

# APA Newsletters

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Fall 2001

## NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES

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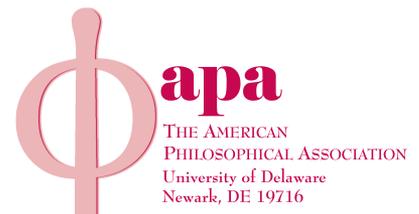
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APA NEWSLETTER ON

# Philosophy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues

Carol Quinn, Editor

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## FROM THE EDITOR

### Carol Quinn

*Miami University of Ohio*

I am delighted to take over the important task of editor of the *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Issues*. I am also the newsletter editor of the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy. I encourage submissions for the continued success of these newsletters. In this issue, I am excited to present a special topic, "Coming Out in the Classroom," in true Shakespearean style (remember Hamlet?): to come out or not to come out — that is the question. (Sorry.) Each of the essays is anecdotal, some are more philosophical than others, and all promise to be beneficial, raising important pedagogical issues.

### Contributions Invited

The editor encourages contributions to the newsletter, especially essays that might fall through the cracks elsewhere for being untraditional in scope or content. Pieces may range from opinion pieces to book reviews to short articles. Commentary on issues important to professional life — teaching, research, and service — are especially welcome. Early contact with the editor is strongly encouraged. Please contact Carol Quinn at Department of Philosophy, Miami University, Oxford Ohio, 45056 or [quinnqv@muohio.edu](mailto:quinnqv@muohio.edu).

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## FROM THE OUTGOING CHAIR

**Claudia Card**

*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

### **Annual Report 2001 from the APA Committee on the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People in the Profession.**

Since my report of a year ago, the committee has not met as a whole, but we have been in contact by email with each other and with Raja Halwani of the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy, with whom we coordinate some jointly sponsored APA sessions. Some members of our committee were able to meet for a lunch or dinner, organized by Mark Chekola, at the Pacific and Central APA Divisional meetings, to discuss such matters as possible topics for future APA convention programs. We also sponsored a reception, arranged by Mark Chekola, at the Central Divisional meetings in Minneapolis, which was very well-received by the 25-30 who attended. Mark Chekola (who will be the new committee chair, beginning July 1) and I attended a meeting at the Eastern Divisional meetings in New York for the APA committee chairs, at which surveys were discussed which appeared to render moot, at least from the point of view of financial support, the possible surveys that our committee had discussed undertaking in the past, either on our own or in conjunction with other “diversity” committees. When some sample surveys were circulated to us by email, however, we found that they did not really address the situations of LGBTs in the professions well at all. Several constructive suggestions were sent in by Cheshire Calhoun to begin to remedy that problem.

Mark Chekola and I also attended the meeting for the chairs of the “diversity” committees at the Eastern Division meetings, at which the idea of a new APA committee on inclusiveness was discussed, along with many other issues pertaining to the experiences of women and minorities in the profession. David Hull represented our committee at a meeting with the APA Board in October. We sponsored very full paper-reading sessions at all of the APA divisional meetings. And we have published Fall and Spring newsletters in the APA newsletter volumes.

The committee is pleased to welcome new members Joseph Sartorelli (Arkansas State), Kayley Vernallis (Cal State LA), and Ralph Wedgwood (MIT), whose terms run July 1, 2001-June 30, 2004, and is grateful to retiring members Cheshire Calhoun and David Hull for their three years of valuable service. I, too, will be leaving the committee after three years as its first chair on June 30, as Mark Chekola, who has been a regular member since July 1, 1999, becomes the new committee chair. Other continuing members are Pamela Hall (Emory), Christopher Horvath (Illinois State), and Kelly Oliver (SUNY-Stonybrook). We are very grateful to Timothy Murphy, who is leaving his position as newsletter editor, for launching that periodical and guiding it through its first five issues, and to Carol Quinn (Miami U. of Ohio), who has graciously agreed to be our next newsletter editor ([quinnvcv@po.muohio.edu](mailto:quinnvcv@po.muohio.edu) for news items!). Like Tim, she has

also had prior experience as editor of the newsletter of the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy. Both Tim and Carol are LGBT ex-officio committee members.

## FROM THE INCOMING CHAIR

**Mark Chekola**

*Minnesota State University, Moorhead*

On July 1 of this year I became chair of the committee, taking over those duties from Claudia Card, who served for three years as the first chair of the committee. As first chair she has established an excellent foundation for the committee. I feel fortunate taking over the duties of chair with the committee functioning as smoothly as it has. The APA Committee on Committees appointed me to serve as chair for 2001-2002, the last year of the three-year term on the committee to which I had been appointed.

During 2000-2001 I attended meetings involving the diversity committee chairs at all three APA meetings. At the Pacific and Central meetings I organized dinner or luncheon meetings with committee members attending the meetings, which we found to be very useful. At the Central meetings Raja Halwani, Programming Chair for the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy, joined in on the meeting so that we could discuss the ongoing cooperation involving both organizations co-sponsoring sessions at the Pacific and Central meetings, taking turns doing the work of organizing the sessions.

The APA makes available some funds to the diversity committees, and we used some for a reception at the Central APA meetings, following one of the committee-sponsored sessions. It was a great success, and I think it would be a good idea to do one or several committee-sponsored receptions at APA meetings during 2001-2002. I may call upon some of you for help in doing this. The prohibitive costs of hotel catering makes it necessary to try to do the reception independent of hotel services, bringing in our own refreshments. This, of course, requires some fussing.

At the Pacific Division meetings in March, Cheshire Calhoun and I attended a breakfast meeting with some of the APA leadership. Cheshire had reviewed the draft questionnaires for the APA survey and noted that they had hardly anything related to sexual orientation issues, contrary to what had been indicated in the discussion about the planned survey in New York in December. The APA agreed to make additions to the survey, and today I happened to receive my survey and found that they did make the modifications suggested. I expect that the survey results will be very useful for the committee.

The APA is establishing a Committee on Inclusiveness. I found out from APA Director Elizabeth Radcliffe that the membership of all three divisions overwhelmingly supported the constitutional change to make this a *standing* committee of the APA. This means that the chair of the Committee on Inclusiveness will be a member of the APA Board, and meet with the Board. This is extremely significant, for it enables the diversity committees, through working with the Committee on Inclusiveness, to have more direct influence

on APA governance. At the Eastern Division APA meetings in Atlanta chairs of the diversity committee will be meeting for a whole evening to discuss the relationship between the Committee on Inclusiveness and the diversity committees. In addition, there will be discussion of some issues/projects to work on collectively. One project is to encourage mentoring programs. The diversity committees are co-sponsoring a series of workshops on “Mentoring for Diversity” at the divisional meetings. APA Director Elizabeth Radcliffe and Chair of the APA Board Jerome Schneewind will join the group for the last hour of the meeting. Claudia Card, our outgoing chair, has been appointed as a member of the newly established Committee on Inclusiveness.

If any of you have any concerns or ideas related to the work of the committee, please let me know.

## FEATURES

### David Hull

*Northwestern University*

I have never felt the need for “coming out” to my students in the sense of declaring it from the front of a classroom. However, I assume that my students know that I am gay. I have been the faculty advisor for gay groups on campus from the early 1970s, and from comments in class discussions, one need not be a rocket scientist to discern that I am gay. However, I did get one shock. Several students who know that I am gay took my course on Sociobiology and Creationism. One of the topics was the causes of homosexuality, which gave rise to quite a bit of banter between me and the students who know that I am gay. A few days later my chair stopped me in the hall. “This is a bit Kafkaesque, but I have received a letter from one of your students complaining about your homophobic comments in class.” I read the letter. The student had taken down the class discussion accurately, and I could see that if she did not know that those of us bantering back and forth were gay, she might take offense. Perhaps there is something to be said for being more than just tacitly out with one’s students.

### *Coming Out En Passant in a Medical Ethics Course*

#### Mark Chekola

*Minnesota State, Moorhead*

There is much to be said for coming out in the classroom by bringing up one’s homosexuality during the discussion of some topic where it happens to fit in.

Last semester I taught a medical ethics course. One of the topics we covered was new reproductive technologies. A concern sometimes raised in discussion of the topic is the proliferation of “parents,” and questions such as “Who is the real mother, or real father?”

My partner was earlier married and has an adopted son from the time of his marriage. Mike, his son, now has a child, Hailey, who is a little over two years old. I have the good

fortune that they live in the same community. Having this connection to a young child is something that I have been finding to be exciting and delightful. During the course of the semester I was becoming more and more involved with Hailey, and starting to take her out on walks and excursions. I had several times used experiences with my granddaughter as examples in my lectures.

One of our readings in the section on the new reproductive technologies was R. Alta Charo’s “And Baby Makes Three—or Four, or Five, or Six: Redefining the Family After the Reprotech Revolution,” in which Charo claims it’s about time our understanding of the family be broadened, not only because of these new technologies, but also because of the frequency of divorce and step-parenting.

While discussing Charo’s essay I told the class, “Let me describe to you my family.” I did a kind of family tree, pointing out that Hailey has four grandfathers, three of them parental grandfathers. The genetic one is unknown and has had nothing to do with his son, much less his granddaughter. My grandfatherhood was established by being the same-sex partner of Hailey’s father’s adoptive father. Her gay grandfathers have no genetic relationship to her, and I have no “legal” relationship to her. I noted that she has no problem relating to three grandfathers that interact with her, and calls all of us “Grandpa.” “And though I have no genetic connection to her, do you think I love her less?” I asked the class. Students were in general quite sympathetic (a couple of men in the class seemed to not get the point), and my bringing this up in class led to several students speaking with me about gay-related issues that were personal to them.

### *Coming Out, Then and Now*

#### Claudia Card

*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

I started coming out in the classroom in the 1970s, when it was necessary to explain why you did so, in order to forestall the impression of sheer exhibitionism. I made a point of finding an occasion to do it no matter what the subject matter of the course was, although it’s not so difficult when you teach mostly ethics. I already had tenure when I did this; it didn’t even occur to me to do it before, and I might not be here now if I had, as it would have raised questions then, when there was almost no LGBT philosophical literature, about whether what I was doing in the classroom was really philosophy. My interests were in busting stereotypes, in making it no longer possible for any of the students to say that they had never known a “homosexual,” in disrupting their unthinking assumption that I must be straight, and in serving as what they used to call a “role model” for lesbian and gay students in my classes, or those who were thinking about it, to show that it is indeed possible to live such a life and not be jobless, totally ostracized, etc. Since the publication of my book, *Lesbian Choices*, I assume that my reputation has preceded me, and announcements are no longer necessary. But I still find small ways to make obvious or explicit that my partners are “she’s,” I use “we” or “us” in talking about lesbians or LGBTs, and I look for ways to put lesbian and gay issues and authors on the course agenda. My interests this time are in treating these things as just as routine as their talk about dating, husbands, and wives. Most students no longer bat an eyelash. This doesn’t necessarily mean they are comfortable

with it. But this generation seems to feel that it isn't cool to show discomfort. Still, they are as reluctant as ever to actually discuss the topic. So I try to put it on the syllabus, and even then they tend to find ways to discuss something else instead. Coming out in the classroom tends to be a lonely business when it's only the teacher who does it.

## ***Coming Out by the Numbers***

**Richard Mohr**

*University of Illinois, Urbana*

I come out to my classes in the first five minutes of each course — in the way I refer to my telephone numbers.

I begin the usual death-march through the now-obligatorily detailed syllabus. Name: anything but "Rich." Office: 206 Gregory Hall. Office hours: 11 to noon TUTH. Telephone numbers: "... And I have also given you my home number. Reasonable hours only - 9 to 9, please. There is a machine, and my lover is willing to take messages as well, but please do not make them so complicated as to try his patience. "Each time in advance, I have to practice the sentence once or twice so as always to get the wording just right. It floats out over the room, registering with maybe only a third to a half of the students. But word of mouth does the rest of the work. Studies have found that such low-impact approaches to the good are more effective in changing people's prejudices than are more direct, more political approaches. I find these findings morally disturbing in that they seem to recommend self-contradictory or positively immoral 'shuffling' strategies: sell out your dignity to get your dignity, sell out your dignity to get your happiness. Still, there is nothing pandering or accommodating in my coming-out strategy. It raises an important issue, even if it does not force students to deal with it — to reflect immediately on their own awarenesses, prejudices, lives. That comes later.

## ***A Note on the Question of Coming Out in the Classroom***

**Raja Halwani**

*School of the Art Institute of Chicago*

To begin with a typical philosophical move, the expression "coming out in the classroom" is ambiguous. It could mean "the actual *act* of telling one's students that one is gay or lesbian," or it could mean "that one is out to one's students, not hiding his sexual orientation from them." The former is about specific actions; the latter is about the teacher's openness, or lack thereof, about her sexual orientation. I want to argue that if we keep the latter meaning in mind, and consequently keep in mind that whether one comes out to one's students is a matter much dependent on whether one is *generally* out, then the issues surrounding the question of coming out in the classroom are reduced simply to pedagogical ones; they lose their moral and pragmatic force entirely.

For the last eight years or so of my teaching experience, the question of whether I should tell my students in class that I am gay has never come up for me. The reason is that I have never for those last eight years or so attempted to conduct my life in such a way that I hid my sexuality from

others. Consequently, whether my students know about my sexual orientation has never been an issue independent from the more general one as to whether I should be out or not. And *this* latter issue is morally settled for me: I consider it to be simply unethical for someone to hide his or her sexual orientation when there is no pressing need to do so, and I was no exception to this belief of mine.

And this is what I want to say in general about this issue. When one is under no urgent need to hide one's sexuality, then it is unethical - unvirtuous, if you will - to be closeted. It runs contrary to practically every virtue in the book: it is cowardly, it is dishonest, it is distrustful, it is unkind, it lacks self-respect, it violates one's integrity, and, it is certainly unwise - not in the pragmatic sense of "wise," but in the fully Aristotelian ethical sense of "wise." This is not to deny, of course, that people often need time and confidence to come out; nor is it to deny that people come out in different ways. Rather, my point is conceptual: there is no good reason for a morally healthy individual to be closeted, not unless there is some pressing cause (and here there is much room for debate, of course, regarding the types of these causes and how stringently to understand "pressing").

But once this is established, then whether one should come out in the classroom or not is settled: *of course* one should, because this is simply pendant from the fact that one is out in general. And many other issues surrounding coming out in the classroom fall by the wayside. Whether students will be demoralized by knowing that their teacher is a lesbian; whether they will take pride in the fact that their instructor is gay; whether they will no longer trust the knowledge that their teacher conveys to them because he is transgendered; whether they take their teacher as a role model because she is a lesbian: these are all issues that are irrelevant. They are irrelevant not because they are unimportant, but because they cannot settle the question in principle. What settles the question in principle is whether one is generally out or not.

What remains, of course, is the possibility that one is openly gay and yet one's students don't know about this. After all, not all academic institutions are small and are ones in which news travels fast. And even in small places, there is always the possibility that one's students - or some of them - don't know that one is a lesbian. So it will always be possible to be confronted with the choice of coming out in the classroom in the first sense of the expression: actually saying or doing something that tells the students that their teacher is gay. But notice: the issue here is *ultimately* a matter of pedagogical tactfulness and effectiveness. If the teacher perceives, for example, that her coming out will cover the student into silence, then she might decide not to come out (I say "might" because, after all, it might be a student that *should* be covered into silence). If she perceives, however, that pointing to herself is an excellent way of offering her students an example of someone who is a lesbian *and* who is accomplished (imagine that!), then she might decide to come out (I say "might" because, after all, there are other ways of achieving the same goal). The first, minor point is - and my apologies for repeating this truthful mantra - that whether the teacher should disclose the information about herself and how to do this depends on the case. The second, major point is that the issue here is *ultimately* pedagogical. Any basic moral issues are settled already by ones having to do with being out in general.

This is not to deny, of course, that pedagogical issues have serious moral dimensions to them (hence the word “ultimate” in the above paragraph). Even when we are, and have been, out in general, it might still take courage to tell one’s students in so many words that one is gay. It might still require tact to know how to tell them. It might require honesty. More importantly, it certainly requires wisdom, especially the wisdom tied to what is best for the students as learners, to decide whether to disclose the information then or not. And this decision requires a balancing - a balancing not seeped in self-deception or rationalizations - between asserting one’s self-respect, dignity, integrity, and a host of other virtues, on the one hand, and what is good for the classroom teaching and learning environment. My point in the above paragraph denies none of these crucial factors. It simply is that the moral issues surrounding the issue whether one is to be out to their students in class are parasitic on the ones regarding being out, period.

**Carol Quinn**  
*Miami University of Ohio*

While in this context the reference is to “coming out” in the sense of sexual orientation, the question (or problem) of whether to come out to one’s students is actually a much larger one; namely, how much personal disclosure ought one engage in with one’s students, and to what end? I have always been the type of teacher who has revealed a lot about myself, in large part because of the courses I teach (ethics, feminism) and the *at least prima facie* appropriateness of doing so. I have “come out,” for example, as a survivor of rape, mostly because I often hear students say in class discussion (when discussing date rape), something like “I’ve never met a rape survivor, but I’m sure that rape *screws you up forever*. I’d rather *die* than be a rape survivor,” at which point I disclose to the class that I am a survivor. At this point in the semester, the students have a good sense of my strong, confident personality, and so I am oftentimes met with the incredulous “you?!!!!” Several times, after such classes, I have had female students approach me (in shock, incredulity, even awe) and disclose to me that they, too, are survivors, and *how could I just come right out and say that?!* This is often followed by conversations about overcoming the trauma of rape, and so on.

Now one might think that this is something that should be left to psychologists and other counselors; that a teacher ought not serve that role. Of course, how one evaluates this claim depends, in large part, on what one takes a good teacher to be. A good teacher is one who, among other things, helps the student develop a healthy sense of self and understand his or her place in the world. A good teacher serves as a role model in this capacity. Further, a good teacher directs the students to others for additional support/counsel – as I have often done.

If a teacher is just a dispenser of information, much like the local pharmacist, then “coming out” seems out of place. A difficulty with “coming out” concerns how to draw the line – how much disclosure is too much, and when is it appropriate to do so?, etc. – and a good teacher struggles to find the proper balance. Questions of integrity, respect, and responsibility come to play. I have “come out” disclosing my Jewish and Native American roots to a largely hostile, racist,

classroom environment. This has resulted in other students who had been “passing” as white (or Christian) to disclose their identities. The result has been very intense, but incredibly beneficial, educational experiences (as students have pointed out in course evaluations). (One Puerto Rican student who “came out” told me after class that she felt liberated finally doing so.) I have also “come out” as a bisexual. Here I have had mixed responses. Such disclosure usually comes about in discussions of homophobia, or sexual identity. Probably the most disappointing response I got happened last semester, when a group of male students shouted out “*you’re the coolest teacher I know,*” and then after class stuck around to flirt with me: “do you *really* like women? *Wow!*” I don’t remember how I responded at the time (I’ve since thought of great comebacks), though I know I felt extremely uncomfortable (even vulnerable), and I was shocked by their immaturity. Their behavior has not soured me so much as to stop further disclosures, but it has made me more aware that *how* I react to such responses is as important as the disclosure itself.

## FEATURED ARTICLE

### ***Is a Queer Always a Race Traitor? Disrupting Invisible Forms of Rationality in the Classroom***

**Shannon Winnubst**  
*Southwestern University*

(A version of this paper, “To Come Out or Not to Come Out? Sexuality and Race in the Classroom,” was originally presented at a panel sponsored by LGBT at the conference of The American Philosophical Association, 31. March 2001. *Note that this is a work in progress.*)

#### **A Classroom in Central Texas, USA**

“As a white lesbian, I know that I am where I am in the world because of my race, because of my whiteness.”

It is the first day of a course I am teaching for the first time. We are crowded into a seminar room at a small liberal arts college in central Texas where the student body is 80-85% white and the faculty even whiter. The course is called “Theories of Race” and, for a variety of reasons, its first run is in high demand. And so I stand there, more nervous than I have perhaps ever been in front of a classroom, and stumble through the intellectual, political, emotional and even spiritual paths that led me to this course. It is the first time that I am standing before a group of people and trying to talk about race. And I am nervous.

After so much reading, so much theorizing, so much historicizing and so many conversations in my head, I am standing there trying to bring it all together into some coherent presentation that might make some shred of pedagogical

sense. But I am no longer in my head. No, I am clearly no longer in my head. Feeling a raw hunger in the room, I can sense that these students are not going to be easily appeased. They came with high expectations of what it might mean, of what it *really might mean for their lives*, to think and read and talk and learn about race. And now, suddenly, I am supposedly the one who is going to deliver this meaning. (Have I told you how nervous I am?) Seeing the emptiness that my theorizing and generalizing and pointing towards structures is creating in their eyes, I suddenly resort to a plan I have only partially thought through: I come out to them.

“As a white lesbian, I know that I am where I am in the world because of my race, because of my whiteness. I know that, despite all the forms of domination I confront as a woman and as a lesbian, despite all the structures of sexism and heterosexism that I experience, the privilege of my whiteness is what fundamentally moves me through the world and brings me into privileged zones of our culture—the privilege of my whiteness is what allows me to be standing up here acting as though I have some authority . . . even some authority on the subject of race. I am a woman and I am a lesbian, but I am perhaps most of all white.”

Or something like that.

I certainly cannot remember it now, over a year later, but I can still feel it. And it was not the coming out that left such visceral scars. I had come out in several courses prior to this one, particularly those on feminist theory and embodiment and other such sexy themes. So it was not the coming out *per se* that jarred me. Rather, it was the strategic coming out that felt so charged—it was the coming out as a lesbian as a way to mark my whiteness that unnerved and unsettled me so deeply. What was I doing? Was I somehow playing my race off of my sexuality? Whose desire was at work here? What kinds of bodies were being produced through this grand outing? And why did it all feel so disruptive, so charged? Finally, what threads of sexuality and race (and, implicitly, gender) were weaving through this scene?

### ‘De-essentializing’ Narratives of Coming Out

In the reading of my coming out as strategic, I already trouble one of the bedrock assumptions implied in the entire narrative machine of coming out: if strategic, then I cannot be ‘coming out’ and revealing some essential, ‘core’ part of myself to my students. To the contrary of this essentializing of sexuality and of desire itself, I must already be trafficking in the constructing of a sexuality—and, less explicitly but coincidentally, a race—that can be negotiated and used for a variety of purposes.

As theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, among others, have developed for some time now, the narrative of coming out is dangerous in its tendencies to reinscribe a repressive model of pre-discursive, essential, even ‘natural’ desire:<sup>1</sup> if you ‘come out,’ you must have at some point ‘been inside,’ implying that some essential desire simply needed to voice itself. While psychologically comforting to some, this reading of the coming out narrative assumes that the voicing of one’s sexuality, and the possibility or perhaps even pressure to do so, does not itself shape the desire. This psychological comfort may largely derive from the sense of relief over having, at last, identified oneself as harboring an essential sexuality: one may be relieved to finally recognize that one has the necessary goods to become a legible subject

(albeit an abnormal one) in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century western European and US cultures.<sup>2</sup> But in the very positing of sexuality and desire as essential to being ‘human,’ this reading of coming out obscures the possibility that this ‘relief’ issues from having registered oneself within a dominant discourse required for legible subject formation and legitimate subjectivity. It obscures the possibility that one is relieved because one has located oneself within the discourse that demands a presence of an essential, even if not ‘natural,’ sexuality.<sup>3</sup> In short, this rendering of the coming out narrative evades the possibility that discourses shape our notions, performances and embodiments of desire: it essentializes sexuality, positioning it as an ahistorical constant.

As a powerful discourse, the colloquial readings of this coming out narrative (particularly in the US) may tell us much about those notions, performances and embodiments, particularly about desire’s intersecting of sexuality and race. In its colloquial use, to come out means to bring out into the light of day that which one has harbored within him/herself silently, invisibly. This can have at least two registers: one can come out to oneself, in the ‘discovery’ or realization that one is gay/lesbian/bisexual; and one can come out to others (as in the classic “coming out of the closet”), again ‘revealing’ to them what one has previously held privately from them. In these colloquial renderings, the narrative of coming out implies the logic of bringing into visibility that which was once invisible. It is this specific logic of invisibility/visibility, particularly as it is used to essentialize desire and evade the possibility that it is shaped by discourse, that I want to interrogate as I attempt to unravel some of the complex relations between sexuality and race.

When I came out to my class on theories of race, I was not enacting either of these two colloquial understandings of coming out. I was not revealing my essential sexual identity to myself; nor was I bringing my personal, private, essential experience as a lesbian out into the open to legitimate my claims about race, sexuality and gender. As Joan Scott has argued,<sup>4</sup> such appeals to the ‘evidence’ of personal experience naturalizes that (often singular) experience as an incontrovertible fact in the world, rather than opening up ways of exploring how experience itself is constituted. It echoes the same essentializing effects of the colloquial readings of coming out. As Scott writes, “The [appeal to the] evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (*LGS Reader*, 399-400). Rather than essentializing my experience as an ahistorical, personal, decontextualized experience of a singular white lesbian in the United States, my coming out in this classroom setting attempted to open up an examination of the categories we assume when constituting and describing experience itself. It attempted to open up a genealogical exploration of operative categories of representation, specifically those that constitute and conflate sexuality and race. Rather than working to make *my* experience as a white lesbian visible, my coming out in this classroom attempted to make the categories of representation visible.

The logic of visibility is thus still at work in this narrative of coming out, but it is at work on invisible categories, not on some essential ‘core’ part of my private experience. Specifically, the logic of visibility exposes invisible categories

that work together to constitute both sexuality and race—categories that persist in US culture through the very resisting and evading of visibility, through remaining invisible. It is thus not only sexuality and race that mutually constitute one another here, but also essentialism and invisibility. In insisting that a clearly demarcated sexuality is an essential part of a subject, the common reading of the coming out narrative renders sexuality as an ahistorical, ‘natural’<sup>5</sup> part of being human. It thereby denies the possibility that conceptions of sexuality might be constituted through specific, socio-historical categories, including categories of race: it renders such categories invisible. As I will develop, this insistence on a specific, essential aspect of a person and the imperative that it remain invisible lays at the core of both racism and heterosexism.

I return then to some of my queries about this act of pedagogical outing: whose desire was at work here? Or, perhaps more fittingly, what kinds of desire were produced in this interplay of race and sexuality? What specifically about race and sexuality was brought into visibility? If we shed light on these (necessarily invisible) categories of representation, could this all suggest that an unstable and uncomfortable alliance with race lays at the core of sexuality in US culture? Could it furthermore suggest that, with or without choice, to be lesbian or gay in US culture is necessarily also to be a race-traitor?

### **A Short Genealogy of Legal and Demographic Categories of Representation: Essentialism in Racism and Heterosexism**

In her now classic essay, “Thinking Sex,” Gayle Rubin draws our attention to several periods of modern history in which a sexual panic gripped the cultural psyche, “historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized” (*LGS Reader*, 4). Suggesting that the late 1980’s was becoming such a period (*LGS*, 8), Rubin urges us to learn from these periods in which “the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated” (*LGS*, 4). And, interestingly, one of the first dynamics she turns to is the conflation of sexuality and race in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in England and the United States.

As she notes, “most of the laws [in the 20<sup>th</sup> century] used to arrest homosexuals and prostitutes come out of the Victorian campaigns against ‘white slavery’” (*LGS*, 5). Drawing from a quintessentially patriarchal attempt to protect young white girls from prostitution, laws about legal ages of consent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in both England and the U.S. slowly extended across a wide range of sexual acts, including male homosexuality. For example, in the U.S., “The Mann Act,” a federal anti-prostitution law passed in 1910, also became known as the White Slave Traffic Act, making explicit that the focus of concern—of panic—was specifically on white female bodies. Rubin goes on to argue that this ‘sexual panic’ about the activities of young white female bodies grew into the 1950’s obsession with ‘the homosexual menace’ (e.g., the McCarthy hearings’ conflation of Communism and homosexuality as the arch-sins against the nation) and the ‘sex offender,’ which became code for homosexuals. As she writes, “In its bureaucratic, medical, and popular versions, the sex offender discourse tended to blur distinctions between violent sexual assault and illegal but consensual acts such as sodomy” (*LGS*, 5), thus giving ample fuel to the policing and persecuting of homosexuals as sexual deviants

and dangers to, of course, those beloved and infantilized white female bodies. It is but a hop-skip-and-a-jump in this legal genealogy to the latest piece of full-fledged legislated homophobia in the US, the recent passage of the lovely “Defense of Marriage Act” in 1996 by the United States Congress.

And so we move, admittedly rather quickly in this short space, from anti-prostitution laws framed implicitly around race (and class) to the legalized persecution of homosexuals. Rubin uses much of this legal genealogy to show the ways that US culture’s present sexual morality, with its strict hierarchy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sexualities, functions largely in the same manner as ideological systems of racism. As she puts it, “this kind of sexual morality has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics” (*LGS*, 15). Drawing this sociological connection between race/racism and sexuality further, she also goes on to show the ways that “in modern, western, industrial societies, homosexuality has acquired much of the institutional structure of an ethnic group” (*LGS*, 17), pointing to the demographic move of gay men and lesbians into isolated, urban settings—gay ghettos.

Rubin thus indicates the ways that, as constituted through structures of legal representation and demographic shifts, the lesbian and gay subject shares central characteristics with the “raced” subject—i.e., the non-white subject<sup>6</sup>—in U.S. history and present culture. I would like to take this recognition of similarities a step further. How and why do our culture’s present sexual morality and ideological racism function in such similar ways? How do categories of race and sexuality function to produce these legal, ethical and sociological overlaps? What is it about race and sexuality in cultures of the United States and northern-western Europe that allow them to become cathected in such similar ways?

As Rubin shows in her illustrations of the sexual hierarchy at work in contemporary sexual morality (which seems only to have grown more rigid in the US since Rubin’s original essay in 1984), an implicit—and invisible—essentialism grounds this system of judgment. The principle is quite simple: the ‘natural’ form of human sexuality is procreative, monogamous and heterosexual. This is the essential form of human sexuality. And, as Foucault shows, this particular form of sexuality fell silent and became invisible as it was normalized, and slowly naturalized, across the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries in western-northern Europe.<sup>7</sup> In fact, it has become so invisible that it is now embedded in the English language: Rubin argues that the lack of a clear distinction between sex as sexuality and sex as gender “reflects a cultural assumption that sexuality is reducible to sexual intercourse and that it is a function of the relations between women and men” (*LGS*, 32). That is, the reading of sex as both sexuality and gender performs the ways that heterosexuality functions as the (unquestioned and invisible) norm.<sup>8</sup> An invisible essentialism that naturalizes human sexuality as procreative, monogamous, heterosexuality thus grounds the sexual morality of contemporary US cultures.

The task now is to explore how, in yet more invisible ways, this sexual essentialism is also constituted by and constitutes a racial essentialism. Living in a racist culture and arguably a racist world dominated by white supremacy, I turn to the formation of whiteness to explore the dynamics of racial hegemony and its dependency on this sort of invisible essentialism.

## Whiteness and Heterosexuality: Unveiling the Phallus

In his provocative book, *White*, Richard Dyer unravels many of the thorny knots that constitute whiteness in Great Britain and the United States. Looking at dynamics that often render whiteness unstable and slippery, he argues over and over that it is precisely this instability that gives whiteness the semiotic flexibility to continue to assert its hegemony in these white supremacist, racist cultures. Foremost among these slippery dynamics is its interplay with the dynamics of visibility.

In an interesting mirroring of the phallus in Lacan's texts, whiteness operates primarily as the invisible—and thus universal—signifier in our culture. One is never *white* in the United States, one is just a person; one never refers to the *white* doctor or the *white* newscaster or the *white* professor, one simply refers to the doctor, newscaster or professor. (Nor, I might add, is the white doctor, newscaster or professor assigned to subjects that are only white; but the black doctor should work in black neighborhoods, the Latino newscaster always covers events of the Latino community, including crime, and the Asian professor had better be teaching Chinese history.) Whiteness is not a color, it is not a race; it is just human. It just *is*, as the grand history of western metaphysics easily shows. And it is this invisibility that renders it ubiquitous, that renders it 'the universal signifier.'

Borrowing strategies from Irigaray's disrupting of Lacan's (and Hegel's and Freud's and...) veiled phallus, I suggest that my act of coming-out in a class on race performs some of the ways that anti-racist whites can disrupt whiteness' hegemony by stripping it of its precious invisibility, by rendering it visible. My simple language with my students indicated that we could "mark whiteness" (a phrase that has since become a buzzphrase, in danger of losing all meaning I fear) through unveiling the privileges that whiteness had afforded me, despite—or in contrast to—my gender and sexuality. But this stays only at the level of description and often results in a listing of privileges that engulfs whites in yet further paralyzing guilt, rather than diagnosing the dynamics that constitute whiteness. If my act of coming out in the classroom is to render some of the categories of race and sexuality visible, the specific dynamics between specific forms of race and sexuality should emerge.

Dyer goes on to develop some of these complex alliances that have developed around race and sexuality in our culture—specifically, around whiteness and heterosexuality. As Dyer writes,

All concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality. Race is a means of categorizing different types of human body which reproduce themselves. It seeks to systematize differences and to relate them to differences of character and worth. Heterosexuality is the means of ensuring, but also the site of endangering, the reproduction of these differences. (20)

As evidenced in Rubin's legal genealogies, heterosexuality often becomes the primary field of anxiety whenever whiteness appears to be threatened. Heterosexuality, particularly as it is naturalized as necessarily reproductive, is the site at which the purity of races is—or, rather, *must be*—reproduced. It is the anxiety of this imperative, which is absolute and non-negotiable for

whiteness in its hegemonic position within a racist, white supremacist culture, that often creates anxiety around heterosexuality itself. (And so, for example, it makes perfect sense that the US Congress passes a "Defense of Marriage Act" in the same decade that begins to forecast the impending minority status of whites in the US.<sup>9</sup>)

But this alliance with heterosexuality seems, as is often the case with categorical imperatives, to become whiteness' Achilles' heel. As whiteness comes to rely upon heterosexuality for the reproduction of pure whiteness (and thus ally itself, unstably and uncomfortably but also necessarily, with sexuality *per se*), its claim to the universal signifier is more and more complicated.

For example, the specific anxiety over inter-racial heterosexuality in US culture begins to unveil some of the complex relations between whiteness, purity and embodiment, particularly as mediated through this imperative of reproductive sexuality. In short, miscegenation threatens purity; simply recall the infamous one-drop rule. As Dyer puts it, inter-racial heterosexuality, operating within the naturalized assumption of reproduction, "breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body... white bodies are no longer indubitably white" (25). The purity of whiteness is thus in danger precisely where it must be reproduced. Consequently, we begin to see that whiteness is not simply allied with reproductive heterosexuality itself, but rather demands particular, 'racially pure' forms of reproductive heterosexuality: race and sexuality are not separable categories.

And so what is the white body to do with this need for *pure* reproduction?

From here Dyer turns towards the gendering of heterosexuality and the ways that white masculinity follows out a very specific form of embodiment and sexual desire—namely, and hardly coincidentally, the form exemplified by the figure of Christ. As the savior of a religion fraught with somatophobia, Christ represents that incomprehensible fusion of the divine and the human—or the spirit and the body. Dyer develops this principle of incarnation, which sets Christianity apart from other monotheistic religions, as the capacity to be *in* the body but not *of* it—to appear in the world in flesh but always to be capable of transcending it, to suffer the temptations of the flesh but always to transcend them into the purified realms of spirit. It is thus the special attribute of whiteness and maleness, as they come together in white male heterosexuality, both to engage this struggle between spirit and body, but also always to transcend the body in a successful conquering of the struggle. The white straight male is in the body, but is not ultimately captured or constrained by it. (Kevin Spacey's character in *American Beauty* (Dreamworks, 1999), along with the popularity of this film, easily performs this.)

But let us again demand specificity. The reason the white male body is able to transcend those *dark, frightening but also seductive* sexual desires is because of his whiteness. It is his whiteness that gives him this ability to transcend the 'darkness' of his masculine, uncontrollable desire. Sexual desire itself is not very white. And thus we arrive at the conundrum that seems to spur and connect much of the anxiety within *both* racism and homophobia: "the means of reproducing whiteness [—sexuality, having sex, sexual

desire—] are not themselves pure white” (26). As a body that categorically cannot be reduced to its own embodiment, sexual desire—as a matter wholly of the body—must be disavowed. This disavowal of sexual desire, as an exemplary disavowal of embodiment itself, thus becomes a necessary condition for the possibility of whiteness. And, of course, as a necessary condition of possibility, it must remain invisible if it is to continue functioning.

### **Whiteness’ Essential Disavowal of Sexual Desire: Racism and Homophobia**

The projection by whiteness of *perverse, unnatural and out-of-control* desire across non-reproductive sexualities and non-white bodies follows immediately from this bizarre condition of possibility. There is a long and storied past to the history of projecting sexual drives as ‘dark and uncontrollable’ onto non-white races in US culture. In explicitly sexualized stereotypes, there is the myth of non-white-on-white rape, which has no foothold in statistics that show rape is primarily intra-racial, and the often connected myth of black men having unusually large penises. Even in the ‘naturalized’ realm of reproductive heterosexuality, white US culture has the stereotypes of non-whites as having huge families, displaying their inability to control their rate of reproduction and, conversely, the legendary fear, held by figures such as Benjamin Franklin, that the white race will fade away, presumably because of its too-tight-control on sexual desires. Rubin also writes about this explicit projecting of ‘bestial sexuality’ onto non-white races: “[In 1969,] the pamphlet *Pavlov’s Children (They May Be Yours)* claims that UNESCO is in cahoots with SIECUS (Sex Information and Education Council of the United States) to undermine religious taboos, to promote the acceptance of abnormal sexual relations, to downgrade absolute moral standards, and to ‘destroy racial cohesion,’ by exposing white people (especially white women) to the alleged ‘lower’ sexual standards of black people” (LGS, 8).

Dyer reads this projecting of sexual desires onto non-white races as a classic instance of transference. As he sees it, this projection provides “a means for whites to represent yet dissociate themselves from their own desires” (28). But it is exactly this slippage in the process of representation, this disavowal at the heart of representation, that can turn simple ‘dissociation’ into ugly bigotry and violence. As Dyer describes them, these “dark desires are part of the story of whiteness, but as what the whiteness of whiteness has to struggle against” (28). But is this internal struggle, this struggle against parts of oneself that one categorically cannot embrace, not the site of an infinite self-hatred—the very sort of self-hatred that seems to fuel both racism and homophobia?

The relation of whiteness to heterosexuality is clearly not a comfortable or stable relation. It seems that the only reason for a white body to give in to sexual desire is to ensure the pure reproduction of whiteness—to protect whiteness. It would seem, in fact, that celibacy is the most ‘white’ relation to sexuality (hence all the images of sexual purity as white in Christian imagery). If sex strictly for the reproduction and protection of whiteness is the only acceptable cause for sexual relations, the projection of desire as dark and uncontrollable (i.e., irrational) is not only cast across non-white bodies—it is also cast across any form of non-reproductive sexuality. Non-reproductive sexuality—particularly sexual desire that does

not involve even the possibility of reproduction—must also be dark, out-of-control, non-white.<sup>10</sup>

How then can same-sex desire, as the quintessential embodiment of non-reproductive sexuality, in a white body be read as anything other than an instance of treason against whiteness? Or, to draw the implications more generally, in a white supremacist, racist world, how can same-sex desire *per se* be read as anything other than an instance of treason against one’s race?

### **Queers and Race Traitors: The Hegemony of Utilitarian Rationality**

As this unraveling of whiteness and heterosexuality exposes, there are a number of ‘invisible essentialisms’ operating in the categories of race and sexuality in US culture. In specific ways, these categories have been naturalized as simply the essential meaning of being human. Their social, historical and political formations as specific forms of race and sexuality have been masked as an atemporal and fixed universal. We simply are raced and sexed beings—naturally, essentially and, if we are embodying the norm of white heterosexuality, invisibly. We are not historically and politically constituted to embody specific values through these dominant readings of race and sexuality.

It follows then that the category of sexuality has been naturalized as necessarily heterosexual, reproductive and monogamous:<sup>11</sup> any other form of sexuality is easily labeled ‘unnatural’ and the idea of a human who does not embody a specific form of sexuality is unthinkable in US culture. In a slightly more complicated manner, the category of race has been fixed to signify any race that is not white,<sup>12</sup> thereby naturalizing a particular form of whiteness as the norm of what it is to be human (i.e., raceless). As we have seen, this particular form of whiteness is that which is in control of sexual desire and transcends the body through rationality, that highest value and often sharpest tool of white cultures.<sup>13</sup>

Reading these specific forms together, we begin to see how an invisible essentialism seems to bond the categories of race and sexuality in such a way that ensures the hegemony of whiteness and heterosexuality. A single thread weaves through both of these specific forms of race and sexuality: rationality. Particularly as that which can reduce the world to its own utility, rationality serves as the principle that allows these specific forms of sexuality (as reproductive heterosexuality) and race (as whiteness-in-control) to become naturalized as the norm of what it is to be human. It is hardly surprising, for example, that this principle of rational utilitarianism is one of the principles most often appealed to in western (white) cultures, particularly since Darwin and Marx, as that which sets humans apart from animals.<sup>14</sup> Nor is it coincidental that it is on the basis of this principle that whiteness’ disavowal of non-reproductive sexualities is read as a humanizing of sexuality. In what may appear as wildly circular, it is because useful rationality is deemed the highest quality of humanity that whiteness and heterosexuality can function as universal signifiers of what it is to be human.

### **What happened in Texas?**

When I came out to my class on race, I made some of these invisible essentialisms and the alliances between race and sexuality more visible. To speak in terms of Irigaray, from

whom I have learned many strategies, I unveiled the phallus. And in so doing, I disrupted whiteness' and heterosexuality's mutually constituting claims to universality: I particularized, localized and historicized the universal.

But the effects of such a disrupting, particularly as a disrupting of rationality itself, are not easily mapped or even guessed. For example, in my class on race, the effects of this pedagogical outing ranged from celebrating my outness to fetishizing my queerness to interrogating my whiteness to retreating in grand homophobic anxiety. They ricocheted throughout the course, resisting rational reductions while exerting great power on our conversations. They opened up those essential, but all too rare, spaces of vulnerability in the classroom—spaces that encouraged critical, even painful, self-reflection. It made the classroom risky, particularly since none of us really knew where any of this might take us.

So it may be, I suggest, with our broader cultural attempts to disrupt racism and homophobia. The rational argument I have offered here may expose some of the structures at work in the US cultural psyche and, in stripping them of their precious invisibility, it may weaken their power. But it does not thereby provide us with the 'answer' to these complex, psycho-social dynamics. And to think that it might, ironically, only perpetuates the very rationality I have attempted to disrupt.

### Endnotes

1. The classic texts here are certainly Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage: 1978) and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminist and the subversion of identity* (Routledge: 1990). See also Edward Stein, *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory and Ethics of Sexual Orientation* (Oxford UP: 1999), for a more analytic approach to debates between essentialism and social constructionism around narratives of sexuality.
2. Both Foucault and Butler offer versions of these arguments: Foucault shows how homosexuality 'emerged' in the 19th century as an aberration; Butler argues that gender is necessary to become a legible subject. See also David Halperin's work on the historical emergence of categories of sexuality.
3. Again, see Butler's *Gender Trouble* for a more thorough and expansive argument.
4. Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Abelove, Barale and Halperin (Routledge: 1993).
5. Given all the rhetoric and condemnation of homosexuality as 'unnatural,' this category of the 'natural' becomes rather tricky. Moreover, as I am developing elsewhere, this category slides considerably as it weaves through sexuality and race, where it is deployed quite differently.
6. The question of language becomes highly problematic when we begin, immersed in this culture of white supremacy, to speak about bodies as "raced/raceless" or "white/non-white." I prefer to use the term "raced" to refer to all bodies that are not white; I refuse the term "non-white," as it continues to reinscribe whiteness as the privileged and determinate signifier. When referring to white bodies, however, I prefer the term "white" in an attempt to color these bodies, to race them, to render them visible.
7. See *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Part Two, Chapter 2.
8. Again, see Butler's *Gender Trouble* for a more extensive argument.
9. On 29. March 2001, newspapers in California announced that this shift, according to the 2000 census, has already occurred in California. I delivered a first version of this paper in San Francisco on 31. March 2001, making my argument rather easy to deliver.
10. This demand for reproduction becomes even more deeply embedded in whiteness if we inject that infamous Protestant Work Ethic into the constitution of whiteness. Georges Bataille's critiques

of western European (white) culture as a culture fixated on utility would be particularly provocative in working out this dynamic further. See "The Notion of Expenditure" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (University of Minnesota Press: 1985) and *The Accursed Share, Volumes 1-3*, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books: 1989 & 1991). This disavowal of any "non-useful" energy is surely connected not only homophobia, but also to racist stereotypes of non-white races as lazy.

11. Or as what Bataille might read as 'useful' physiologically, psychologically, politically and economically.
12. See footnote 8 above.
13. Rationality was often the banner under which white cultures colonized 'savage' cultures. See, for example, Charles Mills discussion in *The Racial Contract* (Cornell UP: 1997).
14. Bataille's discussions of the distinction between humanity and animality begin to convey some of the complexities involved here—for example, a temporal orientation towards the future; a self-consciousness. See *The Accursed Share, Volume 2*.