

# OUR FORTY YEARS IN THE DESERT: A REFLECTION ON STONEWALL

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*This narrative examines questions of privilege and identity through the lens of an LGBT studies course taught forty years after the Stonewall Rebellion. Inspiration is found in ancient biblical texts, the modern civil rights movement, and the trans and queer liberation movements.*

A song for Miriam, for Moses,  
for Rosa and Martin,  
for Sylvia and Harvey,  
for Lee and Leona.

*"Miriam the prophetess ... took the tambourine in her hand; and all the women followed her with tambourines and dances." —Exodus*

I had to ban the words "olden times" from the introductory college course in LGBT studies. It was not that I was so invested in a strict historicism; my own pedagogical choices were far too eclectic and whimsical. Rather, several weeks into the semester, I could see in glimpses that they wanted "their" history and needed it, at once intimate and personal, and in the next moment entirely other-oriented, selfless and generous.

After weeks of preparation I performed a sleight-of-hand, a transformational shell game, and as they watched the red ball appear each time where they did not expect it, I was changed irrevocably and I suspect they were as well. Though I had no shells, the shuffle was simple. I asked my students in succession whether they considered their own freedoms to be dependent first on the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., then on Rosa Parks, and finally Harvey Milk. At each stage they acknowledged the contributions of those who had come before them, though they had only just watched *The Times of Harvey Milk*, and

could only piece together Kodachrome snapshots of what could not be imagined before Harvey, and now, to them, feels like air, water, or sunshine.

We then read of butch and femme lesbians in Buffalo, New York in the 1950s, and I asked my students what freedoms they enjoy because of the example of these women. With this they struggled; with enough prodding, many women could point to strength, independence, self-sufficiency; they had moments of clarity in the haze of privilege in which some of us live. For the men, this was a tougher exercise, until I pointed to the economic benefits of equality, and more invisibly, the mere fact that their friendships with women are not disreputable or taboo. In my view, this was a direct benefit of the struggle for equality in the workplace and for sexual liberation.

How much I hoped they would throw themselves against barricades if only their rights of friendship were challenged. Yet not every student in the class had such an easy claim on free association, nor the invisible scaffolding that allows relationships at all, let alone those across the chasms of gender.

I use the words "women" and "men" tentatively because many people I love are neither or both, or have been both, or simply choose their gender strategically, but for the students in this class, Intro to LGBT Studies, "T" was often their greatest place of challenge and the greatest place of learning. But, more of that later...

I have taught for a long time, but this was my first experience teaching TBGL studies. My dissertation focuses on African American and Chicano/a literature, and I've taught courses in leadership, Jewish American literature, and creative writing. For this course, however, my greatest challenge was in learning who the students were and what they wanted and needed to learn. Perhaps there are curricula that stand independent of the makeup of the student body, or at least there are teachers who assume that the curricula is objectively independent of the group to which it is being taught. However, almost by definition, a course structured around identities cannot be independent in this way: any learning that takes place must be at the nexus of where we are coming from and where we are going.

When I taught Jewish American literature, the "nightmare" student was either a fundamentalist Christian with an agenda for salvation or a neo-Nazi. I had the former and a friend the latter. It's hard even to admit that a student can be a nightmare, because as an educator, it is so central to me that all students deserve my attention, each according to their needs, if you'll forgive a phrase now so charged with historical weight that its beauty has been lost. But, those of us with marginalized identities know that we are vulnerable as educators to types of privilege we don't enjoy, and, so, a single student can do harm in the classroom, not just to individuals, and to the teacher, but to the curriculum itself.

In this queer studies class, the first victim was queer. Not a student, but the idea. In the mid-1990s, when CU Boulder first began its LGBT Studies program, after we graduate students and faculty had lobbied for a course of study that has never been at anything less than full capacity, it was, I believed, a given that the majority of students taking these courses were lesbian, bisexual, trans, gay, or at least questioning.

Now, nearly a decade into the twenty-first century, this is no longer the case. Hoping to learn students' names as quickly as possible, I took advantage of the system that allows faculty to view a photo roster but this proved much more fraught than I had expected. The roster gave me cues as to the potential makeup

of the class from an ethnicity and gender perspective, but I started to feel as if my "gaydar" was in need of a tuneup. I knew, of course, that sexual orientation has too long been assumed to be something one can identify from hackneyed stereotypes of femme and butch, but what was surprising was not the diversity of the photographs, but their sameness—their lack of distinction from each other and from the student body in general. At the time I attributed this to the dating of the photographs, the majority of which are based on student ID pictures taken at the time students are admitted. Surely the conformity was related to the first year students' need to "fit in," and not to an assimilationist victory in which "we're just like everybody else" has had so much propagandistic success that it becomes true.

It chills me to think that I was, even for a moment, caught up in such a physiognomy let alone that so much research of our own time is focused on measuring the length of gay men's fingers or the swirl pattern of the hair on the back of our heads. We have not abandoned our eugenic notions, though we pursue these, masked in the cloak of scientific method, and ever more clinically. At least gaydar still has the aura of the mystical about it.

Armed with a briefcase full of assumptions, I printed out the pictures and used them to take roll. Thankfully, the students presented in many more dimensions than their 2D images suggested, but my gaydar was still troubled. When I distribute a syllabus, the students' first assignment is always to fill out a questionnaire that allows me to get to know them better. Among the questions I ask are: "What was the best class you ever had and why?" "Do you have any preferences about preferred names or pronouns?" "Is there anything you'd like to or need to tell me?" A few of the students came out to me and others revealed important information, but this early in the term, sadly, many students did not take advantage of my invitations. They were going to make me work to know them better.

I had chosen to delay assigning most of the readings until I had a better sense of what they knew and what they didn't. This proved

a smart choice and, though it is more work to customize the readings, it saved me from many potential disasters of readings that lacked needed context and timing.

On the first day of class I make it a practice to give students an overview of the directions we will take in studying the subject at hand. I landed on them a little boldly, probably, by using terms like “queer” and “trans” with abandon, describing myself as both, and letting them know that the latter would require more explanation later in the term. I was, perhaps, a little too much like Emma Thompson appearing as the Angel in America to Justin Kirk’s Prior Walter, but once the corners of the room had collapsed, we started back on Earth, and I introduced them to my muse.

My muse was my grandmother, Leona, a picture of whom I showed them likely taken in the 1920s or early 30s. She is breathtakingly young in the photo and just on the cherubic side of androgyne. The photograph is remarkable in that she is dressed fully in a man’s suit, and, without telling the students anything about her, including that she was related to me, I asked them to make their observations about what they saw. They were partially divided as to her sex. Her hair is curly but short. She is standing next to someone who has been cropped out of the photo, and it is signed “Yours Truly, Lee,” again neutral with regard to gender. That she came to possess a photograph that she had signed to someone else lends even more mystery, though the students could not have known this. I suspect she stands next to a man, but we really see only an ear and a very faded portion of a face, and very little else by which to judge.

All these details were clear enough to the class, but they missed a key detail, which was her tie and the gender of the suit: she was not wearing a stylized version of a man’s suit; rather, she was wearing a man’s suit and tie, and the knot on the tie is a double Windsor. The details of gender presentation are something they came to appreciate later in the class, particularly when we watched *Paris Is Burning*, but the extent of my grandmother’s gender crossing demonstrates skill and choice, not something haphazard or costumed. I know

some other things about her through photographs, and these are that she always chose to present the same side of her face, and, though I have a very early picture of her in a dress, in every other photograph and memory, she is wearing pants; never again a suit, but always pants.

And she is happy in this photo, or at least confident and self-assured. It is only in combination with the troubled parts of her life that I suspect she may have struggled with gender identity or sexual orientation, but I only have this photograph because she kept it, again with someone cropped out of it, on a built-in bookshelf behind her easy chair, among her personal objects, adjacent to my grandfather’s parallel chair and bookshelf. Some piece of whomever she was long before my birth always stood ready at her right shoulder, and I’ll never know whether this was a source of comfort or longing, or perhaps both. My grandmother lived the majority of her life before Stonewall, and I have lived the majority of my life after.

I used the photograph to introduce uncertainty, and this is why I say the first victim was queer, not a person, but the idea. Queer requires comfort with uncertainty... or...you aren’t supposed to know whether Divine eats the dog poop at the end of *Pink Flamingoes*. My students were uneasy, for the most part, with uncertainty, and at times I had to break the fourth wall and tell them that I was intentionally not defining something because they had to learn to be comfortable with liminality. Oh! How I frustrated them by saying the only answer I could give them was the one they themselves produced. I did this, by the way, with a significant measure of glee.

This lesson proved useful immediately when we studied Sappho, a poet whose life is potentially impossibly different from one we can understand, and who still leaps off the page like she just spent the weekend at Alice Walker’s house. In this she is aided by Mary Barnard’s now fifty-year old translation, but whose spare poetics reminds us of the power of poetry to place us in conversation with another time and place. Barnard translates Sappho not unlike King James’ scribes translated the Bible—not faithfully, but

beautifully—and at times, I suspect, closer to the spirit than the literal would allow

Uncertainty was virtuous when we read from multiple translations of the Hebrew and Christian Bible as well, the delicious love of Jonathan for David, the insistent love of Ruth and Naomi, and the mystery of a bi-gendered Adam/Eve creature who exists in some printings on the very same spread with the hierarchical and simply comical myth of Woman being torn from Man. There are two origin myths together in Genesis, and one of them is far less known, though John Cameron Mitchell does an excellent rendering in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

Our “queer” friend was still on life-support by the third class or so, when one student<sup>1</sup> approached me after class and informed me she was considering dropping the class unless I intervened on the comments from other students. A quick interview revealed her to be a non-traditional student and a remarkable one. Over the course of the semester she unveiled much about herself including her career in the film industry, her deep knowledge of alternative sexualities and her own explorations, that she had been a sex worker, and that she had intentions of becoming a social worker with a particular interest in gender non-conforming communities. Her reason for frustration—not with me, but with the other students—was their immature grasp of sexual language. In essence, their sophomoric approach to “it.”

Desperate not to lose someone with whom I had developed an immediate interest, I asked her to reconsider, and gave her a semester-long assignment to keep her engaged. I knew of her interest in counseling, and I pointed out that the class was sophomoric, in fact, because it was a 200 level course. I asked her to stay and to stay in touch with me, and to turn her gaze toward the students as if they were members of a counseling group; not her peers in the way of life experience or academic mastery, but a group for whom she would have to model her fluency with sexuality. I can't say this was the end of her frustration, but it gave us a bond and allowed me to speak to her needs—sometimes in code, and sometimes by way of asides—so she knew she wasn't abandoned. By the end of the semester, if my

observations were correct, she had befriended the students who most annoyed her at the beginning.

At the other end of the spectrum were two students from other countries, one of them Muslim, whose interest in the class is something I may always have to accept as an uncertainty. These two students were among the three males in the class who identified as heterosexual. The remaining males all eventually came out to me or to the class. One of the foreign students said he was interested in the topic because it was not something that exists in his country; while we all know that this is not *exactly* the case, he is correct in the sense that his country is one where open homo/bisexuality or gender variance in the Western sense is rarely displayed at this particular cultural moment.

The Muslim student acknowledged the existence of homo/bisexuality in his country, but told me that gender variance (my term) of any kind amongst males was met by strict religious intervention in the form of head-shaving and public embarrassment. He ultimately came to view homo/bisexuality and gender variance as genetic illnesses, which, for him, was a place of authentic compassion. He also worked harder than nearly any other student in the class: visiting my office hours regularly to work on revisions to his papers, and pursuing his arguments in a more considered way than most. All of this took place in a second language, so many of our conversations were Semitic in nature, at least as often about my appreciation for Muslim thought and culture and my insistence that if he were to attempt to invoke a religious argument, he must do so studiously and not selectively, to honor our mutual traditions of jurisprudence.

If this curriculum were going to serve all of these students, I had a serious challenge before me. I certainly had to give the students enough of the basics to expect them to function in any future studies: they couldn't leave my class without some canonical<sup>2</sup> material, such as Stonewall, the 1973 American Psychological Association's removal of homosexuality from the DSM, or the nearly two century tradition of drag balls in Harlem.

Del Martin, who that summer had legally married Phyllis Lyon, her partner of 60 years, passed away early in our semester, and I quickly reordered some of the Sapphic material to allow us time with these modern legends. I had already selected enough material to be pan-historical, multicultural, and international. I also spent a lot of time weaving in trans and intersex material, beginning with Anne Fausto-Sterling's *The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough*, and *Five Sexes Revisited*, and bringing the theme back in throughout the semester.

It's my opinion and an emerging reality that we should eventually teach transgender studies as a curriculum unto itself, but there is a wisdom in BTGL, and it is that all the students must leave their comfort zones for a time. If I have one regret about this course, it would be that I didn't give the gay boys or their straight girlfriends enough gay material to bolster them because I was so concerned about not underrepresenting the other communities. By this I mean that the strength of LGBT Studies is also its failure: the most devastating end-of-term evaluation was from a gay student who said he was uncomfortable to speak in class because he had just come out and was afraid to betray his lack of knowledge. He simply wanted his history.

I made my choices and set the curriculum at a delicate balancing point between the two poles of students in the class. I used a lot of spectrum exercises so they could see each other's diversity along many continua, but ultimately I let "queer" pass away in hopes that some of them will find her not in the well of loneliness, but in the *mayim chayyim*, the waters of life, that spring from Miriam's well. Some would judge me as a failure for having landed the curriculum between these opposing poles, and I will leave that judgment to the reader, or most appropriately, to the students themselves. I have colleagues that I very much respect, who expect the students to keep up with their curricular choices—like being thrown into the deep end of a pool—and these are neither better nor worse educators than I am, simply different.

What was wrong with my gaydar? Unfortunately, nothing. What was wrong were

my assumptions about why students take a class such as this. When the class was first taught in 1995, these topics were still so taboo within the student body that bigender and heterosexual students would have been a numerical minority in the course; but by 2008, they were the majority. This is a sea change that snuck up on me, but it has proved wrong the strongest arguments against identity-based curricula from neocons and fundamentalists. Even if they were ever intended to be, these courses are not recruiting grounds or ideological havens for the left, and if so, that function has proven a failure. Rather they have become academic, as attractive to the majority culture as most other subjects or methods of inquiry. Oddly, the same is true of Jewish American literature, a "safe" subject students sometimes take to meet their culture and gender diversity requirement, because they are wary of discussions of race or sexuality! How ironic for them when they encounter in my course former Black Panther Julius Lester's *Lovesong: On Becoming A Jew*, or the anthology *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*, not to mention the cosmic twist of landing in the middle of the Holocaust in order to feel less uncomfortable about race or gender.

So what possible connection does the teaching of this course have to do with Stonewall? Why was I so insistent in asking my students to reflect upon the origin of their rights and freedoms? For me, many of the gifts of the course were in allowing them to taste the subtleties and textures of their lives. Audre Lorde (1984) in "The Uses of the Erotic" writes:

*During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale*

*mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it. I find the erotic such a kernel within myself.*  
(p. 57)

Oh, how they squirmed when I dragged them to this passage, terrified not of the sexuality implied, but of the *sensuality*.

They were the last class to purchase their textbooks from the soon-to-be-closed women's bookstore. In their world, every title is instantly available, and much more in the way of selection, but how much was passing away? On the last day of class they met Clela Rorex, Boulder's former county clerk, who in 1975 issued marriage licenses to five same sex couples decades before Denmark, Iowa, or Gavin Newsom. Their friendships across every line were breezy and effortless, with the exception of the Muslim student, who always sat outside the circle, and was visibly uncomfortable in any interactive exercise.

I do not seek nostalgia here, I seek waking. When I drew these students into my shell game, I wanted them to catch me, to up-end the table, and chase me down the street. And so I set up my con right outside the Stonewall Inn, a place outside which I once sat, in the middle of the street, not much older than they after staggering there from the Trans March and the Dyke March, drumming all night with the queerpunks at Stonewall's 25th.

Auspiciously, the 40th anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion corresponds in the Jewish calendar with the reading in the annual cycle of Torah portions of a mysterious and complex *parshah* (portion) called *Chukat*. The Israelites had arrived at the wilderness of Zin after forty years wandering in the desert, where the prophet Miriam dies and the people thirst for water. Their seemingly inexhaustible well, dependent on the merit of Miriam, has suddenly dried up.

Free from bondage, but still in part enslaved, the people long for the security of bread and water, for the certainty provided by *Mitzrayim*, the land of their enslavement, the narrow places. At Passover we say, "It was not enough to take the Jews out of *Mitzrayim*, it was necessary to take the narrow places out of the Jews."

Stonewall was a narrow place: a sliver of a bar under Mafia control and constant threat of police raid, populated by drag queens, hustlers, and homeless youth. Narrow, yes, until that night, 40 years ago, when Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and so many other trans/queer people struck the rock that poured forth water, those waters "in the life." Yes, Stonewall has become a myth, neither the beginning nor the end, but people need myths as much as we need manna, water, and the shelter of the sky. In the biblical account, Moses learns that because he did not follow instructions to speak to the rock but instead struck it in anger, he would glimpse, but not enter, the promised land.

I take this to be the wrong lesson, the morality tale that silences the voice that says: "Enough!" "*Genug!*" "*¡Ya Basta!*" This is the voice so many are afraid to hear because the narrow places feel so secure, so appealing to our animal nature, to our defendable turf. But the myth is also wise beyond compare, because...really... none of us can ever but glimpse the Promised Land. The best a *bodhisattva* or a *tzadek* can hope for—much less those of us living the broken lives of the everyday—is to bring someone toward promise, to stand briefly on that mountain, and then go back for the next one.

*I do not seek nostalgia, I seek waking.*

In a numinous and rare teaching moment where one could feel the ground tremble with meaning, I asked my students, "Years from now, who will be freer because of the way you lived your lives?" Whether trans or not, queer or not, Jewish or not, a friend of Dorothy or not, *whoever you are*, I ask the same of us all.

### References

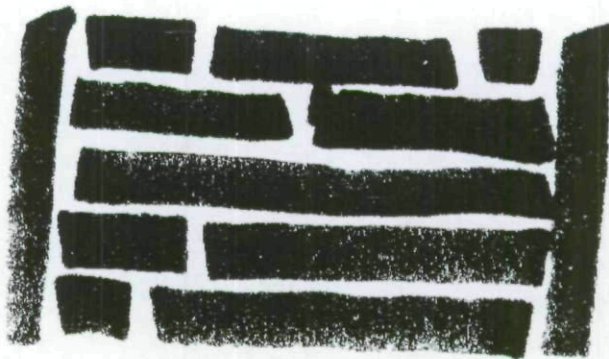
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### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> I regret you cannot meet these delightful people in their full dimension—I came to love them all, but, for reasons of anonymity must reduce them to “students.” It should be obvious enough that I learned as much from them as they me.

<sup>2</sup> How very queer there is one.



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