle, heterosexuality—what Adrienne Rich (1980) refers to as *compulsory heterosexuality*—is promulgated and reinforced as absolute. Heterosexuality is coupled with the construction and imposition of sex as a bifurcated, natural category, which undergirds the presumption that patriarchy is a natural system of power. As Wittig states, "the straight mind is clothed in its tendency to immediately universalize its production of concepts into general laws which claim to hold true for all societies, all epochs, all individuals" (27). The norms, values, and beliefs that comprise *heteronormativity* are embedded in everyday activities, discourse, and ideology.

What Julia Serano calls *straight assumption* and *gender constancy* are implicit to heteronormativity. The former is the assumption that every person is heterosexual by default; the latter is the assumption that binary gender categories are fixed (Serano 2022, 159). Sarah Ahmed's use of the phrase *gender fatalism* captures the assumption of gender constancy and the idea that what is assumed to be natural regarding gender determines what *will be* the case (Ahmed 2017, 25). The notion that gender and other categories of identity are natural and essential, thus determining what is and what necessarily will be the case connects to the idea of straight time against which Muñoz pushes with queer futurity.

Straight Time and Queer Futurity

S*traight time* is enforced through heteronormativity. Straight time denies that there are any viable possibilities apart from a hegemonic, heteronormative framework, which has been classified as natural. "Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction" (Muñoz 2019, 22). Straight time is part of heteronormative interpellation. Options for growth are restricted by what is designated as acceptable. Possibilities for difference are curtailed by presumptions about *how things are*—what Antonio Gramsci refers to as *common sense* (Gramsci 2000). What Muñoz criticizes as pragmatic is the sociopolitical move to fit queerness within straight time through measures such as LGBT [*sic*] marriage that is modeled on heteronormativity and participation in the military—what Lisa Duggan (2012) famously calls *homonormativity*. Jack Halberstam introduces *family time*, which is within straight time, as "the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing" and is based on "strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples" (Halberstam 5, 2005). The heteronormative notion of *growing up*, which Halberstam and Kathryn Bond Stockton criticize as unnecessarily limiting, is included in straight time as a natural form of growth (Halberstam 2011; Stockton 2004; 2009). Halberstam comments, "Childhood, as many queers in particular recall, is a long lesson in humility, awkwardness, limitation, and what Katheryn Bond Stockton has called "growing sideways"" (Halberstam 2011, 27). Stockton argues that children are always queer from the standpoint of *normal* adults because

children embody strangeness in contrast to heteronormative standards. Children, who are allegedly protected from sexuality, are simultaneously inscribed with norms, values, and beliefs concerning expectations about their gender and sexuality. *Growing up* is a restricted conception of growth. *Growing sideways* is growth in multiple directions without clearly discernible endpoints that do not accord with fitting into straight time. Muñoz's ideas of queerness and queer futurity oppose the limitations of straight time, family time, and growing up while including openness that allows for growing sideways.

Queer futurity counters straight time through disrupting the notion of fixed linearity. It is "a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world" that objects to the presumptions made from the standpoint of heteronormativity that attempts to dictate what is natural and what is unnatural; what desires and pleasures are acceptable and what are unacceptable (Muñoz 2019, 25). Muñoz indicates openness beyond the strictures of heteronormative determination. One is not ultimately trapped by fixed identities or desires rigidly rooted in essentialism. Queer futurity involves pursuing desires on a grand scale—desires for a "better world and freedom"—and "better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure" (30). Muñoz clarifies that what he calls the *queer utopian project* that he is pursuing not only pushes against heteronormativity, but also against "the tyranny of the homonormative" (26). The homonormative models itself on the heteronormative. Queerness is in direct opposition to what he refers to as *pragmatic* in the vernacular sense—a desire for normalcy. In this respect, he argues that living for queer futurity entails accepting being lost, i.e., "to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement" (72-73). The idea of queerness as accepting loss as a key aspect of overcoming the strictures of essentialism and naturalizing normativity is a component that connects queer theory to Dewey's theory of inquiry. Muñoz's idea of queer futurity helps open Dewey's work beyond heteronorma-

tivity with tools previously unacknowledged, underappreciated, or unavailable.

Failure

Cohering with Muñoz's idea of queerness as the embrace of loss and the pursuit of futurity, Jack Halberstam considers failure as rewarding. Along with queering as an interrogation of heteronormativity, a positive notion of failure is a useful tool for undermining presumptions of certainty. In the opening of their book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam reflects about the possible rewards of failure:

> Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goals of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wonderous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (Halberstam 2011, 3).

Inquiry is triggered by failure. Halberstam helps focus attention on the beneficial aspects of failure that accompany inquiry. Failure prevents settling for problematic standards—norms, values, and beliefs—that are commonly accepted as natural or worthwhile. The queering of failure as an affordance for poking "holes in the toxic posivity of contemporary life" echoes the use of anger and suffering that writers such as James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Monique Wittig, and others use to poke holes in the alleged naturalness or common sense of patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, and racism (3). Failure is a tool for dismantling hegemony and embracing uncertainty and change.

Halberstam utilizes Stuart Hall's interpretation of Gramsci to define hegemony as "a multilayered system by which a dominant group achieves power not through coercion but through the production of an interlocking

system of ideas which persuades people of the rightness of any given set of often contradictory idea and perspectives" (Halberstam 2011, 17). Wittig and Rich, among others, point to the hegemony of heterosexuality. Queering inquiry provides tools for problematizing heteronormativity. Halberstam also follows Gramsci in defining *common sense* as a set of hegemonic beliefs "that are persuasive precisely because they do not present themselves as ideology or try to win consent" (17). Problematizing heteronormativity problematizes common sense. What are presented and believed and practiced as common sense become dominant norms. Through queering—or through exercising what Halberstam calls subordinate or counterhegemonic modes of common sense—hegemonic norms are called into question (89). Queering may be understood as inquiry sparked by experiences involving confrontations with hegemony and claims of common sense. Utilizing failure and change—divergence from heteronormativity—queering interrogates certainty.

Returning to Muñoz, he also formulates queerness as a way of interrogating what is assumed to be essential and natural. As an impetus for inquiry, Muñoz highlights the present as problematic. "The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and "rational" expectations" (Muñoz 2019, 27). What Muñoz captures is the future-oriented direction of inquiry through the idea of queerness. He states, "Queerness, if it is to have any political resonance, needs to be more than an identitarian marker and to articulate a forward-dawning futurity. The dialectical movement that I am attempting to explicate is the interface between an engagement with the no-longer conscious and the not-yet-here" (87).

Growing Sideways

Queer futurity supplants heteronormative presumptions, such as the essentialist notion of the hetero-homosex-

ual spectrum, through assent and positive use of queer failure that exposes the artifice of certainty surrounding binary categories of gender and sexuality. The failure of certainty expands conceptions and practices of growth beyond heteronormative strictures of growing up. Rather, growing sideways includes an array of possibilities that moves beyond assumed verticality of adulthood and utilizes uncertainty and change through inquiry. Children are inscribed with normative expectations concerning gender and sexuality that equate with being "not-yet-straight" or being identified as "homosexual," although "not-yet-straight," children are expected to approach "the official designation of straight couplehood" (Stockton 2004, 283). Children are expected to straighten naturally when the grow up. The problem of children considered as "preliminary" sexual beings whose sexuality is simultaneously "natural" and "contrary to nature" aligns with Foucault's characterization of a *pedagogization* of children's sex that provides the basis for overwhelming social inscription of norms, values, and beliefs upon children's bodies by authorities, including parents, clinicians, and educators (Foucault 1978, 104). Children are allegedly protected from sexuality while being inscribed with norms, values, and beliefs concerning expectations about their gender and sexuality. *Growing up* is a restricted conception of growth. *Growing sideways*—growth in multiple directions without clearly discernible endpoints—is a more expansive and inclusive idea of growth that aligns closely with Dewey's ideas about growth and childhood. Stockton comments that ""growing sideways" suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain to any age, bringing "adults" and "children" into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (Stockton 2009, 11).

Queer futurity, failure, and growing sideways are concepts that work against heteronormative assumptions and impositions about life, including desire, success, and growth. Each of these concepts contributes to arguments in queer theory against essentialism and

presumed certainty about gender and sexuality. I want to reflect on Dewey's philosophy of inquiry, his positive use of uncertainty, and his ideas about growth as providing support to these concepts and arguments from queer theory while also being enhanced through queer considerations of gender and sexuality.

Inquiry & Uncertainty

Dewey's philosophy undermines fixed epistemic categories and insists on reconstructing processes of doing and undergoing as part of inquiry. For Dewey, scientific methodology that seeks out and implements change rightly replaces essentialist conceptions of knowledge and existence. The mistaken adherence to unalterable values is rejected in favor of contingency and context. Dewey fractures adherence to false dichotomies by recognizing the transactional fluidity of experience. Rather than relying on fixed categories that are purported to determine truth or meaning of experience, Dewey begins with experience as the basis of meaning. His shift away from androcentric claims of universality and foundational metaphysics to contextual fallibilism proves favorable to queer thought, which provides tools of inclusion for experiences that are often marginalized, minoritized, and underrepresented. Charlene Haddock Seigfried recognizes and builds upon these aspects of Dewey's philosophy in her work on pragmatic feminism.

Seigfried comments on how the "pragmatist principle that theory arises from experience and is accountable to it," combined with a view to solving problems rather than simply replicating experience, are aspects of Dewey's philosophy that makes it useful for feminist philosophy (Seigfried 2002, 51). Reviewing how Dewey's work resonates with feminist thought facilitates improving upon some of the philosophical tools he presents with those of feminist philosophy. This is helpful when queering Dewey's philosophy. Insights from thinkers working in and across feminist and queer theory expand and improve

upon his work by concentrating on issues concerning difference and experience. The work of these thinkers facilitates interrogating essentialized assumptions concerning gender and sexuality in ways that Dewey does not, but are consistent with his philosophy. As Seigfried indicates, Dewey's work seems to show an awareness of problems of sexism at times, but he does not pursue these consistently or thoroughly (2002). Feminist thought addresses issues of identity and oppression with greater precision than Dewey addresses them. Adopting tools from pragmatic feminism improves inquiry, especially for understanding contingency, relationality, and difference. Connections between Dewey's philosophy and feminist pragmatism inspires recognizing how tools from Dewey's work and queer theory may be combined.[3]

Seigfried notes that Dewey, influenced by the work of Jane Addams, rejects atomistic individualism and Cartesian dualism that split subject from object (Seigfried 2002; 1991). Beginning with pre-reflective experience, Dewey recognizes that inquiry begins with an existential situation pervaded by quality that is problematic. Valuing context and experience over fixed epistemic principles anticipates the importance of contingency, situatedness, and relationality within pragmatic feminism and queer theory. Essentialism is refuted in favor of varieties of experience and differences of perspective. In her argument for pragmatic feminism, Seigfried states, "The multiplicity of points of view as well as the multiple relations constitutive of persons support feminist claims to having insights to contribute to philosophizing that have so far been missing and whose absence has distorted what is there. It also gives good reasons for deemphasiz-

---

[3] Alison Kafer provides a helpful description for how both feminism and queer theory provide compatible critical tools that do not rely on essentializing or normalizing frameworks. "Queer theorists are committed to forging a politics that does not marginalize, normalize, or criminalize queer bodies, practices, or desires; feminist theorists are engaged in imagining open-ended politics that do not attempt to normalize all women under a unified category of 'woman'." (Kafer 2013, 23). I believe that queering Dewey's work improves upon his philosophical tools with regard to the anti-essentialist and anti-normalizing approaches Kafer suggests.

ing essentialist analysis of gender and provides a model for theorizing about the multiple relationships through which we are constituted and that have been distorted through homophobia, racism, classism, and colonialism, as well as sexism" (2002, 74-75). Barbara Thayer-Bacon reiterates the importance of multiple points of view with her idea of *qualified relativism*. "[Feminists] agree with Dewey that the more other voices are included and considered, the more each of us can trust that we have considered all available information and hope to make a sound judgment" (Thayer-Bacon 2003, 434-435). Qualified relativism recognizes that "we are embedded, limited, and embodied" and serves as a critical tool for questioning "assumptions of man-made constructs and frameworks as natural or always already in existence" (Vorsino 2015, 53). Work in feminist thought adds depth to tools derived from Dewey's philosophy that help recognize the importance of diverse, forgotten, oppressed, silenced, marginalized, and minoritized experiences. The work of queer theorists, such as that of Muñoz, Halberstam, and Stockton, provides similar expansiveness to tools that Dewey supplies, especially when applied to issues concerning gender and sexuality. Reciprocally, Dewey's work provides additional methodological tools to queer theory that are beneficial for interrogating essentialism and normativity.

Queering Dewey's Query

Although Dewey writes little about gender and sexuality, his defense of Bertrand Russell, albeit brief, provides a wedge for queering Dewey's thought that connects with the tools in his work that are enhanced by feminism and queer theory, especially his theory of inquiry and criticism of the quest for certainty. In "The Case for Bertrand Russell," Dewey comments that there is a "cultural lag" between the work of researchers in special sciences, such as anthropology and psychology, upon ethical issues, including "sexual ethics," and "popular beliefs,

which, when they have not been received from some dogmatic institutional source, have usually been picked up from the flotsam and jetsam of old traditions" (LW 14, 232). Dewey targets dogmatism and intolerance that prevents inquiry into matters of ethics generally and matters of gender and sexuality more specifically. He expands upon his support of Russell in "Social Realities versus Police Court Fictions," wherein he argues against the popular, "respectable" belief that existing sexual habits that are deemed undesirable do not exist if they are not discussed, including homosexuality and masturbation (LW 14, 247). Although Dewey clarifies that his argument is not an endorsement of any sexual practices or identities, specifically homosexuality among boys, his main point is that discussion and inquiry concerning sex is to be unfettered by authoritarian principles, superstition, or fear. His defense of Russell's work on sex and marriage reflects his more general criticisms of unscientific thinking that he describes in *The Quest for Certainty* and throughout much of his work on inquiry. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, he makes a similar argument concerning social taboos and prevention of inquiry concerning sexual impulses (MW 14, 114-116). Applying these criticisms to essentialist notions of gender and sexuality helps position Dewey's work as allied with projects within queer theory that seek to overcome heteronormativity and provide acceptance for non-binary conceptions of gender and sexual desire.

In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey criticizes the ideas of being and knowledge as fixed and unchanging. He classifies these as antiquated, superstitious approaches that purport to find changeless principles of being from which all truths are to be deduced. Adherence to an absolute or fixed concept of knowledge leads to a conflict with natural science, i.e., the experimental model. As he states, this is because of "the incompatibility between the conclusions of natural science about the world in which we live and the realm of higher values, of ideal and spiritual qualities, which get no support from natural science" (LW

4, 33). While those who abide by absolutism or beliefs in fixed principles refuse to recognize change, experimental inquiry seeks change in attempts to locate and address problems. For Dewey, inquiry involves considerations of difference, especially from what is considered or presumed to be the case. This is what provides greater understanding of existence as it is lived, rather than as an imaginary ideal that attempts to deny change. Returning momentarily to the defense of Russell, Dewey is arguing against the denial of sexual difference for the sake of normativity or respectability and arguing for openness of inquiry that allows for considerations of difference, especially difference that is contrary to popular traditions and uncritically accepted social mores. Extending Dewey's criticisms of certainty to include heteronormativity provides a view of his work as a form of queering that coheres with Muñoz's utopian concept of queer futurity, Halberstam's positive notion of failure, and Stockton's idea of growing sideways.

Reconfiguring Gender

Shannon Sullivan's reconfiguration of gender through reconsidering Dewey's work on habit, coupled with Judith Butler's concept of performativity, is useful for enhancing Dewey's philosophical tools concerning work in queer theory. Sullivan reads Dewey's pragmatism as suggesting "that we must be open to the continual reconfiguration of our habits and the configurations of gender, sex, and sexuality that structure our existence, and we must work to increase the friction that encourages such transformation" (Sullivan 2000, 39). She argues that his notion of habit leads one to question binary categories of gender and sexuality and to reconsider cultural constructs that shape habits of gender and, relatedly, sexuality. Butler's concept of performativity adds that the elements of gender and sexuality are constituted through repetition of cultural norms. This maps onto Dewey's notion of habituation with added considerations of gender and sexuality

that Dewey does not broach. Sullivan's reconfiguration of gender through Dewey's pragmatism and Butler's performativity is important for my own queering of Dewey because it opens his work further to address issues for which his philosophical tools are beneficial, but that he does not address. Following Sullivan's considerations of Dewey's notion of habituation, I press Dewey's theory of inquiry into the realm of queering to encourage further friction that erodes heteronormativity. Butler's work on performativity, interpellation, and identity is useful in this regard, especially as it coheres with Dewey's focus on uncertainty as a motivating factor to inquiry. I examine these concepts within Butler's work as I draw further connections between Dewey's approach to inquiry and concepts from queer theory.

Butler's concept of performativity as situated between construction and determinism aligns well with Dewey's notions of doing and undergoing, as well as his concept of habituation (Sullivan 2000). According to Butler, the process of iterability, "a regularized and constrained repetition of norms" is necessary for understanding performativity (Butler 1993, 95). Within various contexts, repeated performative acts of naming and signification facilitate the materialization of identities. Identification is a process that is repeated, thus becoming habitual. One is not identified once and never identified again. Rather, identification is reiterated. For instance, one is not merely named once and never named again. With each instance of their name being used, whether they are using their own name or others are using their name, they are being identified. Reiteration of the name is a performative act of naming the person.

Referring to Althusser's notion of *interpellation*, which "forms a crucial part of the juridical and social formation of the subject," Butler discusses the dissonance between performative commands that enforce norms and persons who are commanded to abide by those norms, resulting in the possibility of disobedience (Butler 1993, 121-124). Building from a consideration of being

called a name, Butler focuses on gender and sexuality as interpellated categories of identity that one does not choose. Identity is not an essence of the self. As Stuart Hall states, "this concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already 'the same', identical to itself across time" (Hall 1996, 3). Hall follows Butler by interpreting identification as a never-complete construction that relies on exclusion. "Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected." (5). Identity refers to a "point of suture" between discursive constructions of identity that place persons in particular positions as social subjects, and "processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'" (5-6). Individuals are interpellated as particular identities with which they contend. Each person performs their identities in unique ways that never quite capture a particular assignation. A person who identifies as a man never fully embodies the identity of man. The person who identifies as heterosexual never fully embodies the identity of heterosexual. "There is always 'too much' or 'too little' – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality" (3). As Hall and Butler note, this is because identities are imagined narratives that have material effects. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler focuses on gender formation that occurs within a heteronormative framework. Although identities are imposed, they are not complete. "Identities are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as is constantly marshaled, consolidated, retrenched, contested, and, on occasion, compelled to give way" (Butler 1993, 105). Although identification is often normatively powerful, it is not absolute. Identity involves contingency and ambiguity, even if expectations regarding identity are for sameness and unity (191). For instance, gender assignment is always an approxima-

tion that one cannot inhabit completely (231). Butler's indication that identification never quite succeeds in capturing who or what someone is aligns with Dewey's criticisms of fixed principles and the quest for certainty. Norms operate as imperatives with which each person is forced to negotiate, but they are contingent and constantly undergoing change (237). Attempts to occupy or escape an identity may constitute a source of struggle because identification never quite holds, yet performativity is never entirely willful or arbitrary. The ability to identify varies with persons, identity categories, and the mechanisms that enforce identity. Some identities, such as race or ethnicity, tend to be rather strict in comparison to categories of sexuality, although by no means fixed or absolute. Butler's work reveals problematic aspects of identities as impositions that supply certain forms of materiality to persons through discursive performativity. Identities, such as gender and sexuality, enforce normative habits, regardless of how dissonant these norms are with individual experiences or desires.

Disidentification, Inquiry, and Growth

Muñoz builds upon Butler's insights and uses identity to refer to transactional points (or sites of struggle) "where fixed dispositions clash against socially constituted definitions" (Munoz 1999, 6). This avoids the false dichotomy that presents identity as being either essential and fixed or freely constructed. Using this sense of identity acknowledges differences in bodies, desires, and circumstances that transact with socially constructed narratives. Muñoz quotes William E. Connolly's insight concerning the tensions between fixed dispositions and constructions: "Some possibilities of social definition are more suitable for certain bodies and certain individuals, particularly after each had branded into it as "second nature" a stratum of dispositions, proclivities, and preliminary self-understandings." (Connolly 1991, 163 quoted in Muñoz 1999, 6). Examining transactional points between

persons and identities, Muñoz uses what he calls the *Pêcheuxian Paradigm* that is based on Michel Pêcheux's description of three modes in which subjects are constructed by ideological practices. The three modes are identification, counteridentification, and disidentification (Muñoz 1999, 11). Identification refers to acceptance and voluntary assimilation to an assigned identity. A person responds to the imperative, *You are x*, by assenting, *Yes, I am x*. Counteridentification entails resistance and rejection to imposed identity. *You are x*, is confronted with, *No, I am not x*. As Muñoz states about disidentification, it is "the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (11). The response to *You are x*, might be something like, *Your imposition of x fails. I am imagining and reworking x in a way that transforms its meaning*. Mere affirmation or denial does not work—like the frustration caused by a judge demanding that a witness restrict their answer to yes or no when neither suffices. Roderick A. Ferguson notes that disidentification entails taking up ideology with revisions (Ferguson 2004, 4). As an example of ideological disidentification, Muñoz uses the example of a lesbian, "queer revolutionary from the Antilles" who interrogates the homophobia and misogyny in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, while engaging in his anticolonial discourse "as a still valuable yet mediated identification" (Muñoz 1999, 9). This does not mean that the undesirable, discriminatory elements of the ideology are simply removed while the desirable elements are chosen. As *interrogate* and *engage* indicate, disidentification involves contending with identity in a critical manner that entails change. As Dewey might say, it is to *inquire*, mindful of context.

Imagining Muñoz's concept of disidentification as inquiry helps draw tools from queer theorists together with tools from Dewey's work. Disidentification as a form of inquiry coincides with Sullivan's reconfiguration of

gender and sexuality and further motivates queer futurity through consistently reconsidering and reconstructing categories of identity, including categories of desire. As a proponent of queer futurity, disidentification embraces change and fosters the erosion of presumptive certainty and adherence to fixed categories. This lends itself to the positive notion of failure and the openness of growing sideways as moving beyond the strictures of growing up. In this respect, Dewey's ideas about growth are especially compelling as they support these queer concepts.

Dewey's conception of growth, in tandem with his positive regard for uncertainty and change, contribute to the queer conception of growing sideways that Stockton introduces and Halberstam references in discussions of failure. According to Dewey, growth is "a movement of action toward a later result" (MW 9, 46). This does not imply a static, accepted standard. Rather, growth moves in multiple directions and entails development of habits that are transactional adjustments with environments. If there is an aim to growth, it is the ongoing process of growth. Types of growth are situation dependent. In his essay on Dewey as the *philosopher of growth*, Sidney Hook expounds on this by stating, "There is the growth which generates obstacles to further growth, and the growth which creates the conditions for further growth. There is growth which prevents and growth which encourages the processes of education" (Hook 1959, 1013). For Dewey, growing entails adaptation *with* one's environment, which is done through habituation. Adaptation is not restricted to adjustment *to* the environment, but also entails adjustment *of* the environment (MW 9, 52). In line with Dewey's work on habituation (and Butler's on performativity), individuals are not, therefore, merely passive and subjected to power dynamics regarding sexuality and gender. Growth includes transactional engagement, so one adjusts to the environment as the environment is adjusted through their movement of action. Growth that stifles—such as "growths in prejudice, arbitrariness, hate, invidious prestige, power and

status"—is typically considered undesirable because it disallows further inquiry (Hook 1959, 1014). To block the way of inquiry is to prevent individuals from liberation and enrichment of their lives, thus undermining their power to grow. In this regard, Dewey warns of routine habits, which are unthinking. "Routine habits, and habits that possess us instead of our possessing them, are habits which put an end to plasticity. They mark the close of power to vary. [...] The short-sighted method which falls back on mechanical routine and repetition to secure external efficiency of habit, motor skill without accompanying thought, marks a deliberate closing in of surroundings upon growth" (MW 9, 54). Unthinking habits are those that assent to certainty without question, including certainty concerning gender and sexuality. Regarding presumptions concerning growing up, Dewey's work concerning children is especially relevant.

Dewey considers human beings, from the earliest age, as intelligent because they alter the ways that they engage with their environment as part of their pursuit of ends-in-view (MW 6). Children are thus understood as active, purposive agents instead of passive objects or merely potential subjects. Dewey argues against the idea that children's immaturity is a lack that somehow needs to be filled with growth. He postulates that what he takes to be the two chief traits of immaturity—dependence and plasticity—are powers that provide children with the impetus and ability to engage socially and to adapt with the environment (MW 9, 48-49). These traits indicate the importance of impulse and experimentation for Dewey, which is echoed by Stockton's work about queerness and childhood. This is especially evident in Dewey's definition of plasticity (MW 9, 49):

> This is something quite different from the plasticity of putty or wax. It is not a capacity to take on change of form in accord with external pressure. It lies near the pliable elasticity by which some persons take on the color of their surroundings while retaining their own bent. But it is something deeper than this. It is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail

in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to modify actions on the basis of the results of prior experiences, the power to develop dispositions. Without it, the acquisition of habits is impossible.

Children are relational, desiring agents whose growth is often resistant to external imposition. Dewey highlights and values the transactional engagement of children that facilitates their creation of distinct dispositions of their own instead of devaluing children as if they are merely innocent, impressionable, neutral bodies privy to social inscription. Children actively adapt the environment to their own activities and dispositions as they adapt their activities and dispositions to the environment (MW 9, 52). Dewey recognizes that the belief is often put forth, especially within psychology and education theory, that children must be directed to adapt to the standards and demands of adulthood, but he rejects this as a misunderstanding of growth. Instead, Dewey indicates that childhood is a phase of active engagement that entails growth as a continual process rather than a means toward a fixed goal that is apart from the process. To conceive of children as needing to *grow up* to adulthood is misguided (MW 9, 55-56). Childhood and adulthood are simply names for phases of continuity (LW 1, 210). Growth may entail movement from childhood into adulthood, but it also entails movement in multiple directions, and to become an adult is not necessarily to grow up. Pressures to grow up and techniques of social inscription imposed in the service of growing up are problematized through Dewey's philosophy. In this regard, Dewey's work further lends itself to the critical work of Muñoz, Halberstam, and Stockton that interrogates and supplants heteronormativity through queering.

Conclusion

Through his philosophy of inquiry and criticism of the quest for certainty, Dewey provides an approach to issues of sexuality and gender that extends beyond the

vernacular sense of pragmatism that Muñoz criticizes. If Dewey's philosophy is a form of pragmatism, it is one that supports queer futurity, positive notions of failure, and growing sideways. Although Dewey is writing from within a heteronormative framework, his philosophy is not necessarily delimited by adherence to a heterosexual-homosexual or masculine-feminine binary system when considered in tandem with queer concepts. As Sullivan indicates, Dewey's philosophy coheres with Butler's concept of performativity and applies to reconfiguring gender to undermine essentialism. I have built upon Sullivan's work with the addition of Muñoz's concepts of disidentification and queer futurity, coupled with ideas from Halberstam and Stockton.

But why queer Dewey's work at all? What Dewey's philosophy provides is support for queer arguments against binary and essentialist assumptions concerning gender and sexuality. As Darla Linville states:

> There is newly encouraged resistance to queerness and a new insistence on normative structures. Whiteness, Christianity, masculinity (and the right to dominate/use women's bodies), heterosexuality, gender normativity and roles, ability—physical normativity that discounts contributions of those who are differently abled—are all receiving the message that they deserve the privilege they have received in the past. Conversations about contesting unearned privilege are framed as unrealistic, frivolous whining. (Linville 2017, 9-10).

This is especially relevant given the current anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation being proposed in multiple countries. At the time of writing this (15 September 2023), the ACLU reported that there were 496 anti-LGBTQ bills in the United States (https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights). As noted, Dewey's work alone does not provide enough to combat such arguments, but by queering his philosophy, it provides important tools that help solidify an argumentative phalanx against authoritarian ideology that is based upon unfounded, absolutist assumptions concerning gender and sexuality. His arguments against fixed categories contribute to building

a case against bathroom bills that attempt to reinforce binary concepts of gender, bills attempting to restrict healthcare based upon essentialist assumptions, and legislation attempting to enforce strict heteronormativity through education. Approaching Dewey's philosophy in this manner avoids the vernacular form of pragmatism as political compromise from which Muñoz distances queer futurity. Rather, it extends beyond the sociopolitical into all realms of life and resists compromise. Queering Dewey's work pushes it beyond the confines of heteronormativity. The resulting development of queer pragmatism provides critical tools for undermining absolutist and essentialist ideology that are being used to police identity, desire, and growth.

References

"Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures," ACLU. Last updated: 1 September 2023. Last accessed: 15 September 2023. https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights

Ahmed, Sara. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Butler, Judith. (1990). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York and London: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. (1993). *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* New York and London: Routledge.

Connolly, William E. (1991). Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox. Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press.

Dewey, John. (1978). *Journal Articles, Book Reviews, Miscellany in the 1910-1911 Period, and How We Think, The Middle Works, vol. 6: 1910-1911*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, John. (1985). *Democracy and Education, The Middle Works, vol. 9: 1916*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, John. (1983). *Human Nature and Conduct, The Middle Works, vol. 14: 1922*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, John. (1981). *Experience and Nature, The Later Works*, *vol. 1: 1925*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, John. (1988). *The Quest for Certainty, The Later Works, vol. 4: 1929*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, John. (1988). *Essays, Reviews, and Miscellany, The Later Works, vol. 14: 1939-1941*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Duggan, Lisa. (2012). *The twilight of equality?: Neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy*. New York: Beacon Press.

Ferguson, Roderick A. (2004). *Aberrations in black: Toward a queer of color critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, Michel. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random House.

Gramsci, Antonio. (2000). *The Antonio Gramsci reader: selected writings, 1916-1935*, edited by David Forgacs. New York: New York University Press.

Halberstam, Jack. (2011). *The queer art of failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hall, Stuart (1996). "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by

Hall, and Paul du Gay, 1–17. London: Sage Publications.

Hook, Sidney. "John Dewey--philosopher of growth." *The Journal of Philosophy* 56, no. 26 (1959): 1010-1018.

Kafer, Alison. (2013). *Feminist, queer, crip*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Linville, Darla. "Introduction: Queering Education." *Occasional Paper Series* 2017, no. 37 (2017): 4-12.

Love, Heather. (2021). *Underdogs: Social Deviance and Queer Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Miller, s.j. "Queer literacy framework." *Critical concepts in queer studies and education: An international guide for the twenty-first century* (2016): 259-272.

Muñoz, José Esteban. (1999). Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz, José Esteban. (2019). *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition*. New York: New York University Press.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence." *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. (1993). *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Seigfried, Charlene Haddock. "Where are all the pragmatist feminists?." *Hypatia* 6, no. 2 (1991): 1-20.

Seigfried, Charlene Haddock. "John Dewey's pragmatist feminism." *Feminist interpretations of John Dewey* (2002): 47-77.

Serano, Julia. (2022). *Sexed Up: How Society Sexualizes Us, and How We Can Fight Back*. New York: Seal Press.

Stockton, Kathryn Bond. "Growing sideways, or versions of the queer child: The ghost, the homosexual, the Freudian, the innocent, and the interval of animal." *Curiouser: On the queerness of children* (2004): 277-315.

Stockton, Kathryn Bond. (2009). *The queer child, or growing sideways in the twentieth century*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Sullivan, Shannon. "Reconfiguring gender with John Dewey: Habit, bodies, and cultural change." *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (2000): 23-42.

Thayer-Bacon, Barbara. "Pragmatism and feminism as qualified relativism." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22 (2003): 417-438.

Toomey, Russell B., Jenifer K. McGuire, and Stephen T. Russell. "Heteronormativity, school climates, and perceived safety for gender nonconforming peers." *Journal of Adolescence* 35, no. 1 (2012): 187-196.

Vorsino, Mary. "Re-reading Dewey through a Feminist Lens," *Educational Perspectives* 47 (2015): 50-54.

Warner, Michael. (2000). *The trouble with normal: Sex, politics, and the ethics of queer life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

West, Cornel. (1989). *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Wittig, Monique. (1992). *The straight mind and other essays*. New York: Beacon Press.

Yep, Gust A. "Queering/quaring/kauering/crippin'/transing 'other bodies' in intercultural communication." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 6, no. 2 (2013): 118-126.