
Reviewed by Christian Norman, Department of Communication, Georgia State University.

The collection of poems included in This Assignment is So Gay edited by Megan Volpert not only provides an enjoyable reading opportunity, they also significantly contribute voice to the lived experience of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) educators. This book continues in the vein of books like Karen Harbeck’s Coming Out of the Classroom Closet and Rita Kissen’s The Last Closet, which seek to give voice to those in the LGBTIQ community regarding their experiences in education. Unlike those pieces, which utilize mostly interviewing techniques, Volpert’s collection gathers LGBTIQ voices through their own pieces of poetry. While not the first collection of such voices, This Assignment is So Gay nonetheless gives a glimpse into the lived experience of a population that often is silenced and ignored in a refreshingly aesthetic form.

While reading the book, the rhetorician in me was looking for a consistent argument that wove the poems together. However, This Assignment is So Gay does not function as a coherent narrative in which all the poems work nicely together. Some authors attempt to make connections between sexuality and other maligned subjectivities (such as deafness and obesity) while others make explicit the uniqueness of challenges faced by LGBTIQ educators. Some poems focus on the sting of homophobia and heteronormative assumptions still prevalent in our society while others center on rays of hope and stories of solidarity. Even when confronting the prejudices of others, very few of the poets attempt to marshal traditional logical arguments in their defense. However, as I read looking for the central argument tying all the poems together, I began to realize that the multitude of voices with differing experiences actually lends strength to this collection. Rather than a single argument articulated throughout by different authors, this book stays true to the queer theory values of lending voice to a variety of differing viewpoints and perspectives. Further, while a few poems do indeed engage in logical argumentation, the greater value I gleaned from reading this book came in the glimpses of embodied reality expressed by the authors. Many of those who would choose to read this book are already likely to be familiar with the arguments for greater acceptance of LGBTIQ individuals in society and even the greater need for those voices to be present in an education environment, but the authors in this collection manage to take the reader with them through their own personal journeys navigating the academic world. The poets not only provide reasons why their stories matter logically, they also affectively engage the reader, which Kate Evans argues is crucial for making ties to the lived experience of educators. Knowing the logical arguments is only one step of understanding, hearing the stories of those actually living the experience and being moved by them deepens the connection to those arguments. The multitude of voices also confronts the reader with the reality that there is no singular queer experience, not even for a specific subsection of the population that chose to become educators.

This Assignment is So Gay is important to educators and pedagogy because of the stories it tells. Kevin Jennings argued in Telling Tales Out of School that stories told by queer educators can become the “best weapons” for fighting homophobia. For other LGBTIQ educators and/or students, the voices in this collection can serve as a reminder that others deal with some of the same issues as they. While these readers may not necessarily have the same story as all the poets, the diversity of lived history within the book makes it more likely that they will have one to which they can connect. Some of the poems point to the impact an LGBTIQ educator can make in the life of a student coming to grips with their own sexual identity. This book can serve a similar role for a wider audience. For those, like myself, who are not

2 Kate Evans, Negotiating the Self: Identity, Sexuality, and Emotion in Learning to Teach (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002).
LGBTIQ, the book is important because it is important to hear these voices and stories that are not our own. Especially within the ivory tower of academia, one can forget the struggles that still exist, even within those same walls. The stories and histories collected here break down some of that happy façade. Educators, even those that consider themselves allies to the LGBTIQ community, can use a periodic reminder of the privilege afforded their sexual identity position. If nothing else, being faced with some of the pedagogical perspectives described in some of the poems is a reminder that we often take a standpoint that assumes the normativity of heterosexuality in our own lessons.

While the collection of poems presented in *This Assignment is So Gay* is a much needed foray into the world of LGBTIQ experiences in education, I do think some voices ring louder than others, presenting a possibility for future literature to explore. First, the poems that dealt most directly with homophobia and/or heteronormativity were often from the experience of primary school educators. It may be that LGBTIQ educators have found fewer obstacles within institutes of higher education, but I was still surprised by the disparity (for those looking for poems specifically addressing higher education, see poems by Gabriel Sylvian, Ron Riekki, Kenneth Pobo, Lisa L. Moore, Stephen S. Mills, Lucien Darjeun Meadows, Jeff Mann, Ralph Malachowski, Nathan Alling Long, Timothy Liu, Sarah-Jean Krahn, Charles Jensen, and Arielle Greenberg). Also, while the voices of lesbian, gay, and even bisexual educators are fairly well represented, the book seems to lack such a strong representation of those on the fringes of the LGBTIQ spectrum. Perhaps the intersection of transgendered-educator-poets is a small pool from which to choose. However, I would have liked to hear the stories of those for whom some of the advances in wider cultural acceptance have come much slower. While the voices presented in *This Assignment is So Gay* offer a multiplicity of perspectives, it does not offer the only or quintessential LGBTIQ experience, nor could it. In fact, my criticisms seem to suggest that what we need are outlets for even more voices, perhaps a sequel.