

A Place for Us. Queer Space and the Lesbian and Gay Studies Classroom

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Having taught a variety of Queer Theory and Lesbian and Gay Studies courses for more than fifteen years, I've come to anticipate a crucial moment that occurs about a third of the way through the semester in any given class. One of the students, usually a male, will announce with a casualness that belies his obvious nervousness that he is in fact straight. Typically, what happens after that is.....well, nothing. There are no negative consequences. In fact, nobody comments on the student's sexual orientation at all. The only aftermath of this milestone in the class's progress is simply that, during the next two or three class periods, more of the straight students will announce their sexual orientation until it becomes clear that roughly half the class is straight. Now, the reason why this mundane revelation might also be considered significant is that, far beyond whatever we read or discuss about lesbian or gay life in the classroom, it has always been this moment that has struck me as truly heuristic for the student(s) involved. Having had to "come out" about their sexuality to a group that they perceive as not sharing it, this is one of the very rare times in their lives where they experience, however briefly, some tiny part of what it's actually like to be gay. For one short moment, they inhabit the phenomenological state of queerness, enacting that endlessly repeated scene so familiar to lesbians and gays where you must admit publically that you do not fit with the

norm. Even if the straight student forgets everything else from the class, I would like to think that s/he remembers this.

Recently, however, things have changed, and the last couple of semesters that I've taught one of these courses, this moment of straight revelation hasn't happened or, if it has, it has taken place in a slightly different way. Instead of overtly stating their sexual orientation, both queer and straight students now usually indicate it indirectly, in passing, as an ancillary detail while they're making a point about something else ("My girlfriend and I went out last night and...."). If direct heterosexual self-identification happens at all, it is now typically done on the first day of class, as was the case with the woman I'll call Katy, whose opening comment the last time I taught this course, one of the very first remarks by a student during the initial class discussion, began with the announcement of her sexual orientation: "I'm a straight woman, and...." Now, although this instance may look identical to the straight coming out moment I discussed in the previous paragraph, it reflects, I think, a subtle qualitative difference, a shift from that more familiar event. The purpose of this paper will be to identify and explain that difference, which, I will argue, is based on a changing sense of the ways that the Gay and Lesbian Studies classroom functions as one of the few areas in the public sphere that could be identified as a "queer space." As I hope to show, while queer space was once primarily understood as a separate subcultural enclave, the increasing acceptance of lesbians and gays in western culture requires a recognition that such spaces are now the site of deployments of multiple sexual identities, both gay and straight. Using the Queer Studies classroom as a model, I will suggest that we need to rethink queer space as a site of simultaneity rather than of segregation, a point that will also clarify the possible outcome of the current debate within LGBT culture about the benefits and the pitfalls of assimilation into the larger psychic and ideological space that is western culture.

Queer Space

So what, then, is queer space? Since the late 1970's, the answer to that question in the fields of Geography and Sociology has been to point to the development of lesbian and gay neighborhoods in major cities such as the Castro district in San Francisco or London's Soho for gay men, the Park Slope section of Brooklyn for lesbians, and Amsterdam for nearly everybody (Davis 286; Rothenberg 165-169; Binnie 190-194). Using models developed for the study of racial and ethnic minorities,

1 Extensive historical and scholarly work has also been done in a variety of fields, including, of course, literary studies, on the queer spaces provided by lesbian and gay bars, movie theaters, bathhouses, and cruising areas in most urban environments. See, for example, Chisholm (10-17) and Delany *passim*.

these disciplines argued that, by providing a locus for the queer community, such sites were crucial in the initial coalescence of a group identity.¹ However, a more nuanced analysis of the relation of sexual identity and space was prompted by the rise of Queer Nation, a loosely organized configuration of LGBT groups that were politically active during the early to mid 1990's (Davis 287-288). One aspect of Queer Nation's complex and multivalent agenda was to call attention to the fact that most space in the public sphere is implicitly defined as heterosexual. To protest, they staged a variety of guerilla political actions such as publically holding mock "gay weddings," leafletting at malls, and having Queer Nights Out, during which they would invade straight bars and dramatize the sexual segregation of the space by playing Spin the Bottle and kissing. As Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman note, the ultimate goal of Queer Nation was to make "all public spheres truly safe for all of the persons who occupy them," although "safe" here has a more expansive definition than simply being free from the threat of homophobic violence. Thus, Berlant and Freeman explain, it means "not just safe from bashing, not just safe from discrimination, but safe *for* demonstration...which always involves a deployment of affect, knowledge, spectacle, and, crucially, a kind of banality, ordinariness, popularity" (150-151).

I will return to this idea of a space for queer demonstration, particularly its banal and ordinary aspects, but first we might ask how much has changed in the fifteen years since Queer Nation was active. Berlant and Freeman invoke a fairly expansive definition of "cultural space" that includes the more metaphorical spaces of media and political representation, and, certainly, LGBT people have

made significant progress in those realms, as the proliferation of media representations of gays and lesbians and the increasing availability of same-sex marriage in the western industrial world suggest. Yet, as far as literal, physical space is concerned, the public sphere would still seem to be primarily, and still unconsciously, understood as heterosexual. This is nowhere more evident than in Judith Halberstam's recent attempt to delineate a queer space in the opening chapter of *In a Queer Time and Place*. Defining "queer space" as "the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics" and as "the place-making practices...in which queer people engage" (6), Halberstam seems to have difficulty articulating what a queer space might actually be. Rather than elaborating on those spatial understandings or place-making practices, her argument instead largely works analogically, through a parallel to her much clearer definition of "queer time," which is time conceived outside the daily rhythms of normative family life, the logic of reproductive futurity, or the cultural narrative of maturation into stable adult life. Thus, just as queer subjects are those who live outside of the temporality of heteronormativity, the essential queer subject becomes the "rent boys, sex workers, [and] homeless people" who inhabit "the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned" (10). Obviously, these are fairly extreme cases of queer subjects and queer spaces, which Halberstam presumably invokes in order to counter the prevailing neoliberal emphasis in the LGBT community on a privatized, apolitical domestic space. Yet, these examples are also the inevitable extension of the underlying logic of mutual exclusion that is operant here: like queer time, queer space is whatever is left over from heterosexual culture. Thus, it seems important that, despite her cogent critique of the familial ideology that structures our sense of time, Halberstam has difficulty pointing to the existence of queer people in any public space that is not marginal, liminal, or abandoned by straight culture. Can it really be that one of the few places to have a Queer Night Out is still a gay or lesbian bar?

Actually, I don't think matters are quite as bleak as that, and a reassessment of how queer space might be conceptualized can help us to see some other alternatives. To begin with, if we think of the "queer" of "queer space" primarily in terms of its larger abstract meaning as "the non-heteronormative," then the inevitable logical result is indeed the sort of binarized system posited by Halberstam, which assumes the incommensurability of straight space and gay space and the concomitant relegation of individual queers to the margins of the public sphere. Yet, if we understand "queer space" to refer more literally to places in which

there is an obvious queer presence, then space becomes a far more fluid concept, and that brings us back to Berlant and Freeman's notion of public space as a potential site for the deployment of a certain queer ordinairiness, even of a queer banality. What I understand that to mean is something like the following: on the literal, physical level, most of the space in the public sphere is not, in and of itself, already sexualized. The heteronormativity of public space—a street, a mall, a college campus—is, rather, the materialization of a certain phenomenology; it derives from the people in the space or, more accurately, from their sensibilities, normative assumptions, and behaviors, their deployment of Berlant and Freeman's affect, knowledge, and spectacle, if you will.

This is why a college classroom can, for an hour or an hour and a half, become a queer space and why a straight student might feel the need to “come out” as different there. This is less a question of whether the majority of people in the room are gay, lesbian, or bisexual or even whether everyone in the room thinks that that's the case even if it's not. Rather, it has to do with the class's implicit assumption of a queer perspective, even a norm, for the course, the notion that in this time and place the queer is ordinary. This queer perspective operates through the readings, through many of the unstated assumptions of the instructor and a number of the class members, and through the general trend of class discussions. Simply put, what actively works to make that space queer is something as simple as a student referring to an aspect of LGBT subculture such as Manhunt.com or the notion of a “soft butch” or a “boi” with the expectation that this will need no explanation for the majority of people in the room. In fact, it is precisely the very absence of any need for queer spectacle, for the theatricalized demonstration of a queer presence such as a game of same-sex Spin the Bottle, that marks the classroom as a queer space.

Don't Fence Me In

Seeing the Lesbian and Gay Studies classroom as a queer space in this sense can certainly explain that repeated moment of straight coming out that I mentioned at the start of this essay. If queer is the norm, and you're not queer, you have to announce that fact. Yet, what this notion cannot explain is why such coming out moments have now become rare. Even more importantly, this understanding of the classroom still relies on a binary logic that allocates space according to an absolute distinction: either a space is heterosexual space or it is queer. Seen this way, a queer space simply becomes a site where, for a shorter or longer

period of time, the normative expectations are inverted. Yet matters may actually be more complicated than that, as a further discussion of some specific details from the last Gay and Lesbian Studies course that I taught will suggest. In this instance, only 30% of the class publically acknowledged being lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transgendered rather than the more typical 50%, and, as the students themselves pointed out in the course of the semester, class discussion was dominated by the straight women. Partially due to the relative percentages of queer and straight people in the room, a greater than normal amount of class time had to be allocated to articulating the subcultural knowledge that was necessary to understand some of the readings, which often assumed a queer audience with an extensive command of such knowledge. Thus, one entire class period was devoted to explaining the taxonomic classifications of lesbian and gay culture: how to recognize a soft butch, for example, or the definition of a twink. The class even included its own nod toward reproductive futurity since one of the straight women gave birth to a baby boy near the end of the semester whose visit to the class was one of the highlights of the course.

Now, this may sound like a very straight environment and yet, as I've noted, the class was certainly queer, not simply because there were plenty of queer people in the room or even because the class was devoted to a critique of heteronormative culture in which all the students seemed to genuinely participate but finally because here the queer was mundane. In such a setting, the conventional understandings of heterosexual and queer space that we've been looking at become inadequate to explain the shifting deployments of straight and lesbian and trans and bi identities that were actually taking place in that room. Perhaps the best way to understand the resulting sexualization of the classroom may be through a comparison to Alan Lawson's work on shared space in settler cultures. In "The Anxious Proximities of (Post) colonial Relations," Lawson looks at the decision made by the High Court of Australia in 1996 in *Wik Peoples v The State of Queensland* (commonly known as the Wik case), which ruled that native title to use of the land had never been extinguished by the pastoral leases created by English settlers. Therefore, the High Court's ruling asserted that both the indigenous Aboriginal population and the European settlers simultaneously have rights to the land although their uses of it may differ. Lawson takes this as paradigmatic of the situation of settler colonies in general, in which, because both settlers and natives inhabit the same space at the same time, possession is never complete or absolute: our space is also their space. As a result, Lawson argues,

colonial (and even postcolonial) space is always haunted by a topographic version of the uncanny in which the land is both familiar and strange. Citing Homi Bhabha's notion of overlap without equivalence, Lawson argues that, to understand the complex relation between the co-presence of differing uses and conceptions of the land by natives and settlers, we need "a grammar of unequal proximity" (1213).

Now, obviously, the Queer Studies classroom is not a postcolonial space except in the most metaphorical of senses. To begin with, like most areas of the public sphere, the classroom houses a transitory population so that, in effect, it is never really anybody's space. And even though it could be argued that, like the colonial native, lesbians and gays are at best only imperfectly included in the imagined community of the (new) nation, such easy analogies are not possible. Despite their frequent rejection of many of the premises and assumptions of heterosexual society, Queer Nation's claim to public space was implicitly based on an unstated sense of entitlement to use of the public sphere by virtue of their status as American citizens. In contrast, as Lawson makes clear, in the moment of colonial settlement, the issue of who has a right to the land is based not on civic abstractions such as citizenship but on a sense of possession predicated on temporal priority. Because the natives were here first, the settlers must employ a number of discursive tropes to justify their appropriation of the land both to the natives and to themselves, including the notions that the progress of civilization justifies the settler's actions or that the natives are a dying race anyway. Despite this lack of analogical exactness between the situations of colonial natives and contemporary queers, I nonetheless think that Lawson's ideas can be helpful in explaining what goes on in the Queer Studies classroom if we focus our attention on the notion of unequal proximity as the co-presence of divergent queer and straight conceptions of the world, and, specifically, as disparate notions of the sexual orientation of the space itself. But how exactly would such different conceptions play out in the classroom?

Et in arcadia ego

What I'd like to suggest is that this unequal proximity, the fact that the Gay Studies classroom is simultaneously a straight and a queer public space at the same time, creates not one but two different experiences of the uncanny sense that this place both is and is not home: a queer uncanny and a straight uncanny. Of the two, the queer uncanny might be the easiest to explain. Despite the long tradition of theoretical

2 For a recent example, see Armstrong.

critiques of the incorporation of Lesbian and Gay Studies courses into the academy as a tactic designed to constrain the potentially radical range and scope of queer politics,² it is precisely the institutional sanction given to such courses that, for the LGBT students in them, provides a sense that the classroom is “their space.” The point is not simply that, because these are identity-based classes, such courses are some of the very few in the curriculum that these students feel are “about them” or in which they have the sense that their knowledge of their subculture and even of themselves is vital to the class. Even more crucially, the academic setting confers legitimacy on both this knowledge and that identity, validating both. In this respect, it’s important that this is public space, a part of the public sphere to which queer identities, knowledge, and affect are integral, and it is in this sense that this space can be seen as home by the queer students in the class.

There were innumerable examples of such validation during the course of the semester. One of the gay men (“Travis”) proved particularly adept at, and seemed to take great pleasure in, explaining the nuances of LGBT culture to the straight students in the room. For example, during class discussion of an essay about how internet social networking had changed the courtship rituals of gay male life, one of the straight women students asked what those courtship rituals were. In response, Travis lovingly detailed what he expected from a prospective suitor, which included, at a certain point in the courtship process, a nice breakfast on the morning after. Travis’s finest moment, however, came during our discussion of the taxonomic classifications of lesbian and gay culture. When we got to the concept of the “twink” after a rather tortuous discussion

of the definition of a “bear” that required the citation of numerous examples from television and film, Travis simply said, “A twink? That’s me,” which instantly clarified the meaning of the term. If the LGBT classroom is thus a site where queer knowledge can be deployed, for queer students it can also be a locus of considerable affect. For example, one of the lesbian students (“Anne”) became particularly interested in those readings for the course that interrogated the naturalness of both gender and sex, and it became clear as the semester progressed that both the readings and the class discussion allowed her to think through some deeply personal questions about gender, including notions of transgender. Precisely because the class was the perfect site for the exploration of such issues, at Anne’s suggestion I changed the syllabus to include an additional reading from Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl* so that we could devote a bit more attention to the “t” in LGBT.

Now, if Travis’s display of queer knowledge was in fact predicated on the uncanniness of the LGBT classroom since it actually required the presence of straight people in the room, class discussion of the chapter from Julia Serano demonstrated the less happy side of the unequal proximity of the space. Fairly early on in the discussion, “Tom,” one of the straight students who was a double major in English and Philosophy, commented that he found the essay “ontologically problematic” because of its essentialism, a remark that deeply perplexed Anne. This led to a conversation in the classroom between the two of them after class during which Tom tried to clarify his philosophical objection. Due in large part to her emotional investment in Serano’s essay, which does, in fact, rely on an essentialist argument in order to establish the validity of transgender identity, Anne had a great deal of difficulty in comprehending his points. While the conversation was entirely amiable, and while it was very clear that both of them were trying desperately to understand each other, it finally became evident that they were fixed at a point of mutual incomprehension. While some of that incomprehension clearly derived from differences in their educational background—Anne was not particularly conversant with philosophy—the real difficulty seems finally to have been in their approaches to the reading, which were also finally differences in their approaches to the educational space. While I don’t think either one of them was fully conscious of it, the problem was actually that, for Tom, the reading, like the class itself, was simply the occasion for another intellectual exercise, different from all his other classes only by virtue of the topic, while, for Anne, both the reading and the class were deeply personal in a way that her other

classes could not be. To put it simply, for Tom this was just school while, for Anne, this was her identity.

In other words, it was yet another one of those small quotidian tragedies that are part of the daily experience of what I've called the phenomenology of queerness, another reminder for Anne of her distance from the norm. Moreover, since Anne had more than once said to me privately that she didn't think anyone else understood why gender confused her, this was also for her a particularly pointed instance of the queer uncanny, where, even in "your" space, you're forced to recognize the existence of an alternate, incommensurable heterosexual presence. Yet I would like to think it was also an uncanny experience for Tom too, if only because he did seem to understand the importance of the transgender issue for Anne. If the queer uncanny is the recognition that, even in a queer space, you sometimes have to confront your difference from straight culture so that the queer uncanny is finally just the normal uncanniness of being queer, an uncanny so familiar that it almost ceases to be strange, the straight uncanny may very well be encountering this uncanniness in the first place. For Tom and his straight classmates, the classroom would be one of the rare places where the fact that the space was not only theirs but someone else's too would emerge into visibility. And, certainly, even if Tom had trouble explaining his intellectual arguments to Anne, he did seem to realize that, for her, this was not only an intellectual issue, which was also the recognition that the space was not simply yet another college classroom.

And this then brings us back, finally, to the question of why the heterosexual moment of self-revelation now seems to serve a slightly different set of functions than it used to. Beyond establishing her own identity, I would argue that Katy's announcement of her sexual orientation was based on this sense of the classroom as a site of unequal proximity. If, before, the rigid segregation of queer and straight space led to the misperception that the Lesbian and Gay Studies classroom must be entirely queer (so that straight students felt the need to come out as straight) now the increasingly visibility of LGBT people in the culture at large would seem to encourage a recognition of the Queer Studies classroom as a site of overlapping sexual orientations and, hence, of different perspectives. As such, Katy's remark was designed less to articulate an identification as straight than to create a ground from which to speak, in this case *as* a heterosexual, the speaker's sexual orientation being implicitly situated as the epistemological basis for the perceptions and opinions which follow. In this sense, it is of a piece with the current trend of students noting their sexual orientation indirectly

or in passing, their assumption being that sexual identity is primarily important in that it grounds their remarks in a certain ontology. As such, while one could see Katy's statement as a territorial action, a claiming of a portion of the classroom as a straight space, it seems more accurate to take it as a way of establishing her positionality in relation to the class. Crucially, the fact that she felt compelled to define her positionality in the first place suggests that Katy approached the class with a sense of the straight uncanny, the dissolution of the assumption that all public space is heterosexual and a recognition that the sexual other is also in the space of the same.

We Are Everywhere

Now, if the unequal proximity of the college classroom reflects the increasingly osmotic nature of the sexualization of public space, it thus stands as a synecdoche for larger issues that face contemporary queer culture. As Shane Phelan has pointed out, the growing acceptance of lesbians and gays by mainstream western culture raises a previously unimaginable set of questions about both the benefits and the perils of queer assimilation to the dominant culture (90-91). Looking toward the future, Phelan is only able to imagine two options. One is to continue the trends of the past and to demarcate separate geographic and cultural spaces for lesbian and gay culture, the bars and bookstores and parts of town that have been the traditional enclaves of lesbians and gays. The other option would be assimilation to the dominant culture, a trend given momentum in the last ten years by the increasing availability of gay marriage, which would presumably entail the relegation of queer culture primarily to the privatized domestic space of the neoliberal household with a concomitant erosion of any public subculture. Of the two options, Phelan concludes that assimilation is probably inevitable, if only because LGBT people were raised within heterosexual culture and share so many other cultural norms and values with the dominant. Yet she also argues that, on a certain level, assimilation must, also inevitably, be a failure because the outsider is never fully considered to be "inside" so that "the 'inclusion' of sexual minorities in a state that continues to define itself as heterosexual, white, and masculine will be at best an addendum waiting to be nullified" (113). I would like to think that Phelan is being a bit too pessimistic here, however. As Phelan's metaphors of inside and outside suggest, the options she presents are rather narrowly conceived: either queers will live in both literal and metaphorical spaces outside straight culture or they will be completely absorbed into it. As

we've seen, however, the notion of overlap without equivalence offers another way to understand a queer future. Implicitly echoing Phelan's concerns, Dereka Rushbrook argues that as queer culture becomes more visible to the general public and as straight people feel more comfortable entering lesbian and gay spaces there is a danger that the queerness of such spaces, of pride parades and gay bars and lesbian neighborhoods, will be diluted (198). Like Phelan, Rushbrook assumes a certain zero sum incommensurability of the two cultures: if a space has more straights in it, it will be less queer. Yet, as I hope I've demonstrated, it might be more useful to read this co-presence as an overlap, a simultaneity in which such an accounting is not really possible. As Tatiana Matejskova notes in her analysis of a gay bar in Bratislava, Slovakia, straight people have complex and multiple motivations, including friendship with queer people, for entering gay spaces (138), and, regardless of motivation, such forays must entail some sense of what I've been calling the straight uncanny, a heterosexual recognition that this space is not really your space. As Queer Nation pointed out, however, the crucial political issue is less the question of whether the presence of straight people dilutes gay spaces than whether queers can have an expanded, visible presence in straight space. In other words, is it possible to extend the experience of the straight uncanny beyond the confines of carefully demarcated queer spaces and into the public sphere in general?

To be honest, it is not yet clear what the answer to that question might be or how far we've come since the days when Queer Nation demanded the right to inhabit public space, yet there are some hopeful signs. Like many American undergraduates, most of the students in my Gay and Lesbian Studies class worked in the service industry to help pay for their education. As such, the interactions between them in the classroom extended into other spaces through their jobs at restaurants and bookstores and into a network of relations through their mutual friends from work or school. Nearly every day when I came into the classroom before class, one of the gay men ("Brandon") would already be involved in an extensive discussion of recent events at work with the straight women who sat around him, including complaints about the manager and anecdotes about co-workers, both gay and straight. What was clear from these discussions was that the queer space of the classroom opened out onto a number of other public spaces where the visibility of the lesbians and gays involved made parts of the public sphere, and not only the kitchens and stockrooms, into sites with an obvious queer presence. As such, it seems possible that we are

closer than one might think to a more complex, and uncanny, sexualization of public space, to an assimilation that is not simply erasure. Of course, as Lawson makes clear, the overlapping of straight and gay presences in the public sphere is, may always be, a proximity that is, precisely, unequal. If the straight uncanny is simply the dissolution of the implicit assumption that all public space is straight, the queer uncanny is still the continual reminder that one differs from the norm. Yet I would like to think that Brandon's conversation at least signals the beginning of a certain public queer banality, a straight recognition that Queer Nation was right when they said "We are everywhere."

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SUMMARY

While queer space was once primarily understood as a separate subcultural enclave, the increasing acceptance of lesbians and gays in western culture requires a recognition that such spaces are now sites for the deployment of multiple sexual identities, both gay and straight. Using the Queer Studies classroom as a model, this essay argues that queer space should thus be seen as a space of "unequal proximity," of simultaneity rather than of segregation. By the same token, the implicit assumption that the public sphere is, by definition, heterosexual must also be rethought as an uncanny space where straight and queer identities are co-present.

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Masterclass

In de rubriek Masterclass wordt studenten de mogelijkheid geboden eigen onderzoek te publiceren. Deze keer twee artikelen van David de Kam en Hans Verhees.