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OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

Kill the Indian,
Save the Man

Sexual Assault and Sex
Education-Decolonizing
the Solutions

Welcome to Canada



SEXED

AND

YOUTH

COLONIZATION, SEXUALITY
AND COMMUNITIES OF COLOUR



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JESSICA YEE

Introduction

I have long wondered about the vast relationships between the sexual education youth of colour are receiving and the impact of colonization on their sexuality in general. As a First Nations young woman, I often hear about colonization and how it is has gravely affected the state of our people for generations on a multitude of levels, but rarely do these discussions go anywhere near the topic of sexuality. In my discussions with other youth of colour, more often than not I hear the same things being said, and the same exasperating results of this widespread reluctance to make sexual health a priority for all of our youth.

So is it any wonder that when approaching the subject of sexual education youth of colour are receiving in Canada, it is quite difficult to explain what exactly I'm looking for, and to find any resources that concretely address these very issues? I'm not looking for materials on how to be inclusive when teaching sex ed, and I'm certainly not looking for another adult to tell us as youth how we need to behave sexually. The information that is frequently disseminated from communities of colour regarding our sexual health is almost always pervasive in nature, highly statistical, and seldom speaks to the true realities we are facing to be represented in those "risky" numbers in the first place.

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What happened to us anyway? Why is it that so many communities of colour are disproportionately affected to the point where many of us feel that we are, yet again, raising the importance of equitable sex education alone?

Colonization has a lot to do with that, and here in Canada we need to remember just how many of us are suffering the inter-generational impacts of colonization and what exactly it has done to us. Colonization is more than Columbus coming over to discover the “New World” in 1492 and causing the genocidal affect millions of Indigenous peoples throughout the world can still painfully feel. Colonization is still happening, and it didn’t just happen to us as First Nations.

“Without taking full control of our lives, starting with our own bodies, we would simply be wards of the state”. – Katsi Cook

Before the invention of clinics, anatomy textbooks, or sexual health websites, my own people were practicing sexual education, living with the ideals of feminism, and utilizing theories of reproductive justice to live as a healthy, strong, autonomous nation.

We might not have called it sexual health, or labeled it with any sort of clinicized connotation, but we sure as hell have always believed in our rights over our own bodies, and how fundamental that is to our continued existence. I mean, what do people really think we used to do? Wait for the colonizers to come and teach us about sex?!

You would think however that we would get the recognition for starting the concepts and frameworks that many non-Native academic movers and shakers have been internationally hailed for, but alas, we do not. In fact my people have been so far removed from practicing our authentic ways that a lot of us don’t even want to identify with any of our former sex-positive existence.

Sex was upheld in our culture as not only a sacred and powerful part of human life, but as a very normal part of it, too. Sexual education began in the ancient huts, longhouses, and teepees of our ancestors, where young people would learn from selected family or community members all about their body, how to care for it, and the inviolability of their sex. Many of our ancestral teachings show us that many of our societies were matriarchal and this included healthy, educated decisions over matters of

childbearing and sexuality. We have different ceremonies and traditions that we've been practicing for centuries to back this up.

Our long history of genocidal oppression whether through colonization, Christianization, residential/mission/boarding schools, or just blatant racism has drastically severed the ties between us and how traditionally we might have received the knowledge that would enable us to make informed choices about our sexual health and relationships. The fact is that many of our communities are reluctant to go anywhere near the topic of sexual health because it is now viewed as “dirty”, “wrong”, or a “Whiteman’s thing.”

We have also carried a long history of being sexually exploited; which can be seen anywhere from the early Pocahontas and Squaw days right up until the modern over-sexualization of “easy” Native women, which still permeates much of the media.

“The American ideal of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American ideal of masculinity. This idea has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden — as an unpatriotic act — that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood.” —James Baldwin

We share this agonizing history with so many other communities of colour, whose Western World invaders (whether through forced Christianization or removal of nations into slavery), sought to take away one of our most powerful human abilities: our sexuality, and use it against us to control, destroy, colonize, and mould us into exactly what they wanted us to be. English, a confusing language which the dominant society here insists we still speak, has created binaries like gay and straight, supremacy and subservience, which many of our communities simply didn’t subscribe to. We’re more interested in the essence of our humanity.

It’s definitely worth reflecting on how different things might be if our future generations know about where we came from and call on their ancestral roots to help them make it through these present-day oppressions that we face. I think our job now is to find practical ways to translate all of this into modern terms for our young people to use so they can recover what past gener-

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ations may have lost, and re-assert themselves as the resilient, fierce, and knowledgeable young people who were, once upon a time, the most sacred in many of our cultures.

“Colonization and racism go hand in hand. Racism has provided justification for the subjugation of peoples ... Over time, racial stereotypes and societal rejection may be internalized by the colonized group.”

— Emma D. LaRocque

We also must dispel the myth that Canada is a “mosaic” of cultures where everyone gets along in perfect racial symbiosis — and this is something our youth today need to be talking more about. While there might be multiple ethnicities, races, and cultures represented in larger urban centres like Toronto, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Montreal (and this only represents four cities of the 10 provinces and three territories in all of Canada), we aren’t usually discussing how and why this is happening in order to facilitate knowledge, respect, appreciation and understanding. Toronto alone has more than 60,000 Aboriginal people according to the 2006 Stats Canada Census, but walking through the city streets you might never know who and where they are.

Growing up in the sprawling diverse metropolis of Toronto I hear people of colour say that while we might have neighbourhoods like Chinatown and Little Italy, we don’t really sit down and discuss our cultures with one another. We see our cultures represented mostly in festivals or conferences, while in actuality we have the ability to do more than that. It’s not enough to simply look at the foods and colours of people if you want to know about their culture, you have to understand wholly where the person comes from. It’s about more than just their country of origin.

Examining cultural competency and sex education means using what we already have in our culture to empower our youth to lead healthy, strong lives, while intersecting it with our present day realities. SEX is still such a taboo topic in our society, when in fact it is the foundation of all humanity and is related to every social issue on some level. While we look to other existential issues to problem solve the various challenges our communities are facing, the time has come to bring it back

to the basics and strengthen our identities right from the ground up.

Rather than continuing to allow people outside our communities dictate to us how to be “healthy”, not actually involving us as youth on any sustainable level when working “for youth”, and rarely disseminating anything in a culturally competent way, I decided to go directly to the source itself. For this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, I asked youth of colour about their experiences with sex education and if colonization, in its many forms, affects how they view sexuality.

In this issue we hear from youth in words that are unfiltered, powerful, truthful, raw, radically self-aware and painful on a wide spectrum of topics they needed to share. We hear first accounts of being a newcomer to the country and the frighteningly new methods of sex education. We listen to the tales of being gay in a culture that condemns it today, but so many years ago accepted homosexuality. We are inspired by the many youth change agents who are putting forward the gifts and strengths they carry, confronting their history of colonization, and breaking new ground to continue the fight.

What I really heard while putting all of these tales together was a loud, resounding cry from many youth that they are ready and willing to talk about sex and while 90% of the drama in their own communities had to do with sex, they felt that existing hierarchies, power structures and authority figures stood in the way and incapacitated them from making positive change. It is fair to say that we are already paying the price for the inadequacy in organizations, institutions, and society in general to actualize youth leadership when it comes to sex education.

“Peer education means that young people gain more from an experience when they are actively involved ... [and] is a core premise of peer education and youth development. Research also suggests that programs for youth which are developed through a partnership of youth and adults may be highly effective in building youth people’s skills and reducing their sexual risk-taking behaviors.”

— *Advocates for Youth, Peer Education, Youth Development, and Youth-Adult Partnerships*

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The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines self-determination as “free choice of one’s own acts without external compulsion, and especially as the freedom of the people of a given territory to determine their own political status or independence from their current state.” It is essential that youth of colour are given the right to self-determination when we talk about sexual education, and that we listen carefully to how we can support them to realize this in their own lives. If we believe in autonomy, sovereignty, and self-government over our own bodies, youth must also be allowed these rights. How this plays out, looks, and works will vary greatly from youth to youth, reality to reality, and community to community.

I believe what it boils down to is not only the importance of our right to self-determination, but knowing and reclaiming our history. While today’s youth were not alive when the initial colonization happened, we are alive now, and indeed it’s still happening. We may not have been able to choose what our ethnicity was going to be, but we can own it now and stand as allies with other communities of colour. We can work together in our common struggle for the autonomy to live as our authentic selves in the face of oppression and bigotry. We need to celebrate our rich heritages in peaceful solidarity so we all survive, while together honouring the ancestors who lived so courageously to give us those few bits of raw culture we cling to today.

Education is the key to affecting positive change. Equitable and intersectional sex education — this is how we are going to take back our self determination and put it out there as it once was, strong, sexy, powerful, and most of all, unapologetic of who we are.



TONYA KENT

Sexual Assault and Sexual Education — Decolonizing the Solutions

During my university career, I worked on the Sexual Assault Survivors' Support Line (SASSL) at York University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada for four and a half years. Our organization received crisis calls from survivors of sexual assault, trained volunteers to do the same, gave resources for help, and did outreach sessions talking about healthy relationships and sexual assault. SASSL is a pro-feminist, pro-choice, and anti-oppressive student run organization.

I volunteered from 2003-2005 and was the coordinator for outreach and resources from 2005-2007. The outreach mostly consisted of outreach about sexual assault and healthy relationships to youth at high schools in the surrounding area of the Jane-Finch community and York University. Jane-Finch is an area of Toronto plagued by drug and gang violence. It mainly consists of youth of colour, mainly of the black community. As the coordinator, it was my responsibility to contact schools about having us come to educate their students on sexual assault and healthy relationships. As an organization that spoke about such a taboo topic, I sometimes had trouble getting into schools. There were a few schools that had young progressive teachers who loved that we wanted to come in. Others that questioned what

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we wanted to talk about, why we wanted to talk about sexual assault with students, or why we wanted to talk about sexual assault with their male students. Getting into Catholic schools was an even harder feat, as we were questioned about every aspect of our presentation, and forbidden from discussing abortion, birth control of any form, pre-marital sex, and same sex relationships. As you can imagine, those restrictions would make it extremely difficult to talk about healthy relationships and choices after an assault.

Many schools simply didn't want us to come in or apparently couldn't find the time to fit in "that topic". As if sexual assault and healthy relationships aren't important topics for our youth to be knowledgeable about. As well, middle schools for students aged eleven to thirteen NEVER allowed us in, so we had to wait until students reached high school to educate our youth about sexual assault and healthy relationships. When teachers treat sexual assault as if it's a taboo, dirty topic, it makes students also view it that way and less open to discussing it frankly. As well, the delay and secretiveness around such topics allows students to be exposed to and believe sexist and oppressive ideals about relationships and sexual assault.

I've also had the experience of educating drastically different communities; for example, around Jane-Finch, classrooms mostly consisted of black or a diverse range of South Asian students: closer to Bayview largely consisted of white or Asian students of middle to upper class. Sexual education surrounding same sex relationships was seen as disgusting and outside of the norm by students of the Jane-Finch area. Teachers in these classrooms seemed to do nothing to change this belief except to tell me that "those" kids are taught to be that way at home and it's just "their culture". Can you imagine telling me — a black female — that other black students are just "raised that way"? Assuming that this was true, why not try to change such ideals, instead of just accepting them, othering students who view same-sex relationships in a negative way. These students were seen as "unfixable" and the mainly white teachers seemed content to allow students to maintain their negative belief.

In mainly white classrooms, educating students about sexual assault and drugs or alcohol was extremely difficult, especially because those students seemed to feel that if the victim

was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, it would not be legally considered a sexual assault. But when students questioned a person's credibility and actions — specifically the female's actions — when it came to sexual assault, teachers were more apt to correct white students on ideas that were oppressive or at least tell them to hear us out. However, with students of colour, teachers seemed to just accept those oppressive ideas and do nothing to change them or at least open their minds to a different idea.

When it comes to understanding sexual assault and the different situations where it happens, in classrooms both of colour and mainly white classrooms, the idea that people “put themselves into those situations” is rampant. The *reactions* towards that idea just seem to be different. In classrooms of colour, often black students expect me to “understand where they're coming from” because I too am a black female and should know that you “just don't go up to someone's hotel room and expect not to have sex”. I even had a student tell me once that even though I am teaching about sexual assault, I must not believe those things because “we” weren't raised that way. I thought about this and about being raised in a Caribbean household and realized that even though I believe in pro-feminist and anti-oppressive ideals, I really *wasn't* raised that way. My parents who were born in Trinidad, but immigrated to Canada as adults do not believe in half the things that I protest or advocate for, but yet, I do. I wonder then, how is it that, raised in a household that did not teach me anti-oppressive ideals or pro-feminist beliefs, did I come to understand and believe in those things? EDUCATION. I learned outside of my home certain things and brought them home to my parents who are now getting better at understanding what I believe.

When I say education, I am not necessarily talking about schools. We learned about fallopian tubes, urethras, and ovaries. I think apparently “real” sex education occurred in the twelfth grade when we got to put a condom on a wooden penis. We never talked about sexual feelings and different sexual situations at all. I realize in my time educating that that hasn't changed, as when I start to talk about men and women climaxing, students snicker and giggle and have a hard time believing or understanding how someone can climax or feel good and still be

assaulted. The mainstream sex education chooses to treat sex as a legal contract between two people without discussion, about feelings or reactions to sexual activity. I've also seen our mainstream education dirty sex to the point that it is now seen as something dirty by various communities and those views are accepted as such by our educators.

Many times as a coordinator I also encountered teachers who didn't seem to understand why we also wanted to talk to their male students about healthy relationships and sexual assault. This sexist attitude reinforces the belief that only females are

responsible for safe sex or anything related to a relationship with "the other". As a coordinator, I was told that the males didn't need that education and I should talk with the female physical education teacher about "that". In

How can students even learn from us when we're challenged every two seconds with oppressive notions surrounding sexual assault and healthy relationships?

my experience though, we did have some teachers that allowed us to talk to their male students, but they were few and far between. When we talked about sexual assault with male students, for example about "No means no" or asking about someone's comfort level or situations of assault, we had teachers questioning what assault was and questioning a survivor's previous actions before the assault.

If teachers are expressing oppressive ideals, how are students to be expected not to do the same? How can students even learn from us when we're challenged every two seconds with oppressive notions surrounding sexual assault and healthy relationships? How can students understand that marital rape IS rape when teachers are at the back of the classroom shaking their heads and scoffing? How can students understand that a woman can dress any way she chooses and has the right not to be assaulted when teachers blatantly question that right in front of their students? In a classroom of male students and two female educators of colour, how is it possible for me to get through to students when the white male teacher is questioning our credentials or experience and continually focusing on "those girls that lie about assault"? If the focus is always going to be on the small percentage of people who lie about assault for one reason or another, how

can we focus on respecting people's boundaries or how to resolve a conflict in a relationship in a healthy manner?

Educating students in Catholic schools was an even bigger challenge with forbidden topics like same sex relationships, abortion, birth control, and pre-marital sex. How do those students who are in same sex relationships feel when their relationships are treated as something dirty or outside of the norm? How can we discuss safe sex in a healthy relationship if pre-marital sex is not even to be whispered about? How can we discuss choice after an assault if the morning after pill or abortion is a forbidden topic because we're in a Catholic school? How did we get to the point that we decided that educating our youth on pre-marital sex was wrong? Who decided that marriage was the indicator of whether sex was right or wrong? What about students of different communities who are taught differently? I know that as a black female, my community wasn't the one who decided that any discussion around sex was dirty and taboo.

It is impossible to have a full discussion about healthy relationships if important aspects of that discussion are ignored or treated as taboo. We can't discuss a healthy sexual relationship if a relationship outside of marriage is not treated as a real relationship. We can't discuss sexual assault fully if we only view it as a stereotypical occurrence when a strange man jumps out of a bush and assaults a young attractive woman. If we don't recognize that sexual assault is something that happens in same sex relationships, marital relationships, long and short term relationships, and acquaintance relationships, we can't have a proper discussion nor can our youth be educated properly.

This sounds as though I've never had a good experience as a sexual assault/healthy relationships educator, but I have. I've had students change their minds, I've seen students challenge other students' oppressive ideals, I've had teachers be extremely grateful to us for coming in and invited us back, I've had students who ask me about getting involved in sexual education after our presentations, and all these things have made me happy and glad to have been an educator, but these happy instances happen less often than the unhappy instances.

In my opinion, if we want to educate our youth about healthy relationships and sexual assault, our educators first need to be educated. We can't have oppressive teachers spreading oppres-

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sive ideas to impressionable youth. As a society, we need to accept other peoples' choices in partners and treat those choices and relationships the same way we treat heterosexual relationships and educate our youth to do so as well. We also have to stop viewing sex as dirty and stop viewing sexual education as something that corrupts youth to "go out and do it". Sexual assault is a huge issue in our society and if our youth, male and female, are educated properly, they can truly understand the impact that sexual assault has on a person and not view assault with oppressive ideals.

We also need to take into account that our youth in Canada come from very diverse communities and we need to educate in a non-oppressive manner that doesn't assume that our youth need only to learn the colonizer's belief surrounding sex and healthy relationships. We need to stop viewing sexual assault in a sexist way that always blames that survivor. I honestly don't have a solution to all the questions that I posed, nor do I have an answer to HOW we can stop oppressive ideas surrounding healthy relationships and sexual assault other than, EDUCATION. Educating our youth is the best and only way to keep them smart and safe and when everyone understands that, we can begin to REALLY educate our youth.

* * *

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