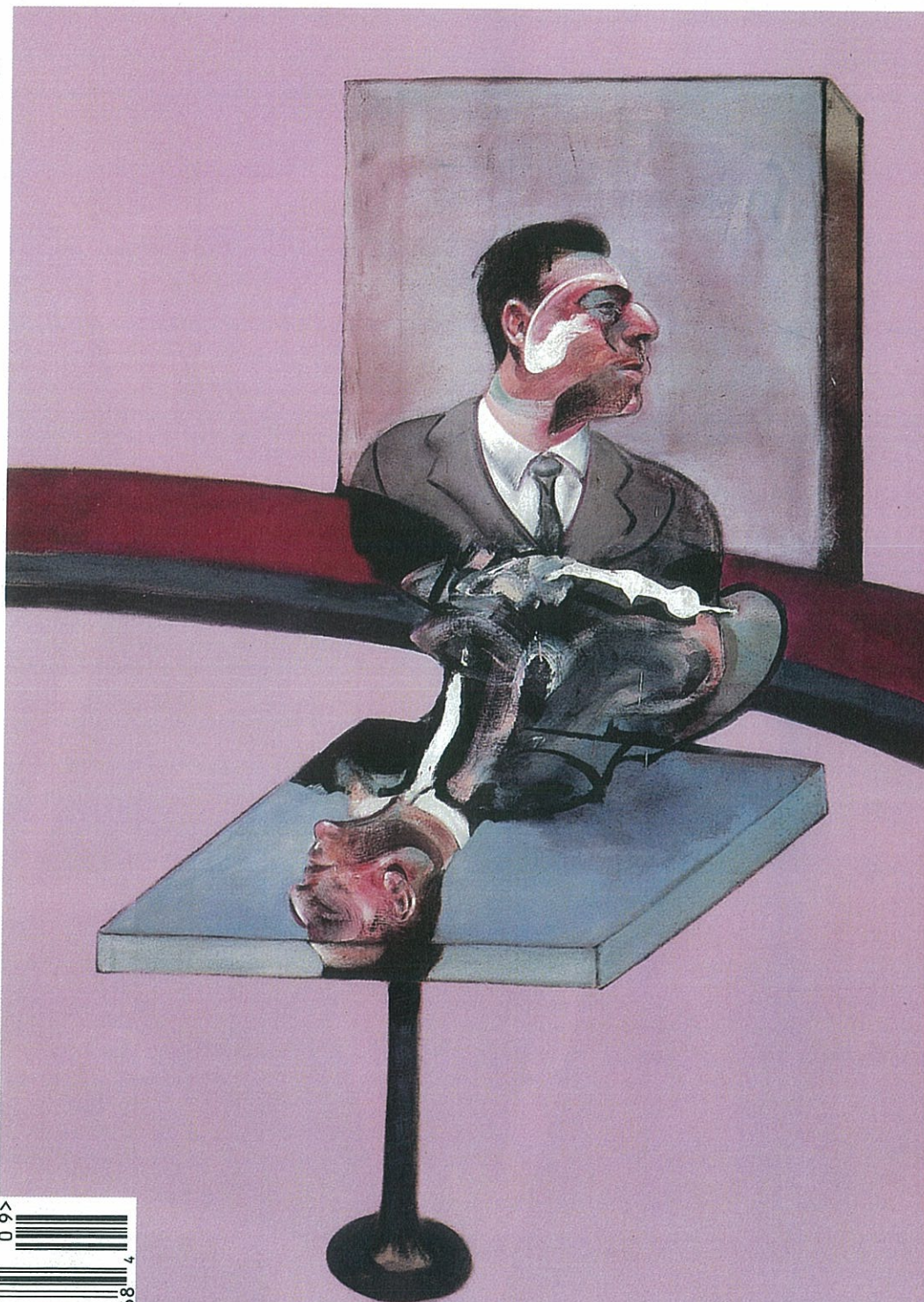


The Gay & Lesbian Review

WORLDWIDE

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2009

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Francis Bacon. *Triptych in Memory of George Dyer* (detail), 1971

SKIRMISHES

LARRY KRAMER

Queer Theory's Heist
of Our History

CAROL BOOTH

The Smart States

LAWRENCE BLECHNER

Psychoanalysis
Heals Itself

STEVEN SURMAN

Coming Out Mormon

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The Science of Intersex



Is *Brüno* for real?
by Andrew Holleran

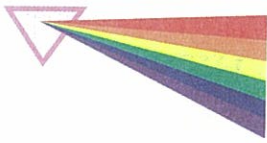


Is Francis Bacon serious?
by Cassandra Langer



Mendelsohn's Cavafy
by Alfred Corn





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Out of the Classroom at Princeton

AMIN GHAZIANI

DURING the Spring 2009 semester at Princeton University, my students in “Queer Theory and Politics” and I staged a demonstration on campus against the National Organization for Marriage (NOM), a Princeton-based nonprofit organization whose self-described mission is “to protect marriage and the faith communities that sustain it.” We protested their \$1.5 million ad campaign, ominously titled “A Gathering Storm,” in which paid actors presaged, “There’s a storm gathering. The clouds are dark and the winds are strong, and I am afraid. Some who advocate for same-sex marriage have taken the issue far beyond same-sex couples. They want to bring the issue into my life. My freedom will be taken away. ... The storm is coming.”

Embracing a program of action-based learning, I had my students apply theories of queer politics by staging an actual demonstration. Aristotle was my inspiration: “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” Or consider Confucius: “Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.” Early education theorist John Dewey, along with contemporaries such as David Kolb and others, have empirically validated the mutuality between thinking and acting, exposure and experience.

Aware of possible risks, I took three precautions: We voted on the idea (the decision was unanimously in favor), I invited students to e-mail me privately if anyone did not want to speak out publicly against the idea (no one did), and I allowed students to observe from the sidelines during the event itself (two students did). Like any other class session, this final one was mandatory. Unbeknownst to my students, they would have to use course frameworks for a postmortem analysis on their final exam. Thus, the progression from reading and discussing academic materials in class, to implementing our own queer political event, and then formally reflecting on it in an exam made for a productive synthesis of theory, practice, and analysis.

But a formal complaint against the exercise obliged the university to respond in a way that raised a series of difficult questions: What is the role of the classroom in campus demonstrations and contemporary politics? Do classroom-based political exercises require drawing clear lines between mandatory participation versus observation? Is there a way to dialogue political theory and practice with students—particularly in the context of a course on queer theory and politics, and in the presence of an instructor—without running the risk of coercion? And how does academic freedom factor into this mix? What follows is a story about an exercise in experiential learning that complicates the relationship between pedagogy and politics.

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QUEER THEORY AND POLITICS

Queer theory emerged in the late 1980’s in academic conferences at elite American universities. Expressed through rejections (of conventional wisdom) and embraces (of an alternate vision), sociologists Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer offer several “hallmarks” as “a plea for massive transgression of all conventional categorizations,” especially those of gender and sexuality:

1. Reject invariant categories. Terms like “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are not transhistorical. Historian Jonathan Ned Katz, for example, has shown that German sodomy-law reformer Karl Maria Kerbeny coined both terms in 1868. Philosopher Michel Foucault identified 1870 as the date of birth for the modern homosexual: “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny. ... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” Queer theorists embrace historical variation and a constructed view of reality.

2. Reject impermeable categories. The origins of sexual orientation—is it born or bred?—is undetermined. Neuroscientist Simon

LeVay argues that homosexuality is genetic, based on his controversial finding that the gay men and straight women have a similarly sized hypothalamus (a tiny area of the brain that presumably controls sexuality). To this, psychologist John Money retorts, “Of course it [sexual orientation] is in the brain. The real question is,

when did it get there? Was it prenatal, neonatal, during childhood, puberty? That we do not know.” This uncertainty prompts queer theorists to embrace membership fluidity and fluctuations.

3. Reject comparing sexuality to race/ethnicity. The late Eve Sedgwick argues that the metaphor of “the closet” is imperfectly portable to race/ethnicity, which renders tenuous any such comparisons. There are seven dimensions of difference that I translate into the following terms: mutability (gays, unlike people of color, are asked if their identity is a “phase”); knowability (gays, unlike people of color, are uncertain about who else might know of their identity); impact (gays, unlike people of color, worry that their coming out will hurt their loved ones); implications (unlike people of color, when a gay person comes out, the erotic identity of the person receiving the information is also implicated and potentially questioned); power (gays, unlike people of color, are not surprised to find that a homophobic public figure in power later comes out as gay); answerability (gays, unlike people of color, have a weak sense of their heritage and history); and gender (gays, unlike people of color, find their erotic and gender identities conflated and therefore disrupted). This elaborate framework has motivated queer theorists to embrace the distinctiveness of sexuality.

4. Reject conceptual dualisms. Power operates through the im-

Embracing a program of action-based learning, I had my students apply theories of queer politics by staging an actual demonstration.

position of binaries such as gay *or* straight, male *or* female, masculine *or* feminine. According to sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, this process of “lumping and splitting” is inconsistent with an “essentially continuous” reality. Classicist David Halperin uncovers in ancient Greece a society populated by *molles*, or effeminate men, and *tribades*, or masculine women. Historian George Chauncey finds in early 20th-century New York that a man could have sex with another man without anyone questioning his sexual normality. A world of “trade,” “husbands,” and “wolves” existed in a highly gender-segregated bachelor subculture alongside “fairies,” “third-sexers,” and “punks.” Sociologist Peter Hennen shows that the “wedding date” of effeminacy and homosexuality was cemented in the popular imagination in the 18th century, while English professor Judith Halberstam asserts that masculinity must be understood apart from the male body and its effects. Because our existing categories imperfectly map onto lived experience, queer theorists advise us to eradicate all categories completely and expand to a system of multiple categories and continua or to reconceptualize how we form categories. To this end, political scientist Cathy Cohen suggests that the “radical potential of queer politics” lies in using the unequal distribution of power to form alliances, rather than creating them narrowly along identity.

5. Reject interest group politics. According to this final hallmark, lobbying and other forms of electoral politics are not the most effective ways to create change. Queer theorists embrace instead a confrontational program of “cultural provocation” or a theatrical “politics of parody” at the street-level. They do not want to meet with their congressperson to ask for a slice of the legislative pie. The goal is cultural revisionism, or rethinking what is considered normal and natural. Signature actions, as summarized by English professors Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, include kiss-ins, mall visibility actions, taking over straight bars, fliering neighborhoods, or spray painting queer-positive graffiti.

STAGING A QUEER POLITICAL DEMONSTRATION ON CAMPUS

We met during our usual class time on McCosh Walk, a heavily populated campus thoroughfare. Everyone brought an umbrella, a visual symbol we invoked to parody NOM’s “gathering storm” ad. Around the circumference of each umbrella, we taped multiple copies of a sign that asserted, “EQUALITY IS THE ONLY GATHERING STORM.” Imagine the sight on a sunny Wednesday afternoon: ten students, dressed to represent the colors of the rainbow flag, carrying equality umbrellas. It was brilliant and beautiful. Two students abstained from participating and observed from the sidelines. As promised, I did not penalize them for this, nor did they receive any noticeable censure from their classmates.

We clogged McCosh walk, making it impossible for anyone to avoid confronting us. To each person we encountered we would ask, “Have you heard of the National Organization for Marriage?” This opening line facilitated a conversation about the organization, their “gathering storm” ad, the connections between the organization and the University, and same-sex marriage in general.

We also distributed a double-sided flier that the students themselves had designed. On one side was a striking photograph of a lightning bolt, against which in large block letters was the rhetorically mocking question, “Gay Storm Ahead?” The flip side provided information. At the very top in all-caps was the main message: “SAME-SEX MARRIAGE: YOU DECIDE.” Underneath it stated, “WE THINK,” and here we articulated a pro-same-sex marriage

stance. Beneath this we outlined both the pro and con arguments. And off to the right, we provided a Web link for more information. This was an intellectually balanced flier that urged people to think, rather than be persuaded by fear.

The day after our demonstration, the student newspaper printed a photograph of our demonstration on its front page. The image was one of our equality umbrellas with the following caption: “Students in SOC 354/WOM 354: Queer Theory and Politics protest the National Organization for Marriage on McCosh Walk on Wednesday afternoon.”

Five days later, an administrator requested a private meeting with me. Someone had seen this photo and complained. The university’s nonprofit status prevents it from taking official stands on political issues. An ad hoc demonstration by students is one thing, but a demonstration staged under the auspices of a course flirts with crossing this line. The university wanted to alert me to this problem. The administrator calling the meeting also wanted an explanation for why I did what I did—and what steps I took to ensure that no student felt coerced into participating. Although he indicated to me privately that he and many others favored marriage equality, he was forced to act as an agent of the institution once the complaint had been registered.

As a result, all of my students received the following e-mail from the university:

The University’s guidelines for partisan political activity are defined as follows in the Rights, Rules, Responsibilities document:

“Encouragement of an interest in public affairs and the furthering of a sense of social responsibility have long been considered important elements of a liberal education. The University continues to consider self-chosen participation in political and social action by individuals and groups to be a valuable part of the educational experience it seeks to encourage. Such activities on the part of individuals or groups do not, and should not be taken to, imply commitment of the University to any partisan political position or point of view.

“A recent exercise in a class entitled Queer Theory and Politics (SOC 354 / WOM 354) involved a demonstration that occurred during a class period. While this was designed as an exercise to supplement the pedagogy in the class, it violated the spirit of this University guideline. In particular, it did not allow students the *self-choice participation* mentioned in the above excerpt...I also invite Princeton students who have concerns about partisan political activities in other classes to contact me so that we might arrange a confidential meeting with me or a member of my staff.”

This letter is a measured response from an administration that was institutionally obliged to address the complaint that had been lodged, even as individuals were (privately) supportive of my action. But the larger question lingers: is there a way to bring activism into the classroom—especially in a course that is transparently about political action—but avoid the charge of violating the prohibition on “partisan political activity”?

It brought me great joy to learn that my students defended our action—and in ways that provide possible answers. One particularly bright student forwarded to me her message:

You write that Professor Ghaziani’s exercise “did not allow students the *self-choice participation*.” I must correct you, for Professor Ghaziani explicitly offered an opt-out option to any student who may have felt uncomfortable participating in the protest. Furthermore, I am concerned when you imply that our exercise was a partisan po-

litical action. You write "I also invite Princeton students who have concerns about partisan political activities in other classes to contact me," suggesting that this class has demonstrated such an activity. Surely, protesting for equal rights for ALL citizens of the United States (regardless of their sexual orientation) is not a partisan issue but a human rights matter which all political parties should support...Applying the theory we have studied in class to a real-life event was an interesting and productive task."

Another student defended our action in a face-to-face encounter with the president:

Personally, I felt that it was a valuable way to apply what we had learned over the course of the semester in a real-life context—something I haven't been able to do with any of my other courses at Princeton. I thought I should [also] let you know that [the] President ... asked me directly about the exercise. ... While the president emphasized that she stands staunchly on the side of marriage equality, she believes that mandating that students attend such a demonstration—even as passive observers—would put dissenting students in an awkward position. I told her that I thought you had communicated quite clearly prior to the actual exercise that anybody who felt uncomfortable with the demonstration should let you know privately, and that I didn't feel any pressure to participate.

THE CLASSROOM AND CAMPUS DEMONSTRATIONS

The 1962 Port Huron Statement was an inspired manifesto of the American student movement that demanded universities to "permit the political life to be an adjunct to the academic one." Author Tom Hayden of the Students for a Democratic Society pitted idealistic students against a university that favored what he called a "business-as-usual, getting ahead, playing it cool" mentality and that exhibited a "mass reluctance toward the controversial public stance." Despite putative notions of academic freedom, worlds

collide in a university context when visions for social change are potentially blinded by fine distinctions between pedagogy and politics, observation and participation. Sociologist Todd Gitlin has shown that 1960's student movements successfully wedded political engagement with the college experience. The aftermath of my class's exercise sits uncomfortably next to this observation. If protesting is a quintessential part of college life, then why was our campus demonstration challenged by the university? What would Hayden think of today's college campuses?

Gitlin may have been correct about the political fervor of the 1960's, but something has shifted. In 2007, *New York Times* writer Rick Perlstein asked, "What's the Matter with College?" It seems that today we must contend with the strained relationship between the classroom and campus activism. Precautions that universities must take may inadvertently obstruct creative pedagogies. There is a widening gulf between individually-embraced and institutionally-sanctioned political beliefs. As a subtype of action-based education, political experiential learning is more complicated and cannot be promoted without qualifications; and academic freedom can wilt against charges of violating "self-choice participation" and forcing students to engage in "partisan political activity."

In the end, it remains an open question whether the exercise backfired. It was certainly an effective experiential teaching tool that provoked an important discussion at the university and classroom levels—and it attracted wide media and institutional attention. Our demonstration was as exciting and important as the university's protection of the expression of individual convictions. Unfortunately, the two trajectories of pedagogy and politics do not always run in parallel. But genuine efforts toward mutual comprehension and respect can enable all concerned parties to be the change they wish to see in the world, to allude to the great educator Mahatma Gandhi. ■■■

CL: Not the Southern trope of the sensitive, poetic, slightly effeminate male like Leslie Howard's portrayal of Ashley in "Gone with the Wind."

AF: No, no role models like that whatsoever. My mother was a homecoming queen, but she was also an athlete and so was my sister. My mother held a state record in baseball throw until my sister came along and broke it.

CL: And, so what did that make you?

AF: Being the youngest child, I was allowed to determine a lot of things for myself. And people encouraged me, in a sense, but they didn't really pay that much attention to me. My mother ran a kindergarten in our house, and I grew up in that. It was for five-year-olds, but I started going when I was two. And I think that fueled a certain kind of ambition, because I remember having all sorts of fantasies about succeeding, becoming important. A lot of it was based on my infatuation with Hollywood.

When I was applying to colleges, my parents left it all up to me. I created a big list of places I wanted to apply to, and then my father drove me all over the country for two weeks interviewing, but he never tried to influence my selection. They didn't identify with that

kind of ambition but were willing to support it without asking too many questions. I remember, I decided on Harvard, and then a few months later, during the summer, the University of Mississippi called as we were having lunch. I went to the phone and Ole Miss offered me a full scholarship, and I just said, No, thanks, I'm going to Harvard, and went back and sat down at the table. Everyone wanted to know who had called. It didn't occur to me to consult my parents who otherwise had to pay. And they had no comment. I was treated kind of like another adult, early on.

CL: How do you think your travels have influenced your work?

AF: I didn't start traveling until I was in my thirties, and then I lived in London for two years in the mid-80's. When I was there, though, I was much more involved in theatre, and I didn't do much photography. I really didn't start photographing in foreign locations until I was in my forties. A lot of that had to do with teaching in an international school in New York, at the International Center of Photography, and making friends with foreign students, who would then return to the countries where they lived, and sometimes I would manage to visit them. Then I began to

be invited to do workshops in Mexico and Russia, so when I went somewhere, I had an introduction and a base, and I could establish a sense of belonging quickly.

Many of these other environments, whether in Mexico, Germany, Switzerland, felt more comfortable to me than New York, with more atmosphere. New York, by comparison, always seemed so pragmatic and efficient and less conducive to the kind of evocative atmosphere I was looking for. In addition, as a Southerner I identified with a lot of places outside the U.S. more than with the Northeast. I'm used to all those long Southern narratives that are more psychological, more personal, and more informed by history. When I first moved to New York in 1977, the thing that was most exciting to me was connecting with a circle of gay male friends. And that all became tragic by the late 80's because of AIDS. Now there's such a *déjà vu* attached to every part of the city in a tragic sense for me.

CL: So, what's next for you?

AF: I'm getting new color work from Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina ready for a show in September in New York, and looking through my archive, figuring out how I want to deal with an early body of work, and writing.