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On Queer Intercourse

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ON QUEER INTERCOURSE

A Guest Editorial

QUEER INTERCOURSE MAKES STRANGE BED FELLOWS

Brett Beemyn

In 1987, the Lesbian and Gay Studies Center at Yale University convened the first national conference to bring together people interested in Queer Studies. Approximately 300 lesbians, gays, and bisexuals attended this groundbreaking three day event. Over the next few years, the conference grew exponentially, as it was held successively at Yale, Harvard, and Rutgers-Princeton. The conference journeyed to the Midwest for the first time in 1994, when lesbians, gays, and bisexuals at the University of Iowa sponsored InQueery, InTheory, InDeed: The Sixth North American Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies Conference. With more than 130 panels, discussions, and workshops, and over 400 presenters, InQueery has been the largest Queer Studies conference convened so far.

The organizers at Rutgers-Princeton suggested to us following their conference that one of the next conferences should be held at The University of Iowa because of the large, active queer community in Iowa City. This community involvement was subsequently demonstrated by the number of people who contributed to InQueery. While Meredith Alexander and myself put in countless hours as the conference co-chairs, a tremendous amount of work was also done by about 20 steering committee members, who organized everything from entertainment and art exhibits to community housing and child care. In addition, hundreds of other people helped with various tasks, offered their homes to house conference attendees, and volunteered to staff registration tables.

The broad-based organizing effort for InQueery was also reflected in the involvement of local artists and activists in both the conference and conference planning; from the beginning, we wanted the event to be accessible and applicable to all lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people, rather

than just hard-core academics. Bisexuality was another area where InQueery attempted to be inclusive. At the 1990 conference at Harvard, the word “bisexual” was included in the title of the conference, but the organizers at Rutgers-Princeton chose to rename it the “Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference” the following year. When we started planning for InQueery, not only did we put the word “bisexual” back in the title, but we also worked to ensure that it would actually mean something. The Iowa conference broke new ground by having a bi keynote speaker, Lani Ka’ahumanu, and having more bisexual papers than any prior Queer Studies conference—in part because a special effort was made to solicit and to include bisexual work. Unfortunately, attempts to be as inclusive of transgendered people met with opposition within the steering committee. Efforts to include “transgender” in the title of the conference failed, although some excellent transgender papers were presented at InQueery.

It was also proposed that the University of Iowa host the Queer Studies conference because of the University’s history of supporting lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns. The human rights policy of the University, for example, provides for protection based upon “affectional and associational preference,” and in 1991 the University of Iowa became the first major school in the country to extend domestic partner benefits to same-sex couples. But, initially, top University administrators were reluctant to provide much institutional support for InQueery, seemingly out of concern for how a national Queer Studies conference would be received by the Board of Regents and play in small-town Iowa. Not until it became clear that the conference was a *fait accompli* and more than a thousand queers were coming here regardless did the University administration get on board, and then, in my opinion, largely for possible damage control. Never did they offer much financial assistance, despite knowing that such a large conference might not be able to pay for itself; their overriding concern was not wanting “an incident” to arise that could irk the Regents or lead to a large number of heterosexist complaints.

The absurd lengths to which top administrators went to prevent a controversy that could bring even their half-hearted support of the conference into question is demonstrated by their reaction to our decision to hold the InQueery coffeehouse in a public space. Fearing that some unsuspecting heterosexual might wander in, the University took the unusual step of waiving the fee to the room so that it could be closed to all but conference attendees. Furthermore, they requested that we put up a sign warning those who entered the room that they may find some of the performers’ material offensive and that we also have someone standing at the door to make sure that only individuals with conference name badges gained admittance. While we refused to include their “offensive” language on a sign, a posted warning was still required of us, and the title of the last performance, “The Safer Sex (W)rap Song,” was inexplicably changed on publicity materials to the less explicit “closing anthem.”

The noticeable change in the University’s support for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals that was made apparent during the planning of the conference demonstrates the neo-McCarthyite atmosphere that has arisen at the University

of Iowa in the past few years. One need look no further than the classroom materials policy, which has encouraged students to object to any course content about lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people.¹ Last semester, for example, a student in my Literatures of the African Peoples class had her mother call the program director and subsequently wrote a letter herself to complain because I had included material about Black lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people in the course, and required the class to attend the conference. Never mind that I had followed the policy and announced all requirements and expectations on the first day of class and also included similar statements on the syllabus. In this hostile atmosphere, students feel justified to challenge any queer content as too much.

Thus, while InQueery, InTheory, InDeed was a tremendous success and a boost to efforts to establish a Sexuality Studies Program at the University of Iowa, the conference's achievements are tempered by the ongoing climate of intolerance here for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people. It seems that bringing more than a thousand people to The University of Iowa to discuss Queer Studies is one thing, but trying to teach such material in the classroom is another.

¹Jean Fallow, Israel Reyes, and Josiane Peltier. "The Regents' Big Stick Policy." *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* (13) 1-12.

HOW TO HAVE QUEER INTERCOURSE IN A RECESSION

Kevin Floyd

in-ter-course. *n.* 1. Dealings or communications between persons or groups. 2. Sexual intercourse.

The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition

My title is in honor of the mother of a junior high school student in suburban Fort Worth, where I'm from, who in the early eighties attempted to get a book removed from her child's school library when she discovered it contained the word "intercourse." No kidding. Apparently unaware of the fact that there are many different kinds of intercourse, she was, I suppose, offended. (Sound familiar?) Asked to write this editorial, I was encouraged to consider the apparent irony of last fall's queer studies conference roughly coinciding with the imposition of the classroom materials policy, a policy which, as others have often pointed out, inevitably encourages homophobia; and as I was pondering this irony my mind wandered, as it sometimes does, to queer intercourse. A theme that keeps recurring for me is economics: how to maintain queer intercourse in an age of shrinking budgets.

I have tried to make sense of the above irony by thinking about my own experiences with both the conference and the policy. I was on the conference steering committee beginning in the fall of 1992, contending at a distance with

conference funding problems generally and, more directly, with the usually frustrating and sometimes maddening problem of finding community housing space for low-income participants. And, like so many others, I have in my own classes been contending with the materials policy since its imposition. This policy, as has frequently been pointed out, equates students with consumers and quality education with consumer satisfaction it also encourages the idea that taxpayers have the right to impose ideological parameters on state classrooms.¹ I have contended with the policy in a variety of ways: I have made some rather gutless attempts to subvert it, like when I intentionally failed to “warn” my class about the two or three brief instances of queer imagery in Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”; I have tried to mock it, when, for instance, I showed a class the first fifteen minutes of *Pillow Talk* and warned them about the shot of Doris Day’s bare legs which opens the film (warning: this film contains heterosexist, depressingly fifties content!); and I have been shamelessly cautious, as when, in the spring of 1994, I warned my students about the homosexually graphic scenes they would encounter when I required them to read Martin Sherman’s play *Bent*.

My experience teaching *Bent* in 8G:1, the introductory literature course for non-English majors, illustrates some of The Policy’s insidious effects. The play concerns the persecution of gay men in Nazi Germany. On the one hand, much of the discussion went well. By that point in the semester, I had developed a good rapport with my students, and many of them trusted that at least I had a good reason for teaching the play, even if they had problems with the sexual explicitness. On the other hand, this experience was the context of what I consider one of my biggest failures of the semester. A male student who had said very little all semester, we’ll call him Bill, did finally speak up about *Bent*, arguing that the sex was gratuitous. To my dismay, he was immediately silenced, “shot down” as our students sometimes put it, by two or three classmates who loudly insisted that only a homophobe could have such an attitude. I was not persuaded by this position myself, and was unprepared for the possibility that I would feel the strong need I felt at that moment to validate a position like Bill’s. I expected his view to be more typical of the class generally and so I was, from the beginning, on the defensive—as were, obviously, some of my students. And I did not succeed in getting Bill back into the conversation.

The currents which fuel such confrontations are pervasive in classrooms on this campus. Instructors are afraid of students and students are afraid of instructors. Of course many undergraduates understand what a condescending policy this is, don’t see their position as that of consumers, and are insulted by the assumption that they need protection. However, much of what I have read in the press and inferred from my own students suggests that there is a significant portion of the undergraduate population that supports the policy. My guess is that they have been exposed to so much sensationalism that they believe they have to be protected from their instructors, that the policy is the only thing keeping them from being bombarded with pornography. “Maybe there are problems with the policy,” I have heard students remark, “but I don’t want to be forced to watch *that*.” The classroom materials policy not only condescends to students and

teachers and implicitly endorses homophobia; it also creates a contentious, potentially hostile atmosphere, an atmosphere in which students and teachers alike are encouraged to assume, *from the beginning*, that they will have to defend themselves from “offensive” attitudes. I wouldn’t want to push this analogy too far, but Albert Einstein’s much-quoted remark that one “cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war” speaks to the atmosphere this policy has created.

Yet the Sixth North American Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Studies Conference, of all things, landed smack in the middle of our delicate sensibilities last fall, the first time the conference had taken place anywhere but on the east coast. The irony of having the conference on a campus with such a policy was not lost on many of the participants; Larry Gross and Esther Newton, two of the more eminent queer studies scholars in the nation, led a demonstration against the policy outside the IMU on the conference’s second day. This irony reached absurd proportions even before the conference began, when concern about offending wandering homophobes who might stumble into the conference led the Administration to ask the steering committee to make sure that only people registered and with name badges were allowed into panel sessions. Thus even graduate students on this campus were informed that without a name badge they would not be admitted to any panels.

The main reason graduate students were asked to register, though, was the cost of having the conference. Some graduate students who wanted to attend were understandably confused and frustrated when they discovered in the weeks and months before the conference that not only were we asking them to pay, but we could not provide them with a schedule of panels ahead of time—because we couldn’t afford it. (I found myself trying to spread word in the English Department that I had a tentative schedule if anyone wanted to photocopy it.) A contracting economy was a formidable opponent of the conference from the beginning; money was by no means forthcoming. Indeed our financial situation was at times so precarious that the conference came close to being cancelled last summer, only a few months before it was scheduled to take place. And one of the few organizations which actually offered promising prospects for grant money was none other than *Playboy*—and for a few seconds in the summer of 1993 we actually discussed the possibility of taking their money—an index of how desperate we were.

Whereas the classroom materials policy seems largely the product of forces inside Iowa but outside Iowa City, the conference was, to the contrary, the product of Iowa City activists, scholars, and community members. This distinction is not unrelated to the distinction often made between Iowa City and “the rest of the state.” Brochures advertising the conference jokingly described Iowa City as “the Babylon of the Midwest.” Or maybe just half-jokingly: this is, after all, one of the most gay-affirming communities in the nation, a community with a political climate that differs in seemingly endless ways from that of the state as a whole. Of course I’m relying on big generalizations here, but the attitude of the vocal Iowa taxpayers who support the policy was for me starkly contrasted with the level of local support for the conference I encountered as I sought out

community housing space in the months preceding it. Painful familiarity with both the financial constraints and the intensely competitive professional environment faced by graduate students was what motivated me to work on community housing. Laura Baker and I were the community housing committee, and I can report that from our perspective, at least, the response of Iowa City residents to this conference was overwhelmingly positive. We had between eighty and ninety requests for community housing space and were able to respond affirmatively to all but three or four of them. Literally dozens of offers came in during the week before the conference, many from church members responding to the request for housing we put in their bulletins; and ultimately we were offered space far in excess of demand. This indicates to me a high level of support for the conference in the community (notwithstanding the impressions to the contrary made by the local news media—television in particular—while the conference was taking place). Almost all participants with community housing were placed in private homes. Laura and I had tried at first to find large spaces, such as churches, that might be able to put up large numbers of people on cots, but with no luck; we probably put no more than ten people in various housing cooperatives around the city, and everyone else slept on someone's spare bed, someone's couch, someone's floor. One woman put seven strangers on the floor of her living room and told me that she could take more if necessary. A thousand (or at least eighty) points of Iowa City light: George Bush would be proud.

Indeed, one cannot avoid noting the strange fact that if tight economic times stifle queer intercourse in some places, they facilitate it in others. Queer studies has in fact become, at least in some disciplines, one of the more marketable means of entry into the liberal academy. I have been advised by more than one faculty member that the focus on issues of sexuality in my own dissertation will, in the current environment, work in my favor, especially in terms of publication prospects. I bring this up in part because a big splash was made at the conference by *Judy!*, the infamous “fanzine” begun on this campus by Andrea Lawlor-Mariano (a.k.a. “Miss Spentyouth”) which draws wonderfully comic attention to the emerging institutional status of queer studies. *Judy!* was in high demand at the conference, even though it has been stridently demonized by Judith Butler, the academic superstar it idolizes. There have in fact been rumours, which I cannot substantiate, that this little zine was the reason for Ms. Butler's noticeable absence from the conference (this editorial is sounding more like *Judy!* every minute); there are certainly people in the field who have reservations about it. I was in the book display with my own copy of *Judy!* and the representative from the press which publishes Butler tried to explain to me why they didn't like the zine, that it allegedly mocks one of their hottest authors. I tried to convince him that the phenomenon of academic stardom is ripe—overripe, even—for parody. And *Judy!* is wonderful parody; Miss Spentyouth has achieved the dream of every young scholar: she is published. Her productivity, not to mention her occasional refusal to take money for issues (there were moments at the conference when she simply gave them away), is, I think, a

blistering commentary on the pressure to produce which pervades academia in a tight job market, and which pervades queer studies in particular. Irony number two, then: while some queer studies scholars try to silence discussion of the unfortunate if inevitable role of the market in their own enterprise, *The Policy*, fueled by arguments which rely on the logic of the market, has silenced queer intercourse in UI classrooms.

But by no means do I want to dismiss the discourse produced by queer studies; much of it is compelling and valuable (like most scholars, I certainly hope mine will be), and in a contracting economy it may very well be threatened. As I write this, I have just been watching an episode of *60 Minutes*, which did a story alleging, with typical stridency, that research and publishing is infinitely more valued than teaching in American universities. Many of us would probably agree with this to an extent, but the analogies used by the professors interviewed were depressingly familiar: Dennis Houston, who teaches English at Rice, remarked of the tuition-paying parents who subsidize scholarly research while their children are instructed (horror of all horrors) by T.A.s, that “it is important that the customer know that the customer is not always getting what the customer thinks he’s getting.” John Solomon, who teaches Classics at Arizona, went further: “I’m waiting for some powerful parent to sue a university for consumer fraud.”² These are not students or parents or taxpayers, but professors implying that education is a commodity for consumption. Like *The Policy*, such media depictions facilitate neither the circulation of queer intercourse in particular nor liberal education in general. Readers might consider writing Mr. Houston and Mr. Solomon and thanking them for the PR.

In my discipline, anyway, I have discovered that the connection between sexual liberation and economics doesn’t get explored very often. Economics isn’t very sexy and consequently queer studies scholars don’t tend to talk about it very much. But last fall’s frightening election results should have clarified things a bit: the Republican victory is another index of the precarious state of queer intercourse in shaky economic times. We who care about sexual liberation must remain organized and vigilant. We can at least do this much between dissertation chapters.

¹ For persuasive discussions of these matters, see the editorials “Strike Three” and “The Regents’ Big Stick Policy,” in the previous two volumes of this journal.

² *60 Minutes*, 26 February, 1995.

PUTTING THE SEX BACK INTO QUEER INTERCOURSE

Teresa Konechne

I was asked to co-write this editorial as a graduate student on the steering committee for the InQueery Conference. Unlike Kevin and Brett, words are not

my medium. My assumption that these sorts of things need to be written in “academic language” left me in a bit of a quandry. *That* language is difficult for me and to write that way would go against what I was trying to say in my role on the committee, which was that, we all have different needs, abilities and expertise. I communicate differently. I make things. My work is about being accessible to people who don’t have the knowledge or speak that language. It is about communicating with my family and the people I grew up with. I need to speak in my own voice, one that I am comfortable with. As the only woman and the only visual artist writing this editorial, I don’t want to step into undeserved stereotypes without explanation.

My experience surrounding the InQueery Conference was quite different depending on which hat I was wearing. I followed three different avenues: organizer, presenter and artist. I got involved about a year before it happened as Workshop Committee co-chair. In this capacity, we were able to marginally direct this part of the program into what we felt was a necessary addition to the conference. We wanted diversity, non-academic presentations, and we wanted people to have fun. We sat around brainstorming about the “call for workshops” and how to word it to bring in as many different kinds as we could. At some point I decided that I wanted to facilitate a workshop on a subject for which we hadn’t yet gotten any proposals....Sex. But I’ll talk about this later. As a member of the steering committee, I saw first hand the politics of putting on such a conference. I also got acquainted with the other committees and what they were looking for. I knew that we were working on sprinkling the town with queer art exhibits, so, not wanting to pass up a chance to blow my own horn as an artist, I wanted to participate in that way as well. This three part participation gave me a unique perspective about the conference, and let me work on my personal agenda as well.

The workshop committee had as its members two people from opposite sides of the academic world, Kelly Willson, a doctor of psychology and me, an MFA student in Intermedia Arts. We were in complete agreement on the fundamental function of the workshops for the conference: to provide an “alternative” venue to the papers. Our interests and needs are as diverse as we are people, so to stay in a solely academic venue was to exclude many of our brothers and sisters who don’t necessarily subscribe to that form of learning experience. With a mixture of topics and presentation formats, we hoped to break down the divisive elitism of academic language and thought; be as inclusive as possible; show that an academic conference can utilize many different ways of information dissemination and learning; and be overtly political.

We made a call for workshops that fell into, but were not limited to, these categories: community issues, political activism, issues of oppression, academics, art/performance, health, diversity and spirituality. We focused on proposals for workshops that were participatory in format, were inclusive of issues that had been left out of previous conferences, spanned the different needs of the community and had presenters from diverse backgrounds and experiences. What we ended up with was something in every category and then some. I know

we didn't meet the needs of all the conference participants, but, as my house guest, an academic Lesbian Avenger told me, "I can't believe it, I've been at this conference for two days and I haven't gone to one academic panel or paper. It's great—I've got to go to at least one paper before I leave." This conflict between activism and academia is an interesting and difficult position for some of us to be in. Some people are comfortable in either camp, but there are those of us that need to have this bridge to stand on and pull from both sides. I think the workshops were mostly in the opposite camp from the papers, but the question is *how* to bring these closer together, or *if* we should. But then you can certainly argue that bringing Queer Studies to college campuses is doing just that. Our history is too rooted in struggle, be it voluntary or involuntary, to speak about queerness on a strictly academic level. Where it gets tricky is that area between cerebral activism and physical activism. This is where the whole question of language and accessibility becomes very important. There's an interesting tension standing on that bridge and we certainly have much to learn from each other. That's the most important thing to remember, activists have similar goals, just different means.

Speaking about these two camps assumes that people are in one or the other, which we know is way off base. One of the things the workshops tried to do was appeal to people who are not in either camp. This is the more difficult task because educational institutions and political groups are the easiest to target. How do we get to the people, who, by choice or by necessity, have not made themselves available through the usual information flow. And, as an academic conference, just who are we trying to target? Do we strive for an all inclusive event, or keep it to the conference-goer types? I know what my answer is, but I don't know how feasible it is. It was difficult to get people in, partly, because it was hard to get the information out. Especially, since we live in a mostly homogeneous world, in a not-so-easy-to-get-to location, the diversity we were hoping for literally couldn't reach us due to situational constraints. This is a sad thing, and one I hope the next Queer Studies conference tries to deal with on a broader level. But, having said all that and considering InQueery was the first even to offer the workshop part of the program, I do believe we began to meet the needs of more people.

As I scanned the many different titles of workshops and saw grassroots organizing, Pomo Afro Homos, the Lesbian Avengers, poetry readings, play readings, racism and homophobia workshops, performance, bi/lesbian dialogues, internet and a myriad of things in between, I thought it interesting that no one was talking about something as implicit as sex. I found it quite amazing that from the point of view of the straight world, we're perverts and all we do is have sex, but in this conference, people were talking about everything to do with being queer, but the sex. So, being the adventurous spirit that I am, I thought I'll just have to cover that subject myself. I asked my partner, Jeanine Givens, to co-facilitate a discussion entitled: *Sex: the Practical, Political and Playful—for women only*. To be honest, I couldn't believe I was actually putting my name in print with this title underneath, (like I'm doing right now) since I had only been

“out” for a very short time. This whole conference was my debutante outing and it did, and still does, scare me. The *ICON* ran a feature issue on local artists with work in the conference and we had rainbow flag posters beside our works. The art department was a safe place for me, but the *ICON* felt like a vulnerable place. I felt my own transition from being an anonymous, “I think I might be queer” or “I’m queer but I’m in denial,” to “Here I am, my name is everywhere and now you have a face to go with it.” Need I say, it was a little nerve racking. Call it internalized homophobia, naiveté, down right fear, or anything you want, but it was there. I started to wonder if I would be discriminated against for housing, if the people who live above me would recognize my name from the mailbox and harass me, and I became acutely aware of just how small this town is. The fact that any of that was even there really pisses me off.

But anyway, I think I was talking about Sex. I went to another facilitated dialogue and thought that the structure they used was excellent. I asked one of the facilitators if she could give me some pointers on how to conduct this workshop. We talked about creating a safe environment for the women participating and the rules of respect. I told her that I wanted it to be fun, and that I wanted us to be the facilitators, not presenters. So she told me about this wonderful game to play which was safe, fun and informative. As participants, we made commitments to each other to close the workshop at 25 people and that no one would leave, unless they were uncomfortable, once the door was locked. This created the “safe” space that was crucial for us to feel comfortable. Jeanine started by holding up a photocopy of a vagina and said “you have to have one of these to be in the room.” This set the tone for a casual and open discussion. The women got to anonymously ask and answer our most practical and outrageous questions about sex. There were women from all levels of experience, knowledge and modesty. No one was pressured to say a word, but many people spoke up even if they were embarrassed. It was great to have older women speaking frankly about their long-lasting and fulfilling sex lives with their partners. Some of the comments that we received from the women were that they learned a lot, they were really glad to have a space to talk to other women about some of the more current issues around sex and that, of course, they had fun. I too had fun, learned a lot, got over my shyness a little about talking about sex and felt affirmed as a facilitator to have such commitment and openness from the women.

My third and final part in the conference was as an artist. Of course, I had not just one, not even two, but three pieces in the show including a video, which was a triptych. (Am I in a rut?) I think the art portion of the conference was probably one of the least visited elements of the entire program. People may have been overwhelmed by the enormity of the program and cultural events, and so never got to see things in other buildings. Of my three pieces, *First Blood* in WRAC was a women’s participatory piece about menstruation, the video triptych, *pink/donna/3*, were lesbian pieces and *the farm show* in the Drewelow Gallery was a progressional installation surrounding issues of growing up on a farm. This installation as well as one of the videos were new pieces specifically made for the conference. When I was thinking about what to put in the gallery,

I was concerned with the fact that drawing a panorama of my farm and including the stories of my life there would not be considered “queer art.” I wondered if there would be some backlash about the fact that I am in a visible place, I have the chance to make a statement about being queer, and I put farm girl stories on the wall. But it was exactly this concern that made me feel strong with my decision to not do that, because this is what this conference is all about for me. Being queer is a part of me, it’s not my entire life. I don’t need to always exploit this part of me because there’s much more than that. We are all much more than that.