

**Presented at the 1997 MLA Panel, "Voices in the Wilderness: Teaching Queer Theory in Strange Places."  
How Teaching at a Catholic Liberal Arts College  
Turned me Queer**

**- Margot Backus**

*"It's not people like me who give homosexuality a bad name -- it's those men who play out perfect little man/wife roles and think their french poodle is their child who are destroying homosexuality's reputation." Divine.*

*"Who made me a lesbian? A lot of people. My father. A girl named Beth. Myself. Fate" Laura, the protagonist of Ann Bannon's Beebo Brinker series.*

These epigraphs gesture toward what I take to be productively queer modes of self-representation. Each rejects a central tenet of the logic by which homosexuality may be made to re-affirm bourgeois heterosexuality's natural, inevitable centrality. The first quote, as recalled from an NPR interview with the late, obese drag queen, Divine, refutes the liberal argument that gays and straights are (or should be) "just alike," and constitutes homosexuality as a queer or de-territorialized space outside of and in absolute opposition to bourgeois, heterosexist norms. In the second quote, lesbian pulp novelist Ann Bannon deflects the earnest attempts of an imagined straight reader to establish the origins of "deviant" sexuality by dissolving the question's essentializing logic, through a moving enumeration of sexuality's multiple and contingent origins.

As Laura's lesbian auto-etiology suggests, and as my title asserts, queers are made, not born. This assertion makes no assumptions concerning the origins of sexual orientation; it turns on a symbolic distinction between homosexual and queer identity. Typically, homosexuality, bisexuality and transexuality are conceptualized as pre-ordained identities, to be discovered or discerned rather than achieved. The paradigmatic image of "coming out" suggests precisely a division between an inner authentic identity split off from an external constructed identity with which it may or may not be congruent. Thus our most fundamental metaphors for sexual identity posit sexual orientation as an innate, a priori condition. Conversely, queer identity emerges as a cultural construct, via a

chosen act of ironic self-nomination that simultaneously affirms and reinvents the social categories by which compulsory heterosexuality's conscientious objectors are marginalized. The application of terms such as queer and its myriad equivalents (feminist, dyke, fenian, witch, fairy, of color, Chicano, white trash, bastard) to oneself thus constitutes a political act, a sort of secular baptism. Like a baptism, it constitutes a ritual, utopian calling into being of a larger imagined community.

If laying claim to the term queer represents a sort of baptism, however, it is a particularly extended, complex, and multi-phasic one. In the course of this paper, I will map out some key moments in my own history in relation to the touchstone conceptions of queer identity (that is, oppositionality and contingency) that my epigraphs suggest.

### **I. Gay is an Identity. Bisexual is a Perversion.**

As a young woman I had sexual and romantic relationships with lots of men and a few women. My closest friendships were with lesbians, gay men, and, above all, other bisexual women. The most fulfilling and functional partnership of my young adulthood was with a man who cross-dressed and who recently told me that he identifies as a woman. When something started killing gay men, I agonized obsessively over my brother's and father's safety. Once we knew what that thing was, I gave them strict and explicit lectures on safer sex. I lived immersed in a queer world, but I was usually one step removed from an "outable" or "authentic" homosexual subject position. Within the rigorous epistemology of the closet, I couldn't come out (the only political act that seemed to me to be meaningful at the time), because I seldom had anything authoritatively tangible and personal in there to reveal. Moreover, "coming out" as bisexual felt, at the time, very uncomfortable to me as a woman, as it also seemed to involve highly personal intimations of multiple lovers and sexual adventurousness that "gay" or "lesbian" did not. Shaping my feelings toward my own sexuality at this time was unconscious shame I'd taken on on behalf of other family members who had had shameful, wrongful things happen to them, within and outside of the family, because they were gay. This shame, wed to a form of sexual survivor guilt, gave rise to a worldview

that (compensatorily) valorized homosexuality but denigrated my own. While "gay" was an identity, "bisexual," it seemed to me, was more like a perversion.

These logistical problems of self-representation were exacerbated when I started to teach. In an essay presented at a graduate school colloquium at the University of Texas, I initiated the ongoing interrogation of my sexual identity in the classroom that I am extending in this paper. In it, I described the first time I came out in a classroom, to a first year writing class at the University of Massachusetts at Boston for which I was an undergraduate peer tutor. The radical lesbian instructor showed The Life of Harvey Milk, and when Milk jubilantly kissed his lover in the San Francisco gay pride parade, the students gave an enormous, involuntary "ugh" of disgust, which (I learned through writing this essay) re-triggered the trauma I had felt at the time of my parents' divorce, when my father was publicly pilloried for having sexual relations with men. I waited for the instructor to come out, to shame the students into realizing how hurtful that response was (to me). When she didn't, I came out as bisexual, a gesture meant to "hit back" at the students whose homophobia had hurt me -- to make them feel uncomfortable, and a little afraid. I went on in the paper to trace my history of "coming out" in the classroom from that time, observing that the unconscious point in all of my early revelations was to intimidate and enforce distance between myself and my students. I wanted to hold at arms length students who were suggestively similar in age and beliefs to the high school classmates and friends who had betrayed and traumatized me and, far more profoundly, my brother, by ostracizing us, and saying vile, shaming, and crudely anatomically explicit things about all of us, terrorizing my brother in particular into a wilderness of bitterness and self hate from which he has yet fully to emerge.

## **II. "Same-Sex Love in the British Tradition"**

In August of 1993, I arrived on the campus of St. John Fisher College, a small liberal arts college "in the Catholic tradition" situated in Rochester, New York. In the simplest sense, this paper's title refers to my transformation, in the absence of any out homosexuals or queer theorists on campus, into a queer theorist, and also a queer mentor and role model, roles that, at a small, conservative college, went with the subject matter. The department

actively wanted a gay/lesbian lit. class, but they were afraid an out lesbian would be met with hostility on a campus that had until very recently proved highly resistant even to garden variety feminism. For my part, I didn't realize I was being considered as a gay/lesbian lit. specialist, so I hadn't given much thought to positioning myself in terms of sexual orientation. When, during the on-campus interview, I made cautious reference to my male domestic partner, the Chair breathed a sigh of relief, saying "Oh thank God -- I was afraid we were going to bring a lesbian here to be eaten alive." From the first, then, my purported heterosexuality set me up as a sort of Trojan Horse -- a safe-looking vessel bearing dangerous contents.

In January of 1994, I met with a classroom full of students who had for various reasons, often to fit scheduling restrictions, registered for a sophomore-level seminar in English literature quaintly and defensively entitled "Same-Sex Love in the British Tradition." In the first half of the semester, an unusually diverse and frankly peculiar collectivity of 97% straight-identified students were excited and enthusiastic about the course, but seemed hopelessly confused concerning the course's goals and methods in a way that (I speculate) they would not have been in a course on, say, "literature of the Civil War" or "contemporary women's literature." Part of this seemed to have to do with a national media culture conditioned by a steady stream of anti-gay political initiatives flowing from a well-organized religious right. By constantly polemicizing gay and lesbian identity and social forms, this media culture flattens and empties out lesbian/gay identity. Questions of lesbian/gay art, politics, medical issues, community, celebration, etc., are re-contained as "pro or con" issues, as though the only question that can or could be asked concerning lesbian and gay lives is whether or not they should exist at all. My students were anxious to assure me that they were "pro," but they were bewildered by my attempts to resituate sexuality and its relationship to cultural production outside of this anemic "yay or nay" paradigm. One student, apparently goaded beyond endurance by my attempts to move gay/lesbian identity into a realm beyond the question of civil liberties, beyond which the class seemed terminally unable to think, turned up at the local women's bookstore desperately looking for a book on "what lesbian's think," as I was embarrassed to learn.

Three good things came out of that first course. First, I met Tanya Smolinsky, director of the Gay Alliance of the Genessee Valley, who came to talk to the class about the history of gay/lesbian activism in the U.S. Tanya was taken aback to find a queer theorist teaching at Fisher, but she immediately made herself useful to me and to my students, providing a support network for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and uncertain students that the class inevitably attracted to me, if not actually to the class, and lined me up for various community appearances that were to prove influential to my self-concept. Secondly, out of this class, or rather the penumbra of external "volunteers" whom the class attracted to my office at odd hours over the course of the semester, came the nucleus of the college's first gay/lesbian/bisexual student organization -- BiGala+. Third, the class constituted the beginning of my work on lesbian literature with a particularly gifted sophomore, Bernadette Brick. Two years later, Bernadette's work on lesbian pulp fiction of the 1950's and 60's would constitute the most satisfying undergraduate work I have ever supervised.

### **III. "Queer Closures"**

In the year that followed, the sophomore-level topics (sexuality and literature) slot that I had pioneered as "Same-Sex Love," transmogrophied into "Queer Closures: The Sexual Politics of Literary Form." The best experience of the whole semester was putting together flyers to advertise the course that also raised gay/lesbian visibility and sought to heighten awareness of homophobia and its harmful effects. I distinctly remember the thrill of posting the magenta flyers around the campus -- this is what I had always wanted to be when I grew up! I have made copies of this flyer to pass out as a sort of festive last effect, since it is possible that I will never teach this course again. For various reasons, the course itself was a disaster. For one thing, as with "Same-Sex Love," I lectured a lot. This was a holdover from my earlier attempts to protect myself and distance from my students around this material. As with "Same-Sex Love," I drew a really strange hodge podge of students, this time including half the football team and a well-know local lesbian "personality," who engaged in a direct power struggle with me for control of the class that culminated on the day I came into my classroom on time, to find the class already in session. "Gloria" was showing a videotape of lesbian stand-up comedians (a tape for which I'd already told her the syllabus had no room nor place). I was also

informed mid-semester that senior faculty members would need to observe me teaching this class, as the college was, due to declining enrollment, firing some tenure-track faculty members, and my teaching was to be assessed to see if I should be retained or dismissed. On the day I was observed, I had just learned that the Gloria had informed the Chair of my department that I was crazy and couldn't teach. I walked into the classroom on that day uncertain of whether I would even have control over what material would be covered. So, what with one thing and another, I haven't gotten back to teaching gay/lesbian literature again. Instead, I concluded, based on my first two experiences, that apart from a very few very out students, most members of Fisher's beleaguered gay/lesbian undergraduate population were too scared to take courses on gay/lesbian literature, and many of the students who were taking the course were just not at an appropriate place to even begin the kind of work that I wanted to do on, for instance, questions of genre and sexual identity, nor were they in the least stimulated at such a prospect. Queer Closures represented closure indeed to the phase of my teaching during which I attempted to protect my personal identity through recourse to an a priori, universal concept of gay/lesbian studies that could be unpacked and made workable anywhere through sheer diligence, knowledge ability and style.

#### **IV. "Our Stories, Ourselves..."**

After Queer Closures and my narrow brush with unemployment, I took some time off from teaching queer theory. I worked one on one with students on honors theses and independent study projects, and with the individual students in need of help who were increasingly being sent my way. Supported by Tanya Smolinsky, and spurred by the evident needs of my students, which resonated with my own deep inner knowing of how much both my brother and I had needed at their age, and hadn't gotten, I also began, for the first time, to speak out in the the community as a bisexual.

I was first encouraged to speak out more publicly as a bisexual at the first "out in the community" event that I organized: a roundtable discussion of the role of Latin American solidarity organizations should take toward Latin American gay/lesbian rights movements, inspired by the Rochester Committee for Latin America's screening of the

Cuban film, Strawberries and Chocolate -- a critique of Cuba's one-time policy of excluding homosexuals from the Communist Party. In the course of this roundtable discussion, a young and very impressive gay activist found a moment to publicly thank an older activist who, although committedly partnered with a woman, had openly owned his bisexuality and consistently kept questions of sexual orientation on the table over the years within Rochester's Latin American solidarity movement. The younger activist recalled that there were many times when he had felt discouraged and on the brink of quitting, when something the older activist said would make him feel less invisible, less crazy, and he had felt again that he could go on. This moving affirmation of the power of the connections that a committed community activist has insisted upon making between his own identity, and his political values, helped to encourage me more publicly to identify myself as bisexual.

I first spoke publicly on the topic of bisexuality at a monthly talk sponsored by the Gay Alliance. The talk was on Marjorie Garber's Vice Versa, and it was meant to help to start a Gay Alliance support group for bisexuals. I arrived dressed to the nines, PhD. mentally in hand and girded for battle, and lectured for most of the hour and a half session. In spite of me, the Gay Alliance did manage to get a bisexual support group going, and I made a few bisexual contacts, some of whom even turned up for my second, more relaxed appearance a year later. For this second session, on Closer to Home, a collection of essays on feminism and bisexuality, I arrived--unpremeditatedly--in an Emma Goldman t-shirt with ripped off sleeves in which I had just been working on my car. Only after the program was I aware of the staggering change to which my shifting wardrobe bore witness. I also brought my boyfriend along, and was delighted rather than horrified when I discovered that several Fisher students and a lesbian staff member who had been wanting to meet me were in the audience. I broke us up into small groups and actually allowed my boyfriend to be in a group with several students from my college and without me. It was at this presentation that I found a new description of my bisexuality -- one that broke through earlier, victimy assumptions of "this is just how I am; problematic and shameful as it is, I can't help it!" Instead, during a discussion with a couple of my students, my boyfriend nodded knowingly as I found myself saying "lots of people with

my history would define as heterosexual. Some wouldn't even think twice about it. I define as bisexual to make political trouble and to express my affiliation with women and with other queer people."

What I learned from these out-of-the-classroom experiences was to stop trying to teach a canon, whether of theory or of literature, and to start teaching from the specifics of my own life and needs, and those of my students. I shelved the seemingly impossible task of teaching gay and lesbian literature together, and developed a new "topics in sexuality and literature" course focusing on women's sexuality and literature. Whereas the gay/lesbian lit. courses had apparently attracted largely a self-selecting group made up of those students who pay the least attention to course descriptions, "Our Stories, Ourselves: Narrating Women's Lives in Twentieth-Century America" has attracted an enormous following of bright and eager young women and men who are clearly starved for a safe space in which to reflect on sexuality, sexual orientation, and their own lives. The syllabus is about half lesbian, and it fits together much more easily than gay/lesbian sexuality ever did. I run the class as a large group discussion, requiring students to come in with two prepared questions upon which to base each class meeting's discussion.

Both times I have taught this class I have come out as bisexual. In both cases it was unpremeditated and done in the service of making a pedagogical point. In the most recent version of the course, I wasn't the first one in the classroom to come out. The way that I conceive of my identity and the way that it can contribute to my students is altering radically. I no longer envision myself in such anemic, two dimensional terms as those that are suggested by terms like "role model" or even out. Instead I consider my identity to be a larger, richer thing, constituted in terms of the discussions that I participate in and foster, rather than in the impression that I make. If "queerness" constitutes a de-territorialized space outside of heterosexist norms, in which those norms may be specified and called into question, and in which sexuality may emerge as a fluid interaction between innate desire, personal history, and performance, I am delighted to report that St. John Fisher did, through its own recalcitrance, turn me queer, with a little help from my father, my brother, a girl named Keli, the Rochester Gay Alliance, my students, and myself.