

Living with Dissonance: Women Students Speak Out about Sex

Roseanne Saad Khalaf

This essay focuses exclusively on the views of women students at the American University of Beirut (AUB). The initial study examined the personal texts and discourse of forty-three students, men and women, enrolled in three creative writing sections over the course of one academic semester. Participants crafted personal texts in order to explore their views, feelings, and lived experiences regarding sex. Emotional narrative engagement allowed them to navigate the terrain of sexuality by reflecting on its significance in their lives. Discourse immediately took a spontaneous turn as the majority of students proved highly adept at engaging with and work-shopping texts. Clearly I was not dealing with passive individuals; they were as interested in my views as I was in theirs. Queries ranging from why I had chosen to examine the issue of sexuality to the goals and scope of my research, and more importantly, what I would do with the findings began to surface. Students were keenly aware that sex texts would provide an intimate glimpse into their lives, but once assured that real names would not appear in any published material, all were disarmingly eager to participate.

When I informed my Creative Writing class that a number of our seminars would focus on the topic of sex, the reaction was silence followed by utter disbelief. Next a rather amusing incident occurred when two animated young women attempted

to speak at the same time but managed only to produce strange, inaudible sounds. Later that afternoon, in the quiet calm of my office, Layla let drop the white veil that covered her mouth while Samar adjusted her tongue rings. As they engaged in articulate conversation I marveled at how two female students, one traditional the other post modern, had been hindered from expressing their views by contrasting differences in attire and adornment that ultimately rendered them silent.

Ironically, they have been made speechless by the very values they adhere to. In many ways, they epitomize the dissonant normative expectations and life styles that so visibly polarize certain segments of Lebanese society. That both are seeking an “American” liberal education and happen to be in the same “creative writing” seminar makes the setting all the more compelling. The outwardly timid and reserved veiled student, along with her dauntless and liberated cohort, who flaunts the rings on her tongue and other parts of her skimpily dressed body, as “emblems of honor” and daring, represent extreme modes of adaptation which are manifest elsewhere in the Arab world.

Contrived as it may seem, a classroom setting devoted to creative writing offers a unique and discerning opportunity to explore sensitive issues related to sexuality, and allows a better

understanding of how a group of intelligent women students forge a meaningful and coherent sexual ideology. However, working critically with the writer's personal experience to relocate it to the classroom in meaningful ways can be immensely challenging, particularly when venturing into sensitive, often forbidden territory. In the crafting of sex narratives, students had to enter unmapped terrain that required stretching language way beyond neutral communication. Because the use of sexually explicit language was often necessary, we ran the risk of exceeding the comfort zone of many female students. At times we even faced a 'linguistic void', ostensibly because students had not yet developed an adequate way of expressing their sexual views, or an acceptable language to do so. In the beginning, natural rapport was somewhat difficult as language had to be carefully negotiated. But all were quick to overcome obstacles and, to my delight, out of the closet tumbled amazing stories.

Creating a space where issues regarding sex can be openly debated and written about freely offered women students more than an opportunity to delve into seemingly private zones of personal autonomy. They acquired an expansive sense of control and empowerment, assuming some of the enabling attributes of a diminutive "public sphere" and/or "third spaces" (For an elaboration of these concepts, see Habermas, 2001; Hall, 1991; Bhabba, 1990; Hannerz, 1996). This was only possible because our contact zone remained protected from threatening outside gazes – by the safety net of a classroom setting where critical exchanges that deal with difference served primarily to deepen and broaden awareness. The transformative power of discourse and personal writing was evident right from the beginning, as students repeatedly expressed a desire to be agents of change, yet remained acutely aware that the acceptance of diversity in our created "third space" was a distant cry from their real environment. Here there was no posturing, for diverse practices and attitudes were not being judged in any way. Furthermore, the ability to engage in text creation under a safety net unsettled and transformed fixed, often rigid ways of seeing, both in and beyond the classroom. In the end, the acceptance of difference gave new shape and meaning to unchallenged views on sexuality that developed into a sense, real or imagined, of empowerment and control.

Thematic Categories

For the sake of clarity I have divided the recurring and salient ideas in the sex narratives and discourse into six thematic categories and given each an appropriate title: "Breaking Away: Parent/Child Dualism," "Writing from the Margins," "Sexual Identity in Flux," "The Exhibitionist: Indecent Exposure," "Male/Female Sex Language," and "The Freedom to Choose and Imagine."

Parent/Child Dualism

Conflicts over sexuality between the majority of women students and their parents have to do with divergent attitudes – a struggle between two opposing sexual ideologies, with students viewing sex as a positive form of self-fulfillment, an opportunity for open experimentation. As such, sexual expression is given legitimacy in all consensual relations, regardless of romantic or enduring bonds. Parents, on the other hand, emphasize the dangers involved in "free sex" outside the secure confines of love and marriage. Physical intimacies, they argue, must act as a prelude to enduring relationships. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that differences between the two generations are hugely polarized with each group attributing meaning and purpose to their particular view points as they dip into an entirely different set of values.

For this group of women, an awareness of the attitudes assumed by parents is essential in order to negotiate and reinvent their sexual identity inside the parent/child dualism. Only when they have labeled and "othered" the views of their parents can they forge entirely new visions and approaches. Rejecting ideas embraced by parents creates alternatives that challenge the existing, taken-for-granted values, offering limitless possibilities.

As for myself, I believe in sexual experimentation. Most of the older people I know, including my parents, are disgusted by gays, but I have nothing against them. Actually, I admire their honesty. I believe every individual should have the freedom to choose same sex partners if they so wish. (Maya)

They are surprisingly quick to expose the problematic nature of their parents' traditional approaches to sexuality.

My parents allow me to have a relationship as long as no sex is involved. No sex at all. No

kisses, no hugs, and no nothing. Of course I know that what they are asking is impossible, so I can never be open and honest with them on this issue. (Manal)

If my parents know about my sex life they will definitely have heart attacks. To avoid all the pain and fighting, I pretend to be completely uninterested and even embarrassed by matters of sex. (Mounira)

In assuming a more liberal stance as they react to the views of their parents, some totally disregard or ridicule what their parents have to say; while others attempt to come to terms with feelings of resentment and defiance as they search for new directions capable of challenging what are perceived to be outdated ideas.

At a young age I developed a morbid fascination with sex because it was a forbidden word in our household. (Hiam)

My parents are convinced that by returning to Lebanon they will no longer need to worry about their children growing up in a promiscuous society. Now I will be able to catch a decent, rich guy from a good family who comes from a similar background, and we will live happily ever after in total boredom. Naturally, I have no intention of living out their fantasies. My career will be the most important thing in my life. I certainly am not going to be bossed around by any guy. If I fall in love, I plan to live with my boyfriend so I can maintain my freedom. (Nour)

A girl's virginity, my parents insist, guarantees the right and the ability to trap a worthy spouse (meaning rich and from a good family). I find the whole thing abhorrent. (Nadia)

The focus is on new ways of seeing and living outside the parent/child dualism through the forging of themes not only against but also outside and beyond old attitudes, in an attempt to offer fresh incentives and perspectives. Seidman (1992) has attributed this dissonance or moral divide between the two generations with respect to love, sex, and intimacy to opposing schools of thought: sexual romantics versus libertarians. The romantics view sex as a way of expressing intimate feelings that have to do with bonds of affection and love: feelings that should never be taken lightly because they involve reciprocal obligations. By contrast,

a libertarian sexual ethic defines sex as a mode of bodily sensual pleasures. "Libertarians intend to free individuals of the excessive social controls that inhibit sexual expression and stigmatize transgressive desires and acts" (p.188). They challenge sexual orthodoxies by aiming to free sex from excessive strictures, concentrating more on its pleasures and expressive possibilities.

Although a large number of women students agree that parents are romantics when it comes to sex, there are some who do not fit neatly into the libertarian category. Instead they harbor serious ambivalence and uncertainty when it comes to liberal sexual practices and are more inclined to favor the views of their parents, seeing absolutely no reason to reject the values they grew up with.

I was brought up by strict parents who do not believe in sex before marriage. However, by the time I entered university, I formed my own ideas that are not very different from those of my parents. I believe that when a girl loses her virginity before marriage, she loses the respect of her future husband as well as the people around her. (Maha)

I respect the sexual values I was brought up with and agree with my parents that sex should take place only in a marital relationship. (Roula)

A highly sensitive and rather embarrassing issue – namely, the double standards, cynicism and social hypocrisy of parents – became a central issue. Goffman's (1971) metaphors of front stage and backstage appropriately exemplify the contradictions students observed and criticized in the behavior of their parents. Backstage parents often relinquish their nice scripts by acting in ways that contradict the polite, moral front they maintain in public or in front stage situations. When parents uphold strict moral values that are not in step with their actual behavior, their children are the first to notice.

The jarring dissonance between overt righteousness and covert misconduct is to my students a microcosm of the deepening malaise they see elsewhere in Lebanese society. Such aberrant symptoms, particularly when parents are presumably moral arbiters and role models, are not lightly dismissed.

My parents lead separate lives. I know they both have lovers. Well, to be perfectly honest, my

father fools around with many women. At first my mother was angry, but now she does her own thing. Of course, in front of their kids they act like a normal and happy couple. (Reem)

It's weird that my parents uphold strict moral standards when it comes to sex, because I know they have no feelings for each other, and even though they live under the same roof, they are not really a couple. (Karma)

Clearly the insincerity of parents compounds the sense of moral outrage. Students are, after all, trapped in a socio-cultural setting that demands they pay deference to parents whose values and conduct are no longer relevant or meaningful to their own situations. What is even more telling about views of parental hypocrisy is that the group of women students who reject romantic values subconsciously embrace another set of romantic values when they assume relationships should be honest and not sexually dead. Curiously all were unable to imagine that parents could have had more liberal views when they were young.

I'm sure that my liberal views on sex will never become conservative like the views of my parents. I plan to keep an open mind, especially with my future children. (Randa)

Writing from the Margins

For some, their views on sexuality remain worlds apart from mainstream groups. The very act of challenging and ultimately rejecting narratives of essentialism and fixity moves these women students to the margins where they speak from alternative places to register disapproval. Here the self/other distinctions not only raise critical questions but produce narrative subjectivities that "other" those they feel have "othered" them by attempting to impose sexual practices and attitudes. Crafting sex texts renders the invisible visible, and is in and of itself an enabling act: a bold attempt to gain control of one important aspect of their lives.

I resent having people with conservative ideas about sex tell me what I should do. Most of the time they talk about the importance of preserving my virginity, as if sex should be placed in a freezer until a girl gets married. I have been having sex for two years and do not intend to stop just because bossy people with outdated ideas tell me to do so. (Hind)

Sometimes I think I'm surrounded by people who still live in the stone ages when it comes to matters of sex. They are so completely out of it that I have a hard time being polite. Why should I not have sex before marriage? To make matters worse, older people usually think it's alright for a man to do it in order to gain experience. I despise irrational double standards. (Lara)

Sexual Identity in Flux

Narratives prod women students to examine and redraw the boundaries that categorize them as different. Positions and stories that create established parameters are rejected in much the same way that notions having to do with fixed ideas are quickly examined and dismissed. The formation of their positionings are not situated within some established public ideal but formed through diversity derived from competing ideas. Narrative voices are the outcome of shifting and conflicting tensions brought into play when sexual codes are viewed with apprehension and suspicion. Hence they are clearly inclined to favor more situational and constructed normative standards and actual modes of conduct. New choices and endless possibilities start to take shape providing more open ended multiple models. There is an eagerness to move beyond invisible barriers, to resist the pressure to conform to rigid and absolute forms of sexual identity that translate into established and predetermined positions.

By challenging the views of mainstream groups, students create a fluid space (Bauman, 2005), in which on-going experimentation leaves room to construct new views, setting into motion a struggle against definition by others, against the fixity of what is considered normal sexuality as opposed to diversity in sexual patterns. Sex becomes shaped by difference, and labels are considered mere fictions serving primarily as a means of social control because they inevitably block out the many subcultures and sexualities.

Labels limit people in ways they aren't even conscious of. Nothing is set in stone and I hate how the sexual complexities of our lives become diluted into one defining category: The rape victim, the heterosexual, the homo, the lesbian, the pervert, etc. Ironically, it was only when I stopped feeling the need to be labeled that I was able to be in a healthy relationship. (Hind)

Simplistic, fixed labels are dismissed. Sexual identities exist on uncertain ground and are constantly subjected to displacements. Sexual normality remains impossible in an ever-shifting terrain. In this sense, women students are more inclined to veer in the direction of situational rather than absolutist ethical yardsticks. Morality becomes, as it were, how one feels afterwards.

Although I was also attracted to men, my experiences with them were never fulfilling. At one point in my life, I decided to explore my attraction to women. After a year I became completely disillusioned with the lesbian community but I also knew that if I disclosed my feelings for men I would be shunned and called a traitor. Slowly I drifted away from the gay scene realizing that if there is no place for someone like me there I must create my own place. Now my friends are people like me who have rejected the term normal when it comes to sexual identity. (Fayrouz)

Like Fayrouz, a substantial number of women students reshape and reinvent their sexual identity through experimentation with alternative frameworks, seeking to define themselves against a shifting landscape of possibilities. It is hardly surprising that within such a fluid and negotiable setting virtually everything becomes charged with sensual, erotic undertones and, hence, highly contested. Seemingly mundane and prosaic matters – i.e. dress codes, speech styles and the freedom to imagine alternate sexual attributes and practices – begin to assume primacy. Students are often in danger of viewing everyone as “other” and having their individual tastes become so “selved” that they will never match up with the tastes of others. The question that springs to mind is how many of these individualized alternatives can be enacted in a world of others who are also equally individualized?

The Exhibitionist: Indecent Exposure

AUB campus is densely populated with women students wearing suggestive clothing that reveals tattooed and pierced bodies among other more lurid and sultry manifestations of eroticization. Why female students conform to a highly fashionable, exaggerated dress code that serves to exhibit the body in provocative ways initiated a lively and rather humorous class debate. To some (and Siham is a typical example), this investment in body image

is not only seen as an intrinsic, natural desire to embellish femininity and enhance feelings of self-worth, it is also readily recognized for its extrinsic, instrumental value: a means to seduce and attract men. Furthermore, as Rima candidly admits, the competition for this scarce commodity (men) is so intense that many women on campus are engaged in a fierce game of “outdoing” each other.

It is a natural and innate desire to wear sexy clothes in order to attract men. I know that my body is appealing and so it feels good to wear short skirts and low cut tops. It's a way of seducing men visually. (Siham)

Those who wear suggestive attire use their sex appeal to tempt men but also to keep them at a safe distance. They exhibit their bodies to feel attractive and desirable while simultaneously sending a clear message that men can look but not touch. It is immediately evident that playing the role of a seductive temptress is fully exploited and thoroughly enjoyed.

I wear sexy clothes to tease men. It's fun because that's as far as I'm willing to go. (Raya)

My friends and I try to outdo each other when it comes to wearing sexy clothes. One of my friends comes from a very religious family that thinks she should dress in a modest and conservative way. Instead of fighting with them, she hides her clothes in my car and changes into tight jeans at my house before going to her classes at AUB. It's worth the inconvenience because we both enjoy looking cool in order to attract men. (Rima)

The abandon with which young women students eroticize their bodies should not be dismissed as merely a trendy and fashionable craze. It is a reflection of a deeper and more nagging societal conflict, almost a textbook instance of anomie: i.e., a disjunction between normative expectations which condone, indeed cajole, young women to be sexually attractive but condemns them if they become sexually active. Many young women, even the most adept at reconciling these inconsistent societal expectations, are the ones, as therapists have insisted, to bear the psychological toll. They are the surrogate victims of such cognitive dissonance, but dissonance, after all, is the price of individuality, as is anomie (see Durkheim, 1951). If students want to be “different” or “individual”, the

price is psychic dislocation. In scripting terms the intra-psychic is more important since it is the place where dissonance is negotiated.

This problem, incidentally, has been recently compounded by a disheartening demographic reality. Because of the disproportionate out-migration of young Lebanese men in pursuit of more promising career options, the sex ratio is visibly skewed. Demographers put the estimate at approximately four to one; i.e., one male for every four females in eligible age brackets. Once again, it is the growing pool of single women who must, in one way or another, deal with the scarcity of eligible men. The eroticization of the female body and other associated ploys to embellish sex appeal seem like an appropriate strategy to gain a competitive edge over their cohorts when it comes to soliciting the attention of the scarce and coveted male. In the language of Bourdieu (1993), this eroticization becomes a judicious resource in the "social capital" that single women need to cultivate and jealously guard.

Male/Female Sex Language

Linguistic approaches are often used in discourse to provide evidence of gender differentiation. An analysis of men's and women's speech styles reveals that they are mostly organized around a series of global oppositions. For example, men's talk is "competitive", whereas women's is "cooperative"; men talk to gain "status", whereas women talk to achieve "intimacy" and "connection" (Cameron, 2002; Coates, 1996; Tannen, 1991). These stereotypical notions or conventional language distinctions proved problematic among my students, as women students did not form a homogeneous group. Many positioned themselves along-side male students by assuming dominant discourses that conjured up a liberal sexual environment. Like their male counterparts, they adhere to the opportunity-taking narrative pattern in which they see themselves as the initiators, the "doers," of sexual activity.

In the context of our previous remarks this too becomes part of the "social capital" women need to skillfully cultivate. Here, as well, women can no longer afford to remain passive and resigned victims. Instead they depict themselves as active agents directly involved in either resisting or accepting the circumstances that undermine their autonomy and wellbeing. As decision makers they

assume complete control over their sexual activities. Moreover, within this group, sex is considered autonomous from love or intimacy. Subsequently, as modern liberated individuals they initiate, engage in, and enjoy sex outside the confines of love and marriage. In texts and discourse they break with and undermine the stereotypical notions and conventions that resort to restrictive language and behavior. Sexual encounters are disclosed in language that is explicit and direct, with a surprising degree of distance and control. Dalia is so unabashedly explicit in this regard that her sexual encounters are completely divorced from any ethical stance or intimate feelings. Indulgence becomes an unalloyed libidinal resource to be fully exploited. If her younger boyfriends fall short (because of their premature ejaculation) of fulfilling her expectations, she readily seeks older and more experienced men.

Lately I have been having sex with older men because I got pissed off with guys my age who come quickly leaving me dissatisfied. Now that I have taken matters into my own hands, sex is pleasurable. I am beginning to enjoy multiple orgasms with mature men who know how to fulfill my sexual needs. (Dalia)

Female students also differ through the inclusion of resistant or emancipatory discourses that incorporate feminist rhetoric laced with fierce criticism of misogyny and prejudice. There is a strong determination to defend their rights.

My father lectures me about the dangers of premarital sex because he wants me to be a chaste, ignorant virgin when I get married. My brother, on the other hand, is encouraged to indulge in sex, even with prostitutes. You might think my father is an illiterate, old man but actually he is an AUB graduate. When I tell him that I reject his double standards he threatens to cut off financial support. He considers me disobedient and says he is no longer proud of me. The truth is that I am not proud of him either. This is my life and I alone decide when, with whom, and how often to have sex. (Nayla)

In sharp contrast, a more conservative group of women have developed strategies which enable them to approach the topic of sex alternately, from a more inhibited discourse rooted in polite, acceptable language. They are careful to avoid explicit terminology, adhering instead to

expressions of a traditional and patriarchal kind. To be happy, they argue, a woman should seek a long-term heterosexual relationship. The rhetoric of love, intimacy, chastity, romance, marriage, and motherhood are invoked.

Sex should be shared only with the person you marry. My virginity and faithfulness is a special gift I will offer to my husband because I want to be perfect and beautiful for him. (Suha)

Sexuality, as their texts demonstrated, is accompanied by a discourse of distaste and fear. Premarital sex is not only wrong and dangerous, but transgressive pleasure is closely linked to morality and social punishment.

I believe it is immoral and unacceptable to have premarital sex. Our society is correct in punishing women who are promiscuous. In the past, Americans were moral and strict when it came to sex. Now it is as simple as eating or drinking. I do not mean to offend Americans, but their values are not acceptable in our culture. I, like most of my friends, cannot take sex lightly. (Manal)

If I have sex before getting married I will live in fear that my family might find out and punish me severely. I really don't think it's worth the risk. (Youmna)

In general, these women students seem comfortable acting in accordance with prescribed essentialist social rules: the sexually attractive woman is the beautiful one who, to please men and her family, must guard her virtue. They favor the passive as opposed to the proactive narrative pattern, but in restrictive and tentative ways, since options remain closely tied to gaining acceptance through the male gaze. Because they long to be the objects of male desire, one overriding concern is the need to remain feminine, to be a real woman in the eyes of men. Once the centrality of men is established and confirmed in the narratives and discourse of this group, they immediately focus on the need to achieve and maintain femininity presumably to remain objects of desire. Yet ironically, the notion of femininity seems to create extreme feelings of anxiety and competition.

It is very important for a woman to remain attractive, especially if she wants to find a suitable husband. Some girls are lucky because they are naturally good looking. I have to work

hard at it and I am sometimes afraid that men will go after more beautiful girls. (Amina)

The sharp divide between the conservative female discourse of passivity that coexisted with one that assumed a far more liberal stance, constructing sex as autonomous from traditional relationships, assumed striking proportions and instigated heated class debates. However, it is the liberal stance and terminology towards sex-related issues, so boldly adopted by a considerable number of women students, that blurs the conventional distinctions between male/female sex texts. It is rather curious that none of my students raised the possibility of being interesting to men or even happy with them in non-sexual ways.

The Freedom to Imagine and Choose

Given the ambivalence, fluidity, and inconsistent expectations young students in Lebanon are subjected to, it is little wonder that a prosaic academic elective (a seminar in creative writing) should become an accessible and meaningful vector for the expression and mobilization of pent up emotions. Sheltered in the sanctuary of a classroom, students are released from the constraints of the outside world and the opportunity to write becomes both an outcome of, and direct agency for, the articulation of new found freedom.

Of course writing itself can be viewed as a practice of freedom. Texts focus on the personal, and as such they allow the freedom to imagine while blocking out the freedom from interference. The freedom to imagine is essential if students are to envision sexuality in ways that permit alternative possibilities, through identifying the existing gap between what is, as opposed to what is longed for. By creating diverse themes and navigating forbidden territory they are able to explore "hidden transcripts" that may eventually counteract the cultural givens that define sexual identity. As Weeks (1995) has correctly argued: "The radical oppositional identities which arise against hegemonic ones offer narratives of imagined alternatives which can provide the motivation for inspiration and change" (p. 99). Pushing beyond normalizing and imposing sexual strictures allows students to map possibilities that widen their vision. They think and write boldly about unarticulated expectations, about what could or should be when it comes to sex-related issues and control of their

bodies. Imbedded in these narratives are themes that demand a collective awareness of the need to respect diversity, a call for the celebration of difference, including the right of each and every individual to choose. Most striking among women students is an approach to sex that is at once open and expansive, rather than moral and judgmental, with images of diversity, daring, and experimentation.

I do not believe that one should be restricted to a single partner for life because it is possible and important to have sex with many people over time. (Serene)

I like guys, but I'm not sure I don't like girls too. Sometimes I check them out and declare which is sexy, pretty, etc. I examine them like a guy would. Is this normal? If I lived abroad I might have sex with a girl just to see how it feels. Also because virginity is such a big deal here, I'm determined to lose it. (Ibtihaj)

My parents are divorced and I can't really remember a time when I saw them together in a loving relationship. This is probably why I hold my current view on the uselessness of marriage. I would like to experiment with different kinds of relationships and arrangements with the opposite sex before I decide how best to live my private life. (Joumana)

Religion, race, age, and social class will never be a hindrance if I am attached to a person. Before I came to AUB I never thought this way. However, I have to admit that after watching a lot of love-making on campus, I have changed my views and become much more liberal. (Dana)

Heterosexual couples are not perceived as the building block of social life presumably because the majority of women students do not envision any kind of "proper" sexuality for all. "Normal" sexuality is viewed with skepticism. Instead, scripts reveal impatience and defiance when it comes to set social constructions that demand the regulation of sexual behavior. While to Maha fidelity and virginity are a "special gift" she intends to offer her husband on their wedding night, Ibtihaj remains defiant. "Because it is such a big deal," she declares, "I am determined to lose it." She also need not confine herself to heterosexual sex. "If I lived abroad I might have sex with a girl just to see how it feels." In other words, far from being unnatural or deviant, homosexuality is seen as a way of

constructing or reconstructing sexual arrangements and relationships to suit real human needs. It is a personal choice one makes and, as such, deserves respect and acceptance.

I don't have anything against gays. In fact, I have many gay friends. My dad, however, insists they are abnormal and a threat to society. (Nina)

Concluding Remarks

In undertaking this exploratory case study I was fully aware of the unusual nature of the sample and its rather contrived classroom setting; more so since it focused on textual material and discourse rather than actual sexual behavior. Given, however, the resilient cultural taboos in Lebanon that continue to impose formidable constraints on free and candid discussion of sexuality, the classroom became an expedient and "natural" sanctuary in which to explore such forbidden and censored issues. Judging by the positive reactions of students, the experience was more than just an expressive outlet of repressed desires and hidden fantasies. It proved also cathartic and didactic, thereby revealing the importance of providing neutral settings and diminutive "public spheres" where the young can freely communicate and share common concerns away from the public gaze.

Students persistently and repeatedly argued for a liberalized conception of sex, stressing the need to move it into an arena where rational and experimental approaches rather than moral thinking and behavior can, and indeed should, occur. In fact, if I am to invoke a common conceptual distinction, one can discern a shift from an essentialist to a constructionist perspective.

All recognized the urgent need for a new language in the absence of adequate vocabulary to articulate expanding possibilities in the intimate sphere of sexual experiences. Even though a healthy, open attitude towards sex allowed students to explore the vital role it plays in their lives with little or no inhibition, language remains a constraining factor.

Finally, I would like to extract a few broad and unanticipated inferences from the study, particularly as they prefigure the need for a decentered and more public debate on such sensitive and contested issues. Although the findings represent no more

than the cloistered views of students sheltered in the comfort zone of a classroom, the significance of the results, marginal or sketchy as they may seem, should not be belittled or undermined. Pinar (1997), among others, has argued that when given voice, marginal views begin to circulate in the mainstream, where they are invariably taken into account and recorded. Though in danger of being controlled or greatly modified by a regulatory regime (Foucault, 1980), they still possess the power to disrupt and discredit those at the center, once they form a space capable of being analyzed in articulation with others. Judith Butler (1990) recognizes the need “both to theorize essential spaces from which to speak while simultaneously deconstructing them to prevent solidifying” (p.118). Keeping sexual identities fluid leaves room for diversity, which will open up yet more spaces from which to speak.

Judging by subsequent conversations I have had with my female students outside the classroom, they seem determined to continue exploring the changing shape of sexual differences. Furthermore, they remain acutely aware that crossing boundaries only sets up new boundaries that must be continuously transgressed in order to avoid the

strictures that accompany the static nature of rigid, inflexible views. Once again, in other words, seemingly private emotional narrative engagement had the potential to expand further than the confines of our classroom setting. It provided the opportunity to move beyond situated literacy and the mere crafting of sex texts. In telling their stories, students ventured out of the margins to negotiate public and private positionings, and by externalizing views they formed a realm capable of being analyzed in articulation with others. The autonomous comfort zone was transformed into a participatory contact zone, where diverse ideas could be openly debated against a shifting landscape of possibilities and alternative frameworks. Awareness was refined and heightened through imaginative text creation, open and critical discourse. In our shared space, diverse perceptions concerning sexual identity served to increase and sharpen awareness in ways that ultimately unsettled and transformed rigid ways of seeing, both in and beyond the classroom.

Roseanne Saad Khalaf is assistant professor of English and Creative Writing at the American University of Beirut (AUB).
Email: rk04@aub.edu.lb

REFERENCES

- Bauman, Z.** (2005). *Liquid life*. Cambridge UK: Polity Press.
- Bhabba, H. K.** (1990). *Nation and narration*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P.** (1993). *The field of cultural production*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Butler, J.** (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Cameron, D.** (2002). Beyond alienation: An integrated approach to women and language. In M. Toolan (Ed.), *Critical discourse analysis: Critical concepts in linguistics* (pp. 280-305). London: Routledge.
- Coates, J.** (1989). Gossip revisited: Language in all-female groups. In J. Coates & D. Cameron (Eds.), *Women in speech communities* (pp. 94-121). London: Longman.
- Durkheim, E.** (1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. New York: Free Press.
- Foucault, M.** (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings*. New York: Panthen.
- Goffman, E.** (1971). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hall, S.** (1991). The local and the global: Globalization & ethnicity. In A.D. King (Ed.), *Culture, globalization and the world system*. Binghamton: SUNY.
- Hannerz, U.** (1996). *Transactional connections*. London: Routledge.
- Pinar, W.** (1997). Regimes of reason and the male narrative voice. In W. Tierney & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Representation and the text* (p.p. 81-113). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Seidman, S.** (1992). *Embattled eros*. New York: Routledge.
- Tannen, D.** (1991). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. London: Virago.
- Weeks, J.** (1995). *Invented moralities*. New York: Columbia University Press.