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The Queer Debt Crisis: How Queer is Now?

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“The Queer Debt Crisis: How Queer is Now?”

Introduction

Pamela L. Caughie

In response to the 2012 MMLA Call for Papers, Madelyn Detloff, Judith Roof with Alanna Beroiza, and I organized a series of linked panels on gender and sexuality. Our objective was to initiate a sustained discussion at the annual conference among scholars in the fields of queer theory and sexuality studies in the absence of a permanent section in these areas. In keeping with the conference theme, our proposals took up various notions of debts in queer, gender, and feminist studies. I organized the first panel, “Academic Debts to Non-academic Communities,” which articulated, and interrogated, the relationship between academic theories and community groups, such as asexuality studies and the asexual internet group AVEN; queer studies and the 1980s activist group Act Up; and the work of Donna Haraway and 1980s coalition building by US Third World feminists. Detloff organized the second, “Queer Economics,” on which she also presented, which took up the notion of “debts” in terms of economies of sexual desire, pleasure, and exchange. (Both panels are described in more detail in Detloff’s contribution that follows.) The third panel, “The Queer Debt Crisis,” which begins the exchange published here, concluded our mini conference. Asserting that queer theory has overextended its critical boundaries and that its dominance in the field of sexuality and gender studies threatens feminism, the last panel challenged the premises of the preceding two panels. And ignited a firestorm.

Whether or not we were successful in launching a sustained discussion of queer and sexuality studies at the MMLA remains to

be seen, but when it comes to our desire to create a lively discussion among scholars in the field, we got more than we bargained for. The raucous debate that followed the third panel exposed our different understandings of the term *queer*, its history and its politics (if, indeed, it is seen to *have* any politics), and its relation to feminism. Heated accusations and prejudicial caricatures meant to blame or trivialize opposing views were tempered by probing questions and challenges that made all of us reflect more deeply on the political and ideological commitments we clung to so passionately. We have tried to reproduce the main lines of that argument here. Beroiza, Roof, and Dennis Allen begin with revised versions of their remarks, which they presented in dialogue form at the conference, where each read in turn sections of a paper collaboratively produced. Detloff and Carina Pasquesi, whose paper was specifically targeted in the conference debate, then respond to the joint presentation, elaborating on their points of disagreement with “The Queer Debt Crisis,” a title that raises the question of whether queer theory is in crisis (as some presenters seemed to think), or whether there is a crisis in the notion of the debts it owes (as others suggested). Suzanne Bost, who presented on the first panel, closes the essay cluster with a response to this exchange, identifying the main points of contention and offering not so much a solution (for she wants to keep the debate going, to keep things messy, as she says) as an alternative way of understanding what is at stake in this debate.

That MMLA debate was one of the most stimulating that I have participated in at an academic conference (not excepting the face-off between Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam at the 2013 MLA). Something was going on in our exchange, something incredibly important that suddenly crystalized for me in the months when our essay cluster was under review. A debate about sexual labeling that I had tended to see as purely academic became, unexpectedly, deeply personal.

In July 2013 I returned from summer teaching in Rome to find that a dear friend of mine, whom I had known for twenty years, had been arrested and jailed while I was away for viewing, and sharing, child pornography online. I was stunned. My friend was

a good man, kind and generous, gentle, funny, sensitive, a loving and much loved son, brother, uncle, and friend. I couldn't imagine a man like him in jail. Whatever he stood accused of, he was, by the commonly accepted definitions of our society, and by my personal knowledge of him, a good man. My friend had never been in trouble in his life; he lived to help others; he was the support of many family members and friends. Yet within two weeks of my return he was dead. My friend took his life in despair that he could ever be that man again.

Depressed and alone after a break-up two years ago, he had turned to the internet for solace. A long-time consumer of pornography, as I later learned, he had opened a picture of a child sent to him anonymously. He was guilty of looking—and looking, again and again. He was, as he put it, a voyeur, and he was hooked. He opened more pictures, and more, and then shared them with others. This good man had done a bad thing. He committed an illegal act. For that, my friend—this slightly-built, boyish-looking, gentle man—was arrested, shackled, and jailed. After five excruciating weeks, he was put under house arrest with an ankle monitor. For the estimated two years it would take to bring his case to trial as the lawyers tried to winnow the charges against him, that one-bedroom apartment would be his cell. Unlike those accused of murder, an accused pedophile is not allowed out of his home to work, shop, or exercise.

In telling this story I do not mean to suggest a link between queerness and pedophilia. My friend wasn't queer because he was gay or because he liked pornography. I would say he wasn't queer at all. He wasn't good because he owned property, paid his taxes, loved his mother, and believed in the American dream. He was good because he was believed to be good by those who knew him most intimately. He was bad because he was believed to be bad by a justice system ignorant of and indifferent to the human beings it so readily and recklessly labels, a system that judges people by caricatures rather than their complex, abundantly textured characters. My friend's story made the issues we had debated in the abstract at the MMLA—the way we talk about forms of transgression, the way we label sexuality identities, the way we put people into boxes, and the

risks and responsibilities entailed by the theoretical commitments we make—glaringly real. By telling my friend’s story, I hope to make these real to others. But more than that, I hope to reclaim his goodness, his humanity. I want to expunge the shame he felt at the sexual label attached to him like the shackle around his ankle.

My friend was not, by any stretch of the term, a sex offender. Yet that is how the legal system labeled him. A man who had never viewed child pornography until he was forty-nine years old; who had never touched, photographed, or abused a child; who had never produced pornography or distributed it for profit—this man was a sex offender, and worse, a pedophile, in the eyes of the law and would forever be labeled as such. My friend had twenty-six nieces and nephews (he came from a large Irish Catholic family) and there was never even a whisper of inappropriate behavior. My son had known him since he was two years old and there was never a hint of scandal. If I had a two-year-old son today, even knowing what I do now, I would trust him with my friend. For he was a good man. According to studies, there is no empirical evidence to show that people who look at child pornography will go on to abuse a child, yet our justice system labels those charged with viewing pornography as sex offenders, even before their trials, even without evidence of any personal contact with children.¹ Had he committed this crime in his native Ireland, he would likely have received probation and mandatory counseling, perhaps internet monitoring. Instead he was facing the possibility of seventy-two years in prison, as a prosecutor gleefully announced at one of his court hearings, causing my friend to faint.

His friends and neighbors visited daily, but still my friend spent much of his time alone. He was consumed by despair and shame, overcome with humiliation by the public nature of the accusations against him. His arrest photo was published in the *Chicago Tribune*; his place of business was vilified on Yelp; clients turned on him in disgust. He had often told me, as he did when I visited him during his house arrest, that he was the good one of the seven siblings, the one who never gave his parents any trouble. The shame of having fallen so precipitously, coupled with the anxiety of having lost his

source of income, which had allowed him to help so many family members, was overwhelming. During my visit, he paced the kitchen where we sat together over a glass of wine, he grabbed his head in his hands, and he cried—we cried together. He told me then that he had tried to take his life in jail. It's so much harder than you can imagine, he said. Although friends and family had removed from his apartment sharp knives, razor blades, a rope, anything he could use to harm himself, no one who knew this gentle man really believed he was capable of taking his life. No one could imagine despair so deep that such a sweet man could find the strength to hang himself with a string of Christmas tree lights.

A month later I shared this story, and my letter to the prosecuting attorney excoriating a judicial system so cruelly indifferent to the humanity of those who stand accused of such a crime, with Carina Pasquesi. Her intelligent and compassionate response helped me understand how mourning my friend was an extension of my theoretical commitments as a feminist scholar of gender and sexuality. "Writing that letter and standing with your friend," she wrote in an e-mail, "is the very best way for you to honor his life and publicly show your love, commitment and support. Not everyone, even those who consider themselves open-minded and liberal, is willing to stand with a person labeled as a sex offender, and even worse, a pedophile. When my Queer Theory students push me to tell them what 'queer' truly means (an impossible task, I know), I find myself saying that queer means to stand with those . . . dominant culture considers the least respectable when it comes to sex and gender, those many people usually work hard to distance themselves from. It is brave of you to stand with your friend. I will pass on your friend's story to future Queer Theory students, keeping his spirit and struggle alive and raising awareness about harsh mandatory sentencing and the state's often misguided efforts to protect children. Patrick Califia, Gayle Rubin, and Lee Edelman's work remains vital. They articulate a painful truth about the ways in which laws meant to protect children do not really protect them but instead police, and often destroy, the lives of those labeled as 'perverts.' Much in your letter is akin to their arguments" (Pasquesi, Message).

And much in my friend’s story is akin to our conference debate, which was about far more than queer theory. Part of why our debate was so heated was that it hit us in places where we are most deeply invested, and even most personally vulnerable. Initially, in suggesting to the contributors that we publish this debate, my hope was that readers would continue the discussion by responding to this exchange and by organizing panels on queer and sexuality studies at future MMLA conferences. As we go to print, my hope now is that our academic exchange will not lose sight of the individuals for whom these issues are literally a matter of life and death.

In closing, I want to acknowledge the three participants not included in this cluster and their significant contributions to the linked panels: Elizabeth Hanson (Loyola University Chicago), “Theory Goes Viral: The Asexual Web Community and the Trouble with Identity”; Judith Brown (Indiana University), “Throwing Poems”; and, Stefanie Dunning (Miami University), “All of the Lights: The Multiplex Economy of the Black Queer Club.” I thank them along with the six authors that follow for a truly momentous event at the 2012 MMLA.

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