

If queer theory were my lover

(Gdyby teoria queer była moim kochankiem)

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A version of this paper was given at the *Parameters of Desire* conference in Bielsko-Biala, Poland, June 8-11, 2003.

STRESZCZENIE: Poniższy tekst powstał w oparciu o wystąpienie na konferencji queerowej "Parametry pożądania", która odbyła się w Bielsku-Białej w dniach 8-11 czerwca 2003 roku. "Gdyby teoria queer była moim kochankiem" stanowi próbę analizy roli teorii queer w Akademii przy wykorzystaniu i połączeniu różnych gatunków i technik, takich jak wypowiedź osobista, esej akademicki, pytania, humor, performance oraz alegoria. W pracy tej autor, zajmując antyinstytucjonalne stanowisko, przygląda się wpływowi Akademii na jednostki, które w niej funkcjonują; relacji, w jakiej my, teoretyczki i teoretycy queer, ustawiamy się do naszej odmiенноści oraz teorii. Stara się on również odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy celem teorii queer jest akceptacja w strukturach Akademii, czy raczej powinna ona dążyć do podważenia *statusu quo* Akademii.

quo Akademii.

Part I: An Apology?

This is not the essay I initially proposed for this conference, a critique of Harry Hay and his notion of Subject-Subject relationships. But, if queerness is defined as shifting, fluid, unfixed, then do I need to apologize for such a shift? And how exactly should we view this disruption?

I should say that I did not "intend" to change topics. Rather, something shifted within me as I was writing the paper I was "supposed" to write. What came out instead is this presentation, a personal exploration in five parts into the shape of queer theory. The following-a combination of personal essay, fiction, critical essay, and rhetorical questions-might be described as trans-genre, a form which has many antecedents.

As primarily a fiction writer, I feel to some degree out of place in queer theory, like an Other in a discipline of Others. Because of this, I resort to the first rule of fiction, which is to start with an image that reveals the closest thing to truth you can get to. Here it is:

In the late 1980's, I was accepted into a supposedly progressive cultural studies PhD program in the U.S. I was excited about theory and the chance to explore queer identity within what I assumed would be a supportive environment.

However, the atmosphere of our cultural studies program proved, time and time again, hostile to cultural diversity and healthy relationships to our bodies. A graduate student from India told us her acceptance package included pamphlets recommending increased hygiene, as Americans (unlike some foreigners apparently) expected people not to smell of body odor. When graduate students confessed they were confused about a text on semiotics, their professor said he didn't believe they had done the reading. Several women graduate students told me they even felt too intimidated to approach anyone about their concerns.

Personally, I recall in a Hermeneutics course, spending three hours discussing Plato's *Phaedrus*, never touching on its central topic: Socrates' arguments for and against same sex love. We discussed instead the instability of language, especially written language, and the difficulty of developing an interpretation of a text because its genre is dependant on its meaning and vice versa-i.e., the hermeneutic circle. Neither the professor nor any of the other students ever connected this hermeneutical problem to Socrates'

central point: that same-sex love is both difficult to argue for or against on moral grounds.

While some professors encouraged me to study gender theory and queer theory and to critically challenge cultural patterns *outside* the academy, they opposed any radical change in the structure of the academy itself. Within two years, the majority of the 'marginalized' students had chosen to leave the PhD program: the only two people of color, three out of six women, and myself, the only queer man.

I left the academy in 1990 with a clear sense that it was the academy itself, perhaps even more than the culture at large, that needed rupturing and an infusion of queerness--something that theory did not seem to offer. Coincidentally, I had just discovered a network of queer communes in the U.S., and decided to move to one-in essence to let theory arise from praxis, rather than to wait for praxis to arise from theory.

So, I stand here today with a great deal of skepticism about the academy, about theory in general, and queer theory in particular. Some may argue that my experiences were isolated or that they would be unlikely to happen today. But I believe otherwise. In fact, after I related my concerns about presenting at this conference, a professor friend attempted to comfort me by saying he knew many

academics who become acutely nervous before delivering papers at conferences. One of his colleague in fact said a good presentation was one in which she didn't throw-up. And an undergraduate male I had taught in graduate school confessed he had become bulimic due to the stress of college. It strikes me that these reactions to the academy are not very different from the cultural forces which cause women become anorexic or bulimic, or change their bodies in other ways. That is, I don't think it's too extreme to say the academy alters our bodies.

If the academy causes such violent reactions in those who supposedly have positions of power within it, how does it hope to alter the power structure of other cultural institutions? And, more immediately, how can we participate in this process, under the guise of academic freedom? Most importantly, I'm interested in what ways we can offer radical, liberating theory without participating in the academy's domination of our bodies.

Part II Questions

Why do we participate in Queer Theory?

Is it because we identify as queer?

Do we want something from it, some sort of change?

Do we see that change as public or personal?

As we perform an act of Queer Theory, are we the subject or the object of study?

Is "queerness" located somewhere other than within us?

What is the relationship of Queer Theory to our bodies?

Are we replacing our bodies with theory?

What are our strategies as Queer Theorists, and are they different from non-queer theorists?

What is our style and our form?

Where did it come from and where will it lead us?

Are we more theorists or queers?

Part III A Dress

In the book *Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, published in 1977, Larry Mitchell claims "A man can learn more by wearing a dress for a day, than wearing a suit for a lifetime"(19).

When I first read this aphorism, I instinctively felt it to be true, and if not true, at least provocative. I would often quote it in conversation. It took me over a year, however, before I put it into practice. One day, while frustrated with graduate school, I slipped on a dress and decided walked through the streets of Pittsburgh, promising myself I would keep walking until I stopped thinking about the fact that I was wearing a dress. After several hours, being periodically heckled, I returned home--unable, even for a moment, to accomplish my goal.

The level of distress and delight I felt wearing a dress in public had nonetheless taught me a great deal. I had considered myself as an openly gay, "liberated" male, aware of the gender constrictions/constructions placed on me. What I discovered was that physically challenging those constructions was a completely different experience to intellectually challenging them.

Unlike Judith Butler's initial valorization of drag-a recognized public performance of gender which exposes the structures of gender to those who witness it-the above quote and personal experience

suggests that cross-dressing creates cultural change not from without, but from within. It is the man who is wearing the dress who learns, not those who gaze upon him. With this realization, theory and activism become inseparable. Theory cannot merely be a spectator sport: *how* we practice and present it is as important as what we attempt to say.

If seeing me in a dress delivering this paper happens not only to affect me(it's both terrifying and exciting), but also affects you, the audience, let it not so much remind you of the rigid constructs of gender normative behavior, as the rigid constructs of academia.

For, if we are to take seriously Butler's claim that gender is performance with opportunity for rupture, then what are we waiting for? Why not teach in drag? And if the answer is, "My school wouldn't let me," then isn't the academy's support of queerness only in theory? How much can we say we take stock in a theory if we are not willing or able to execute it in daily life? And what else might we be missing from theory believed, but not practiced?

Part IV In Theory

If there is anything queer theory can take from feminism-or rather, can share with feminism-it's the interplay of theory, practice, and

activism. The personal is the political.

The common academic notion of queer theory is that it should be its own discipline and be "employed" to other disciplines. For example, Bjoorn Fritz argues in "What is Queer?" that "Queer theory is both an academic and political tool, aimed at deconstructing a heterosexual society's view of 'the natural'" (1). He does not suggest, however, that one of the places that deconstruction should take place is in the academy itself. He claims "queer theory seeks to establish an academic discipline" and that it could be "employed across a wide field of academia" [my italics] ("Queerifying Art History" 184). Queer theory is not seen as being employed *against* a wide field of academia—that is, to work at destabilizing disciplines and practices within them.

Queerness, to Fritz, is also seen as "a viable object of study." In the paper I am not delivering, I outlined various definitions of objectification. One of these definitions is 'not allowing the other to affect or inform you.' If Queer Theory does not allow queerness—whatever that might be—to inform it, it follows that queerness is, to academics like Fritz, only an *object of* queer theory.

Tamsin Spargo warns of this kind of limited project, stating "Queer critiques of normality cannot overlook the ability of dominant

discourses. . .to appropriate and contain subversion"(62). One of the principle methods of achieving this is by inviting queer discourse to adhere to the parameters of heterosexually normative academic discourse. In her critique of Carl Stychin's book *Law's Desire: Sexuality and the Limits of Justice*, for instance, Susan Burgess argues, "I don't think we can effectively challenge mainstream concepts at the same time that we adopt, in an uncritical fashion, mainstream presentation styles and the social forms upon which they are based"(1).

Such a critique calls to mind Stuart Hall's observation that social/political groups such as the gay/lesbian/bi/transgendered communities maintain a "dissociation from the status quo. . . expressed as much in cultural attitudes, ideology, and life-style. . ." (63). If this is the case, a truly *queer* theory would, as Hall suggests such groups do, "polarize and fragment. . .the consensual nature of . . . theory. . ." (63), as well as the *practice* of theory. In fact, Spargo argues that Queer Theory "derives its power. . .[from being] perpetually at odds with the normal, the norm,"(62), rather than attempting to be accepted into it.

Martin Parker, in his article "Fucking Management: Queer, Theory, and Reflexivity," claims that "Queering implies a desire to fuck the discipline a little. Or as Michael Warner has put it. . .'to make theory

queer, not just have a theory about queers"(46).

Parker goes on to suggest that, as P. Clough claims about feminism, Queer Theory can also "disturb the idea that the forces of power are outside the academy and that therefore academic knowledge can offer a disinterested judgment of politics" (50). In order to do this, however, we need to seriously look at the discourse and practices we have adopted from the academy. The challenge of queer theory then is not to establish itself within the academy, but to dis-establish the academy itself. We need to constantly test theory by practicing it within-and without-the academy. This, of course, takes enormous amounts of work-and play! It is no easy task-nor was choosing to stand before you in a dress in this conference room. But, as I said at the beginning, there is also something exciting about it.

Part V: If Queer Theory Were My Lover (A Work of Fiction?)

I met Queer Theory in the early 90's, in the library of a prestigious university in the states.

"Hi, I'm Queer Theory," he/she/it said. "But everyone calls me Q.T."

"Hi QT," I said.

Hesheit was young, attractive, and very well read. A bookish type, which I often fell for. I was queer, too, so what was there not to love? We got to talking, and thus began our relationship.

At first things seemed great. We'd sit up discussing identity politics for hours. QT had a very impressive vocabulary. And I could tell hesheit liked me. But I started to wonder, did he/she/it love me for who I really was, or was I just an object of their study? And was he/she/it really as fluid and playful as he claimed she was?

I began to notice some strange habits, too. For instance, they refused to see me anywhere except on campus. And they seemed to like to talk about sex a lot more than actually having it. But what really got me was when hesheit took me home to meet the parents. When she picked me up that evening, he asked me not to wear my dress.

"I like dresses on other men," hesheit explained, "but on you it just doesn't look very. . . professional."

I refused to give in, however, and she put up with it, though he occasionally scowled. Sitting on the couch with his brother and sister, both of whom I found even more attractive, I started to wonder if I was going out with the right person.

And then there were the parents. Both were academics, of course, who never married. They lived in the same house, although on opposite sides. Her mother, Judy, smile when she met me, and said she liked my dress. "Is that what you usually wear," she asked, "or were you just in a performance or something?"

Before I had a chance to answer, his father, Michael, appeared, shook my hand, and gave me a look like he wanted to fuck me. Should I have been offended, or taken it as a compliment? I wasn't sure. In fact, I couldn't tell if either parent liked me; they were both so hard to read.

Anyhow, after that date, I started to have real doubts. QT only seemed to love me for my mind. "What about my feelings?" I said, one time while we were strolling across campus. "What about my body?"

"Oh, don't worry about them, they're just constructed," he said. "Come on, let's go to my office and talk about fucking."

When we did play around, it was always in her office, with the windows shut, on top of a stack of books. And it was always oral sex, which was OK, I guess, in theory. But something still felt lacking.

Then one day QT confessed what the problem was: sex was a little uncomfortable for him, for her, for it.

"Why?" I asked. "It's a natural part of who we are. And if it isn't, it can still be fun, can't it?"

"No," QT said, "not for me."

"Why?"

"Because of my history, my origins."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't know anything about sex," Q.T. confessed. "I was born in the academy. And what's more, I'm a test tube baby. My parents never even actually had sex. This is the only kind of insemination I know."

It was soon after that that I ended our relationship. I sometimes think of what it would be like if we had stayed together. Could we have had a meaningful relationship? Of course, it's all academic now.

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