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Queering Gender,
Gendering Bodies

NUJLS: A Queer Jewish Community

There is not a single person in the world who has one clear-cut identity. What am I? I am an American; I am a student; I am a lesbian; I am a Jew; I am a bookstore-owner-in-training. I have never been one single thing, and each description I give myself plays a significant role in the development of this person called “Devorah Singer.” However, there are times when certain identities may seem contradictory; namely, in this case, the identities of “lesbian” and “Jew.” Traditionally, there is no room for queer people in Jewish culture; the Torah labels our loving acts as abominations. Yet, we exist, so how do we reconcile this conflict? In his article “Being Gay and Jewish: Negotiating Intersecting Identities,” Randall F. Schnoor identifies four different ways that gay Jews combine their identities: Jewish lifestylers, gay lifestylers, gay-Jewish commuters, and gay-Jewish integrators.¹ It is these gay-Jewish integrators who are our focus here, as it is this group which NUJLS serves.

NUJLS, the National Union for Jewish Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, and Intersex Students is a community-building organization. According to Vinny Prell, the Executive Director, “The mission of NUJLS is to empower LGBTQQI Jewish students to feel affirmed in and proud of their identities.”² Since 1997 NUJLS has held an annual conference which brings queer Jews from across the nation to a single college campus for a weekend of workshops and socialization.³ Throughout this past academic year, I both attended the conference and was a member of the conference organizing committee, giving me a first-hand view of the organization's goals and realities.

The road to this year's conference was rocky. Originally the conference was scheduled to take

1 Randall F. Schnoor, “Being Gay and Jewish: Negotiating Intersecting Identities,” *Sociology of Religion* 67 vol. 1 (2006).
2 Vinny Prell, Personal Communication, 9 April 2009.
3 NUJLS, <http://www.nujlsonline.org>, (accessed 30 April 2009).

place in February at Evergreen State University in Washington, but it was moved at the last moment to allow NUJLS more time to gather funding during the financial crisis. Because it took a few weeks to confirm a new date and host university, it felt to me that we brought everything together at last minute. The most stressful part of the organizing, however, was by far the selection of a keynote. Do we want a rabbi to speak, or should we look for a role model who is not a religious leader? Do we want a local queer organizer, or do we want someone with a big name to give the speech? What do we want the keynote to address? To what degree do we need to narrow down a topic, and to what extent should we leave the choice up to the speaker? In the end, we decided to contact gender theorist Kate Bornstein and invite her to give the keynote speech at the conference. We were a bit apprehensive about this choice; while Kate Bornstein is a big name in the queer community, we were unsure of whether she identified as a Jew. As it turns out, however, we had no reason to worry. Kate Bornstein not only gave an elaborate speech connecting queer and Jewish identity, but the content of her speech speaks directly to the mission and realities of NUJLS's work.

As mentioned above, Schnoor's reasoning indicates four different ways through which queer Jews surmount their possibly contradictory identities. For the first type, Jewish lifestylers, traditional Judaism is so central to their identities that they try to suppress their queer urges so that they do not interfere with their Jewish lives.⁴ On the opposite end of the spectrum are gay lifestylers who focus their lives around their queer identities and place little emphasis on their identities as Jews.⁵ Other queer Jews, however, do not model their lives around a single identity but rather combine the two in one way or another. Here we have gay-Jewish commuters, people who emphasize either their queer identity or their Jewish identity depending on the social situation in which they find themselves⁶ and gay-Jewish integrators who perform both their queer and Jewish identities simultaneously regardless of

4 Schnoor, 49.

5 Ibid., 50.

6 Ibid., 51.

the social situation.⁷

What are we then? Taken at face value, it would seem like NUJLS represents a group of queer-Jewish⁸ integrators. In truth, this is the identity which we perform while we are NUJLS. We attend religious services, but we also listen to our peers discuss their experiences with reparative therapy. We consume challah and wine, but we also talk about sexual oppression. We learn about the issues of being both Orthodox and queer and we read queer poetry based on biblical stories. If this isn't queer-Jewish integration, what is? However, it is not fair to assume that everyone at the conferences identifies this way all the time. Towards the beginning of her speech, Kate Bornstein herself questions her Jewish identity:

I'm a transexual dyke, I'm a sadomasocist... I've got piercings in body parts I was not born with, does that make me a Jew? I'm a tattooed lady, I'm a radical left-wing elder, artist, and theorist, I'm a pornographer.... I believe in gods and goddesses and angels and demons, I'm an athiest, am I a Jew?⁹

Who is a Jew? This is a question to which there is no simple answer. Is it something innate that you are born with, like gender? Is it something you do, like lighting candles every week? Is it something you believe? Can your Jewish identity be taken away if you do something wrong? The only answer Bornstein provides is that we cannot allow others to answer this question for us.¹⁰

While Kate Bornstein does not go into it, I would like to pose a similar line of questioning: who is a queer person? While I firmly identify as a queer-Jewish integrator, I often wonder about the validity of my identity. Thus, I ask:

I'm a lesbian who does not ping, am I queer? I'm a Jew Who Cares, I love wearing long skirts, am I queer? I have never had a girlfriend, I have never been kissed, am I queer? I can't stand noise, I don't appreciate camp, am I queer?

Do I have to be visibly queer to count? Do I have to appreciate the mainstream forms of queer entertainment to count? Do I have to have experience? For that matter, does Kate Bornstein have to be

7 Ibid., 52.

8 While Schnoor uses the term "gay-Jewish," for the purpose of this paper I change this term to "queer-Jewish," as the group which I describe is composed of members across the queer spectrum, not simply gay Jews.

9 Kate Bornstein, Keynote address at NUJLS 2009, 5 April 2009.

10 Ibid.

observant in some way or another to count as a Jew? In both of these lines of questioning, I would like to propose that we are not really asking whether we are Jews or whether we are queer people, but rather we are asking whether we fit into the Jewish community and whether we fit into the queer community; or in other words, would we be accepted by our peers? Do we share the necessary culture?

According to Janice M. Irving, culture can traditionally be seen as “a status available only to those born into groups with a history and a shared set of practices.”¹¹ In this sense, then, Judaism fits easily into the realm of culture; Jewish history can be traced back thousands of years and Jews share many common practices—such as the attendance of services and the consumption of challah mentioned above. However, I would like to add another aspect of culture which this definition ignores: the existence of ethnic and social capital which gets passed down from generation to generation. This, too, is deeply embedded within Judaism; knowledge of the Hebrew language and the presence of Jewish Community Centers are just two examples out of many possibilities.

Where, then, does this leave queer people? Is there a queer culture? One could argue, as many have, that queer culture does not exist because it is not a community into which one is born, nor does it possess a history or social and ethnic capital such as a common language and traditional dress.¹² Is this true, though? Biologists, historians, and anthropologists are engaged in a debate about whether sexuality is socially constructed or whether it is innate—or, in other words, something into which people are born.¹³ One could argue that queer people share a common history, if a fairly recent one, which includes events such as the Stonewall Riots.¹⁴ The queer community does not lack social and ethnic capital, either; there is queer literature, queer music, and a history of common dress which was distinct enough to serve as an identifier.¹⁵ Even if queer culture did not exist a hundred years ago, it has developed into a reality, meeting all the basic requirements for a culture stated above.

11 Janic M. Irving, “A Place in the Rainbow: Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Culture,” in *Queer Theory / Sociology*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 217.

12 Irving, 218.

13 Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 16.

14 Irving, 224.

15 *Ibid.*, 224-5.

Even though we have identified both Jewish and queer culture, this does not solve the problem of what to do with those whose identities fall into both cultures. While some people choose to emphasize one identity over another—Schnoor's lifestylers and commuters—there are those of us who wish to keep both identities on equal ground. Here we must ask another question: If Jewish culture exists and queer culture exists, then does a queer Jewish culture exist? While Schnoor's article references queer Jewish organizations which date back to the 1970s,¹⁶ queer Judaism is still a fledgling culture. As queer Jewish rituals develop and spread, as we conduct queer readings of Jewish texts, and as we create a space where queer Jews can gather, we create a culture. At NUJLS, the culture also includes havdallah circles and kosher lox, gender neutral bathrooms and an awkward avoidance of pronouns until someone gathers up the courage to ask. It is a mixture of Jewish ritual observance, queer and Jewish learning, and plenty of queer public displays of affection. It is a culture which strives to include the broadest range of people possible, welcoming people from across the spectrum of Jewish and queer and from all over North America. It is a culture where all these people, many of whom are complete strangers, come together to discover that they are not alone and that communities can be built where one can be both a Jew and a queer person without having to neglect either part of hir identity.

“The broadest range of people possible” remains ambiguous without further examination. Historically, movements and communities encounter difficulty including everyone, and NUJLS is no exception. In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” for example, Adrienne Rich rebukes the feminist movement for failing to acknowledge the lesbian continuum.¹⁷ In “Desire for the Future,” Amber Hollibaugh begs feminist sexual theorists to focus at least some attention on the positive experience of sex rather than concentrating solely on the victimization of women in sex.¹⁸ To discover NUJLS's pitfall, we turn once again to Kate Bornstein's keynote:

16 Schnoor, 53.

17 Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1986), 23-75.

18 Amber Hollibaugh, “Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (Boston: Routledge, 1984), 401-10.

Bornstein: LGBT is an uneasy, unstable coalition, and I know that NUJLS includes LGBTQ...
Audience: Q -
Bornstein: Q -
Audience: I -
Bornstein: I -
Audience: (*speaking over one another*) A, A, no A, A
Bornstein: Some people say A, some people don't. Alright.
Audience member: I don't think it's part of the acronym
Other Audience member: It's not part of the acronym
Bornstein: But that's where we get into trouble is the - some people - who do we include?

The issue of the A reared its head multiple times during my experience at NUJLS. Until November, whenever asked me what NUJLS stood for I said it was the National Union for Jewish LGBTQQIA Students. I had never encountered a queer organization which didn't include allies, and thus I automatically added the A to the end of the acronym. Had I not composed a fundraising letter which included the acronym with the A at the end, I would have been one of those confused audience members who insisted that the A *must* be part of the acronym. If we are building an inclusive community, it seems wrong to exclude people just because they identify as straight.

Upon seeing the acronym, we assume that the A would stand for “allies,” as if there are two groups of people, the true queers—LGBTQQI—and those who are merely supportive. Kate Bornstein takes issue with this idea, as seen below:

I have an A for asexuals. I don't use the A for allies. Fuck allies. They either identify with sex positivity and gender anarchy or they don't. Fuck allies. We don't need allies, we need members.¹⁹

Who are these members? Kate Bornstein adds an entire can of alphabet soup to the mix: an A for adult entertainers, an S for sado-masochists, an S for sex workers, an S for sex educators, a G for genderqueer, and a P for polyamorous, to name a few. Altogether, Bornstein proposes an acronym that includes thirty letters, including “an E, a T, and a C for et cetera.”²⁰ However, she also proposes

19 Bornstein.

20 Ibid.

another, shorter acronym: GASP, standing for “Gender Anarchy, Sex Positivity.”²¹ Sex positivity—and for that matter, categories such as polyamorous and sex educators—does not hinge on sexual orientation; thus, these people are not allies, they are full members of a group of queer people.

This notion of a queer mentality is collaborated by others in the queer community, such as L.A. Kauffman who writes that “Queerness... is more a posture of opposition than a simple statement about sexuality. It is about principles, not particularities... queerness is about acknowledging and celebrating difference, embracing what sets you apart. A straight person can't be gay, but a straight person can be queer.”²² However, this is by no means the majority opinion in the queer community. In 1979 Janice Raymond spoke out against MTF transfolk in the women's movement, specifically speaking out against Sandy Stone for “pass[ing] off... as a real woman.... After all his male privilege, he is going to cash in on lesbian feminist culture too?”²³ While this particular statement was made thirty years ago, there are still some who are apprehensive of a straight presence in queer culture. While Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick embraces the “open mesh of possibilities” invited by the word “queer,” she also feels that “queer must denote 'almost simply, same-sexual object choice, lesbian or gay,'” for fear that the very definition of the word, and its roots to the GLBT movement, will collapse.²⁴ While I acknowledge and understand the benefits of expanding “queer” to include sex-positive heterosexuals, as Bornstein terms it, I feel that NUJLS's current stance aligns with the ideas of Sedgwick. NUJLS is first and foremost a community building organization, not an organization geared towards activism or education of the general population. It is an organization committed to the combination of two minority groups, Jews and queer people. For me, part of the excitement of attending the conference was knowing that once I was there, I would be surrounded by people who share my basic identity, which is a situation which is not possible in a school where the queer Jewish student group attracts more allies than queer Jews.

21 Ibid.

22 L.A. Kauffman, quoted in Calvin Thomas, *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 16.

23 Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 224.

24 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, quoted in Thomas, 18-9.

. With that said, from what I have seen—both behind the scenes and as a conference participant—NUJLS does a fairly comprehensive job of fostering inclusivity. All the food served at the conference is kosher, and there was always a vegetarian option available. Services were offered in each denomination of Judaism, and they were optional to maximize the inclusion of secular Jews as well as religious Jews. On the queer side, NUJLS made no assumptions. There were no boxes when it came to identity, simply open fields for gender, preferred pronoun, and sexual orientation. While a roster with contact information was created for the participants, registrants were asked whether they wanted to be included in order to maximize privacy for those who may not be out of the closet. Housing was made available based on preference; same-gender housing was available for those who did not feel comfortable staying in a room with someone of the opposite gender, and to my knowledge all requests for privacy were honored.

One of the most interesting—and confusing—parts of the conference was the lack of ability to judge anybody based on appearance. While in theory I had access to everyone's preferred pronoun and gender identification since I was the one who compiled the food and housing lists along with the roster, once I was at the conference I felt like it was private information that I had no business reading. Since the only person I knew prior to attending the conference was my boss, everyone was new to me. What do you do when you walk into a room full of strangers and you are not privy to even the most basic, taken-for-granted information such as the gender identities of the people around you? At the beginning of the semester, I would not have been able to handle that situation. If this conference had been in January, I would have spent the entire time trying to figure out people's identities. Yet, in the beginning of April, it was just an interesting experience. A month later, I *still* don't know the gender identification or preferred pronoun of the individual with whom I spent the most time at the conference and with whom I am still in regular, non-Facebook contact—and it doesn't bother me. I imagine I will find out one day, but until then I'm content to simply think of hir as gender neutral.

Perhaps it would be fair to say that at NUJLS, gender didn't particularly matter. We weren't

concerned with binaries; we were just a group of like-minded queer Jews coming together to form a community. On Sunday, Kate Bornstein began her keynote with the sentence, "This is a new talk, and I'm not comfortable with it yet; the comfort I have is that I'm with family," and truly, that is what we became in the two short days that we spent with each other. We were strangers when we arrived, but by the end we were family. Even after looking back at the conference through the lens of our class readings and Kate Bornstein's keynote speech, I don't think I would recommend that NUJLS change a single thing—except, perhaps, for the amount of time which we have to spend together and the matter of that pesky A.