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Gay and Lesbian Professors: Out on Campus

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Source: *Academe*, Vol. 84, No. 5 (Sep. - Oct., 1998), pp. 40-45

Published by: American Association of University Professors

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40251336>

Accessed: 29/06/2010 09:17

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## Gay and Lesbian Professors

# OUT ON CAMPUS

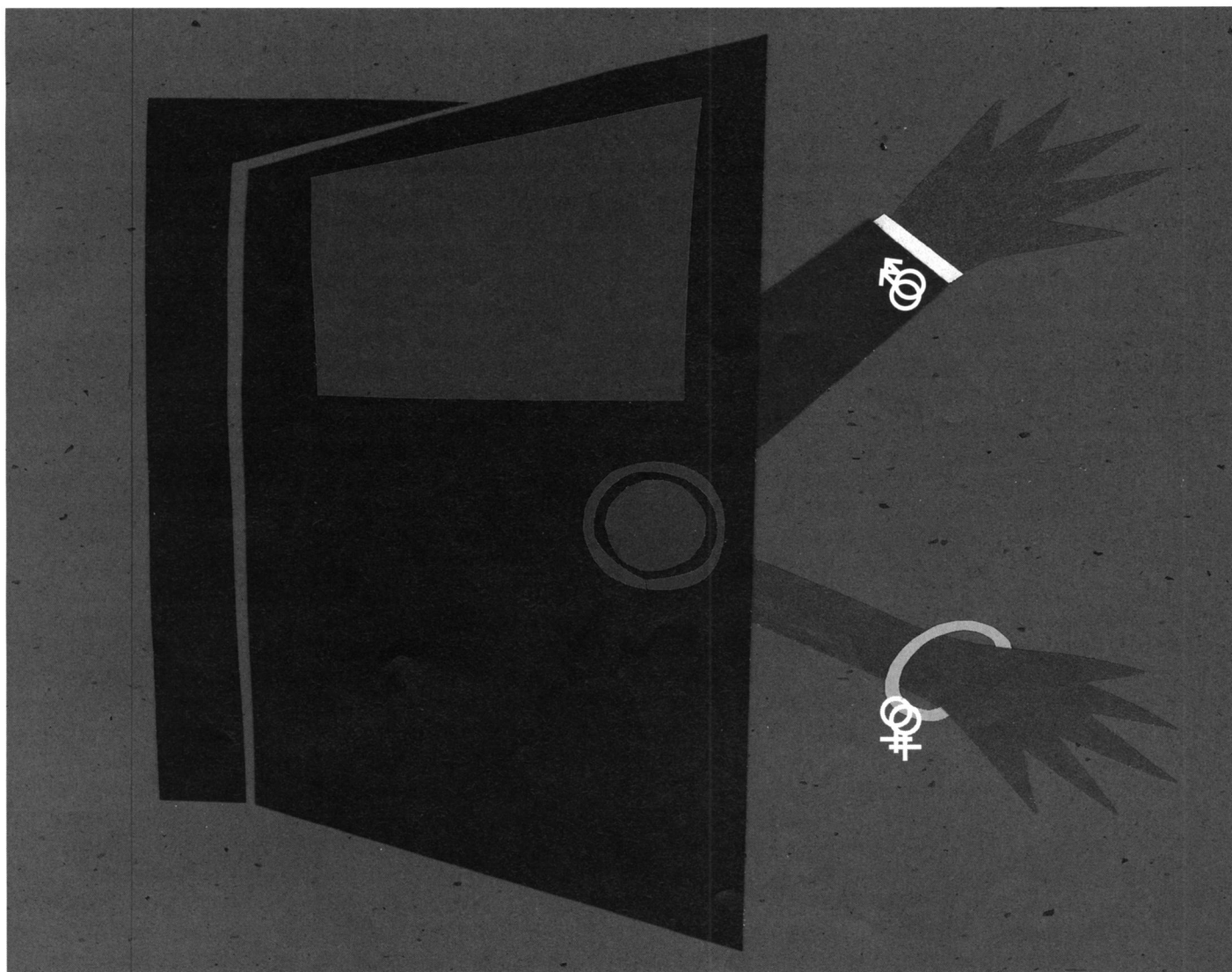
BY JILL DOLAN

TALKING ABOUT THE STATUS OF GAY AND LESBIAN studies on U.S. college campuses these days requires an astute sense of the politics of location and patience for blatant contradictions. From certain perspectives, the field, particularly queer theory, is thriving, generating much academic research, textual exegesis, and curricular development, especially in the humanities.<sup>1</sup> From other perspectives, gay and lesbian faculty members (whether or not they teach gay and lesbian studies or queer theory) remain second-class citizens of the university, just as they are second-class citizens in American political culture. In



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the absence of basic civil-rights protections, gays and lesbians are still subject to workplace discrimination, hate crimes, and college and university practices that favor heterosexuality despite the best intentions of even the most liberal institutions.

## Hot New Field

IT'S DIFFICULT TO DISTINGUISH THE RECEPTION OF GAY and lesbian scholarly work from the treatment of gay and lesbian professors in the academy, partly because the establishment of gay and lesbian studies as a legitimate academic field eased the process of declaring sexual orientation in the workplace for many faculty members. Programs in gay and lesbian studies became not only sites of intellectual investigation, but also locations to which gay and lesbian faculty members could gravitate to find common cause. It's important to remember that fewer than twenty years ago, neither students nor faculty members could presume to be open about nonconformist sexual identities without fearing professional repercussions or reprisals. Even now, there's a false sense of the widespread acceptability of queer theory, which has enhanced the visibility and marketability of work in sexuality studies. As series in queer theory and gay and lesbian studies proliferate, academia sometimes seems complacent about

the status of the field and the people in it. Among recent series established by major university presses are Series Q (Duke University Press); *Between Men/Between Women and Gender and Culture* (two separate series by Columbia University Press); *Sexual Cultures: New Directions from the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies* and *The Cutting Edge: Lesbian Life and Literature* (two series by New York University Press); *Unnatural Acts* (Indiana University Press); and *Triangulations: Gay/Lesbian/Queer Drama/Theatre/Performance* (University of Michigan Press).

Because the market has made the field so appealing, or "hot," graduate students often have book contracts before they finish writing their dissertations. Imagine their dismay when they find that there are no jobs advertised or forthcoming. While the marketplace of ideas has generated strong interest in the field and much important and notable scholarship, colleges have been slow to establish majors or minors, departments or programs, or even faculty lines to protect the future of the field. In 1997 Yale University turned down playwright and activist Larry Kramer's generous gift to establish a gay studies program, supposedly because the university didn't want to "balkanize" the campus with another identity-based area studies track. But the only line that the university has made available in the field is a regular, one-year, nonrenewable visiting appointment housed in the English

department. This makes the relationship of gay and lesbian studies to the production of knowledge at Yale tenuous, at best.

Gay and lesbian studies has been featured in the mainstream press often since Yale snubbed Kramer. Over the past year, the *New York Times* published cover stories on the status of sexuality studies on U.S. campuses, while the television program *60 Minutes* broadcast a story on the proliferation of courses in lesbian and gay studies, in which Mike Wallace grimaced at most of the gay people he interviewed. Conservative commentators framed the story with disparaging remarks produced from ill-informed viewpoints, and as George Chauncey, author of *Gay New York*, reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, most of the gay and lesbian faculty featured in the program saw their words and ideas twisted out of context by the segment's unshakable doubts about the validity of a field that studies nonconventional sexual behavior and nonnormative identities.

The emergence of queer theory has inspired much of the present rush of attention toward gay and lesbian studies by the mainstream press. When Wayne Koestenbaum and Eve Sedgwick were hired into the Ph.D. program in English at the City University of New York's Graduate Center in 1997 and 1998, for example, members of New York's print media outdid themselves remarking on the concentration of "chic queerness" that CUNY had acquired. The *New York Times* published a long Saturday feature on Sedgwick and her work, while *New York* magazine published a photo of Koestenbaum and Sedgwick in a spread devoted to "important New Yorkers," a photo in which the pair were framed as fashionably smart in their attire and attitudes. The less-liberal press in New York took predictable potshots, printing derogatory editorials about what its journalists perceived as the latest in the faddish turn of the academic curriculum.

The mainstream print and broadcast media tend to cover gay and lesbian issues in a prurient, moralizing way. It's not accidental that when the *Times* runs its annual story on the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention, it invariably cites a panel with a sexually oriented title, intending to shock readers. At conferences, scholars of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory present research meant to test out new knowledge and challenge received academic wisdom. Taken out of context, this scholarship, which of necessity melds personal, often unexamined, experience and histories with rigorous analysis and insight, is easy to dismiss or ridicule.

## At Home in Academe

UNTIL KRAMER'S REJECTION BY YALE, THE MAINSTREAM PRESS paid little attention to the institutionalization of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory in the academy. Also ignored were the effects of that evolution on the presentation of new knowledge in

the classroom and the curriculum. Members of the field are just beginning to address curricular development, university employment practices, and the field's potential for undergraduate education. In October 1997 Robyn Wiegman, director of the women's studies program at the University of California, Irvine, organized a daylong interdisciplinary forum at the Humanities Research Institute that brought together faculty members from across the UC and California State University systems to discuss the methods used to establish gay and lesbian studies majors or minors on their campuses. The forum prompted much important discussion about the implications of institutionalizing gay and lesbian studies and queer theory as an academic field. Representatives from UC San Diego and UC Santa Barbara described plans for developing gay and lesbian studies from their women's studies programs, whose emphases and names would probably change. (San Diego's department was going to be called "gender and sexuality," while Santa Barbara's was to be named "gender, race, and sexuality.")

Others who attended the forum stressed the relationship on their campuses between academic units in gay and lesbian studies and student resource centers or faculty and staff advocacy committees. A new minor at UC Riverside, for example, was devised through the interest of the campus resource center and a chancellor's advisory committee. Without requesting additional funding, the minor was established in the English department. The now full-time staff in the resource center continues to be involved with the academic program. At other campuses, resource centers and academic units compete for budget and staff allocations. The question of resource allocation, staffing, and faculty lines is pressing on all the UC campuses, and most of the existing minors in the system have created their curricula with little budgetary

support. When faculty members and students at UCLA worked to pass the minor, the university's development officer used the occasion to raise funds in the Los Angeles lesbian and gay community.

While gay and lesbian studies programs aim to be interdisciplinary, the field's contents tend to be biased toward the humanities disciplines, which often provide the primary administrative structures for minors in the field. Hard work will be required to bring social and hard sciences faculty and knowledge into the core of the curriculum. Participants in the Humanities Research Institute forum noted the lack of consensus around what constitutes the base of knowledge in the field. The minor at UC Riverside purposefully minimizes core requirements, while the one at Berkeley refuses to create a hierarchy around its courses. The Berkeley program's core includes an introduction to the major, based on alternative sexual identities and communities; a course in historiography that is cross-listed with women's studies; an anthropology course; and a course on semiotic, visual, and political

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representation offered through the rhetoric department. In addition to this core, students must select two courses from a variety of fields based on a list of electives compiled by the minor's faculty committee.

## Political Activism and Academic Study

AS GAY AND LESBIAN STUDIES IS INSTITUTIONALIZED, A constant, productive tension must be maintained between political activism in the gay and lesbian community and academic study in the field. The incorporation of the field into the common curricula of undergraduate education offers practitioners a chance to challenge the traditional organization of knowledge. New minors and majors in gay and lesbian studies might lead to institutional coalitions with other identity-based area studies, suggesting jointly held faculty lines and requirements that students take courses across areas. The field's content must draw on such coalitions, and the field itself should take a leadership role in cross-identity issues, such as welfare, immigration, health care, and cultural and political representation. In building programs and curricula, it's important to analyze critically the problems of institutionalizing knowledge. What gets lost when fields developed out of the urgency of a social movement become part of a long list of courses in a college or university bulletin? What does it mean when existing disciplines absorb the outlaws? The MLA conference generates so much queer theory partly because its practitioners are mostly hired in English departments and other humanities fields. Because gay and lesbian studies and queer theory bring an activist understanding of social problems to the academy, they can help resist the ways in which the academy keeps knowledge (and the people who create it) discrete and disempowered. Doing so, however, will require maintaining a constant, productive tension between activism and theory.

The Humanities Research Institute forum and the press coverage on the development of academic programs in the field are encouraging and stimulating, while raising questions about the politics of institutionalization. But many programs and faculty members fail to receive the level of positive reinforcement that sometimes appears to be the norm; these exceptions demonstrate the need for activist vigilance. Last fall, for example, the State University of New York at New Paltz became the focus of a media storm when New York State legislators and members of the SUNY board of trustees protested "Revolt Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom," a conference held at the campus. Legislators and trustees particularly objected to conference panels on sex toys and lesbian sadomasochism. Most of their criticisms came, however, from reading program titles rather than attending and carefully considering the issues the sessions might raise.

In March, in the wake of the New Paltz controversy, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that the Kansas Legislative Research Office asked six state universities for a list of courses that contained material related to homo- or bisexuality. According to the *Chronicle*, no one could ascertain why the request was made, or to what purpose the research would be put, but the focus on these courses was considered newsworthy (and chilling). Such threats to academic freedom (like the perennial attacks on freedom of expression in the arts when the creative impulses come from gay, lesbian, or queer sources) remind us that we can't

become complacent about the acceptance of academic studies or activist work based on gay, lesbian, or queer issues.

## Ownership and Authenticity

THE FOUNDING OF GAY AND LESBIAN STUDIES AS A sub-discipline, and the ascendancy of the attendant field of queer theory, have raised questions of ownership and authenticity. These same questions came up when women's studies and race- and ethnicity-based studies appeared on campus. Academic disciplines generated by political movements and the need for systematic study of the marginalized experience tend to grow away from identity-based—some might say essentialist—scholarship to reach out to a more diverse range of research questions and participants. Women's studies once saw its faculty made up mostly of (white) women, for example, but many programs now include men. (This might be because many women's studies programs are moving toward the more inclusive—although perhaps less precise—"gender studies" designation as they change their titles with changing academic tides.) Similarly, while gay and lesbian studies programs were often founded by the few openly gay faculty members willing to risk their livelihoods to promote the new field, the discipline is now taught by people of different sexual identifications and practices. The advent of queer theory has further expanded the roster of professors and students working in the field. Intensely suspicious of stable assignments of sexual identity, its scholars favor a fluid, more changeable and indeterminate understanding of sexuality.

## Attack on Nonconforming "Lifestyles"

IN THE ALWAYS POLITICALLY COMPLICATED ARGUMENTS about "who can teach what" and "who speaks for whom," I would argue for an antiessentialist position. I do, however, believe that we need to acknowledge that people are discriminated against regularly on the basis of their identities. Queer theorists can imagine a time when sexual identities will be too multiple to matter, but our culture hasn't arrived at that utopian moment quite yet. Theory, academic practice, and political realities are at a disjuncture around these issues. Not all faculty members who teach in gay and lesbian studies or queer theory are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or queer, but many of them are. Attacks on the field are often not so thinly veiled attempts to denigrate sexually nonconforming "lifestyles" in general. When civil rights protections aren't in place on local, state, or national levels, faculty members are vulnerable to these ideological skirmishes in very real ways.

At public institutions, legislators or politically appointed boards of trustees often prepare the ideological thrusts and parries. At private institutions, the Association for Alumni and Trustees (formerly the National Alumni Forum) and the National Association of Scholars single out gay and lesbian courses (and faculty) as the focus of their conservative criticisms of curricular change. Often, the religious or political affiliations of private institutions determine a priori the contents and contexts suitable for learning. Many of these institutions explicitly assert a heterosexual agenda at the expense of diversity. In fall 1996, for example, the administration of Catholic University in Washington, D.C., forced a student production of Tony Kushner's

award-winning play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, off campus, deeming it antithetical to the university's religious doctrine. Arts censorship is becoming increasingly prevalent in American society. In just the last year, we saw a decrease in funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, elimination of grants to individual performance artists, and the defunding of gay and lesbian projects in San Antonio, Texas; Anchorage, Alaska; and Charlotte, North Carolina. One would hope that universities would continue to uphold freedom of expression as an important institutional value, even around gay and lesbian issues. But such freedoms are no longer givens.

It's very difficult to prove that people don't get tenured or lose their jobs because they're gay. Stories circulate about such tenure and promotion difficulties. An assistant professor at an Ivy League school, for example, saw her tenure held up all the way to the president's office in the early nineties, purportedly because of the lesbian content of her work. She is now meeting obstacles in her promotion to full professor. But these reports are anecdotal and sometimes difficult to substantiate. They pass among communities of people or networks of friends who are also in precarious institutional positions, or who simply fear that discrimination because of sexual orientation happens in ways that are hard to unmask and name, especially since policies against discrimination are rare nationwide. Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, based in Washington, D.C., reports that discrimination against gays and lesbians in the workplace is still legal in forty states. The Employment Nondiscrimination Act, federal legislation that would have protected lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the workplace, failed to pass in the Senate by one vote in 1996. Birch hopes that it will pass this year. But even if it does, its effects aren't guaranteed. In Maine, a referendum last spring rolled back the state's antidiscrimination policy for lesbians and gays. In 1992 Oregon tried to pass its noxious Measure 9, which would have "restricted the use of state funds for anything that promoted behavior deemed 'abnormal and unnatural,' or acts of 'sadism or masochism.'" As former AAUP president Linda Ray Pratt notes, "This proposed legislation was not only offensive to faculty members in its discriminatory intention; it was also an infringement on academic freedom, since it would have required teachers to promote the state's 'truth' in the classroom."

## Domestic Partnership Policies

THE CLIMATE OF HATRED AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE wider culture infects the classrooms and the institutions in which gays and lesbians work. Yet a growing number of colleges and universities have domestic partnership policies. The list currently includes all the Ivy League institutions; campuses in the University of Michigan system; the Universities of Iowa, Chicago, Vermont, and Pittsburgh; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Stanford and Duke Universities; the City University of New York system; and other institutions around the country. Although the policies differ, some offer health benefits and on-campus housing rights. It's encouraging that more institutions are sponsoring such policies despite the passage last year of the pernicious Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as a legal union between one woman and one man. The act was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Clin-

ton as a direct reaction to the demand for legalization of gay and lesbian marriages. This debate has become more prominent since the Hawaii Supreme Court agreed to hear a case challenging the legality of prohibiting gay and lesbian marriages. Many gay, lesbian, and queer activists find domestic partnership policies a more progressive benefit for which to agitate than marriage. Although they vary depending on locality, these policies go some way toward alleviating the social and political inequities endured by gays, lesbians, and queers. Domestic partnership policies often approve real-estate inheritance rights for gay and lesbian partners, and they sometimes extend health benefits and other economic and social rights typically accorded through heterosexual unions.

## Dangers of "Coming Out"

BECAUSE LEGISLATION AND DOMESTIC PARTNERSHIP POLICIES vary by institution and location, gay and lesbian faculty members are very much subject to the whims of their institutions and the policies set by the cities and states in which they live. The Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force recently reported that opposition to equal rights for lesbians and gays is declining among most Americans. But in smaller, more isolated settings, many gay and lesbian faculty members continue to find it difficult to be open about their identities in their classrooms and scholarship. Bob Schanke, an openly gay theater professor at Central College in Pella, Iowa, arrived in his office last year to find it strewn with books and papers. Tacked to his desk was a note that read "Queers eat shit." In his mailbox he found another note, "Death to fags." When Schanke complained and sought protection, his supervisor called the police, who investigated the incident as a hate crime. Students, faculty, and administrators at the college—which is affiliated with the Reformed Church in America—supported Schanke publicly and unreservedly, but he reports that after the incident made the national news, he received ugly letters of condemnation. One of his students told him that "she always felt that being gay was evil, like being a murderer." Schanke now wonders what the rest of his students think. Not all gay or lesbian faculty members reveal their identities to their students.

There's an insidious assumption that bringing sexual identity into the classroom—even as a part of a rigorous academic curriculum—means advocating (proselytizing, even) for unconventional sexual behavior. Roger Kimball, one of the most vociferous critics of radical scholarship based on sexual or gender experience, recently published an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* inveighing against "Queer Publics/Queer Privates," a conference sponsored last May by New York University. Kimball explicitly attacked queer theory as "an effort to make one's private sexual interests the chief focus of one's academic work." After describing in prurient detail several of the NYU conference panels and performances, Kimball asked, "How much worse must things get before the public wakes up and refuses to pay for the transformation of the academy into a playground for transgression?"

Kimball harped on the expense to the taxpayer (although NYU is a private institution) for work he considers totally irrelevant to basic education. Critiquing Kimball is easy, since in many ways his outrageousness makes him instantly parodic. But

the ideological assumptions behind his jeremiads are clear and invidious. Kimball and critics like him consider marginalized experience and the rich body of theory based on it, whether from women's studies, race- or ethnicity-based studies, or gay and lesbian studies, irrelevant to the store of common knowledge and unworthy of investments of time, money, or institutional resources. The appeal to taxpayers' outrage inevitably presumes the taxpayers to be white, middle class, and heterosexual. It's a short leap from jettisoning so-called "transgressive" curricula (a designation that certainly comes from the eye of the beholder) to questioning the credentials or worthiness of the teachers of those curricula, whose identities are often shaped by the marginalized experience they study. As certain prominent queer theorists have noted, visibility comes with a cost; it makes gay, lesbian, and queer faculty members instantly vulnerable to sanctions by the state, alumni, and trustees.

## Difficult Personal Choices

I SERVE AS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York's Graduate School and University Center. Ours is the first university-based research center to focus on the wide-ranging and lasting contributions to knowledge of lesbian and gay experience. The center boasts a mission that requires it to bridge the academic and public audiences that the knowledge it produces might serve. As such, it has a great deal of visibility in the intellectual and political communities of New York. It also has a reputation elsewhere in the country for fostering, through its fellowships, scholarships, conferences, and publications, groundbreaking interdisciplinary work in gay and lesbian studies and queer theory. Roger Kimball has yet to come to one of our conferences (as far as we know), and the Graduate Center administration has unfailingly supported our existence, but we know that when CUNY's trustees shift their political attention from dismantling remedial education in the system's senior colleges they will focus on the curriculum. We believe that focus will turn to women's studies, race and ethnicity studies, gay and lesbian studies—and, by extension, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies.

Our security, then, may be chimerical, even when we feel established institutionally. The cash bar of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus at MLA meetings is among the most popular venues at the convention; it attracts hundreds of people each year (not all of whom are gay or lesbian). I also attend the business meeting of the lesbian and gay focus group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) at the association's annual conferences. The ATHE focus group is smaller than the MLA caucus and still tied to a notion of identity that makes its members'

presence at the meeting something of a political statement. I look at people at the meeting (and some of the people at the MLA cash bar) and wonder how they negotiate the complicated politics of location and geography that make our experiences as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered academics so particular and unpredictable. There's a texture to our lives that requires us to consider continually the effects of being open about our sexual identities and of choosing to speak to our students, colleagues, and administrators from a particular, marginalized identity. We bear, as queer theorist Kobena Mercer might say, a continual burden of responsibility for our communities and a sense of our own exceptionalism.

Gay and lesbian academic literature has many anecdotes about how we negotiate our issues. Should we "come out" to our students? When, in class or outside of class? Why is it important? Should we come out at a job interview? Should we tell our lesbian and gay students to reveal their identities? Should we encourage them to write on gay, lesbian, or queer topics, knowing that it might hurt their job prospects? Should we encourage our heterosexual students to work in queer theory? Should we require that they "out" themselves as straight when they do?

Should I write about lesbian issues without tenure? Should I volunteer to help at the gay, lesbian, and bisexual student services center? Should I (can I?) work with the local activist group? Should I befriend my students who are lesbian or gay, if I'm the only faculty role model or support system they have? How can I protect my sexuality as my "private life" when it's also the basis of my scholarship and teaching? How can I teach that sexuality is not "private," but publicly constructed, and still preserve a sense of separateness between my work and home lives?

How we as individual faculty members answer these questions depends more than we'd like to think on the benevolence or approbation of our institutions, neighborhoods, cities, and states. Whether we are open about our sexual identities or not, our choice of answers is delimited by the larger sociopolitical sphere in which our identities are legislated and negotiated. Despite all of the progressive advances—the raft of publications, the success of centers for lesbian and gay studies, and the building of programs and research—gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer faculty members continue to endure institutional and social practices that often cause them to be misrecognized, misnamed, or misheard. Our institutional stories really are a contradiction in terms. ☞

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## Note

1. While gay and lesbian studies runs the gamut of disciplinary fields, focusing on everything from literature and history to science and the arts, queer theory is a methodology derived from social constructionist schools of thought, which suggest that sexuality, as a fluid, shifting, historically contingent category, is an important perspective through which to view the development of all knowledge.

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