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Suzanne Bost
Loyola University Chicago, sbost@luc.edu

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Response: “Unsafe Politics and Risky Connections”

Suzanne Bost

I have been asked to write a response, which first demands a reflection. As others in this body of essays have already alluded, the initial response to the debate at MMLA 2012 about Queer Theory’s continued vitality was messy, sometimes loud, and certainly not unitary. I wish I could replicate in writing the urgency and cacophony of the original response: a room full of people with their hands raised all at once, talking on top of each other when they couldn’t wait to be called upon, whispers between neighbors, anxiety. The critique of a much loved theoretical mode and political architecture—queer—produced awkward, unfinished responses, tentative propositions, and a sense that something new was emerging. It is difficult to respond to something that is still emerging. Indeed, this is my third iteration of response: my first was vocalized in Cincinnati, my second was written in response to earlier versions of these papers, and now this. I will end this response with an open question to indicate that this process is still emerging and that this response is a solicitation rather than an endpoint. I will continue to re-vise endlessly my views on the relationship between identity and politics.

At one point Carina Pasquesi’s essay concluded with a call “to continue to think past representation and inclusion and instead imagine and build alternative models of being and belonging beyond traditional forms of kinship and intimacy.” (She has since revised this conclusion with a series of unanswered questions, which is totally in keeping with my reflection above.) I think the unrevised sentence encapsulates the heart of the debate best, though. Do we want to reimagine the world queerly (a radical ideal that produces
some necessary horror) or to change the world by way of inserting ourselves into the systems of legibility through which rights and power are distributed? If queer is anti-identitarian, it is because it is a framework that challenges conventional models of representation linking bodies, identities, and politics. Queer theory’s original intent was to emphasize these categories’ failure to align in predictable ways. Judith Roof worries that inscribing multiple differences, a “seemingly never-ending list of categories,” (104) within queer is an intellectual “sleight-of-hand” (104) that reinscribes categorical essentialism and creates another binary. Is queer just another identity category, or is it a marker of incoherence that is unintelligible in the face of juridical demands for legibility? Is the objection to queer that it is too rigid or that it is too fluid? As a thinker, I am a big fan of incoherence: expanding intellectual possibilities by embracing contradictions and multiplicity. But these ideals are difficult to put into practice. How do we translate our radical intentions into politics? How do we even put them into language?

I would like to restore to the conversation a term from Pasquesi’s original paper presented in Cincinnati: barebacking (anal intercourse without a condom, a term Pasquesi embraced in her analysis of Tim Dean’s Unlimited Intimacy). Audience members reacted to the risk of AIDS transmission embedded in this practice as well as to the presumed male-centeredness of barebacking as a metaphor. I, myself, was driven to tears. To me, the real question is, how much risk are we willing to embrace in order to assert (or to feel) our own unique feelings and desires? Identity politics are pretty comfortable, self-affirming, seemingly clear-cut. Identity-based movements are recognized by the federal government and provide avenues for securing protections for “suspect classes.” Barebacking points a middle finger at protection and advantage. It accepts risk in order to assert queer love. It is about the ways in which our every move against hegemony might end our lives. According to Dean, barebacking is concerned with “overcoming the boundaries between persons” (2). Permeability means letting down our defenses, embracing the potentially alien, accepting how messy intimacy can be.
As a scholar of Gloria Anzaldúa—who embraced corporeal, national, and identitarian permeability—these gestures are very attractive to me. Most famously, Anzaldúa described the U.S./Mexico border as “una herida abierta [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifebloods of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (Borderlands 3). Less famously, she resisted identity politics and categorization in favor of a “new tribalism.” In one of her last essays, “how let us shift,” she proposed that we “step outside ethnic and other labels” to discover that “identity has roots you share with all people and . . . all planetary beings” (“now let us shift” 560). This approach favors connection and cross-species miscegenation over the particular needs that seem to coincide with an identity.

Anzaldúa was uncomfortable with even the label queer, which she found limiting and alienating. In an undated manuscript called “Patlaches,” she wrote:

There is no single historical source or origin, no one founding identity for Chicano queers or lesbians. . . . Our origin as dykes is both indigenous and Spanish. . . . I claim the term patlache from the Nahuatl language. Other terms I favor are de las otras, of the Others; mitá y mitá (mitad y mitad), half and half. Marimacho to me means the more butch dykes and marimacha as not being so mannish yet assertive, don’t-get-in-my-face sort of dyke. In solidarity to our white lesbian sisters, I coined the term lesberadas, retaining the les of lesbians and eradas of desperadas, the Spanish word for the desperate ones. . . .

Her preference for identification is a cacophony of names able to capture a process that cannot be contained by labels. In the published version of this essay, she critiques middle-class lesbians who “perceive, organize, classify, and name specific chunks of reality . . . [because their] theories limit the ways we think about being queer” (Keating 165). Instead, Anzaldúa, like a barebacker, refused sexual limitations.
As Detloff reminds us, queer theory “shows us how identities are formed (and deformed) in and through power systems that exceed the sum total of our biological parts and/or sociological environments” (116). Queer has a critique of normalization, of categorization, and of power built within it. It likewise has a history of contestation, self-questioning, and categorical incoherence. All of these things are also true of feminism as a theoretical approach. Feminism, too, as Roof reminds us, has tried to address the heterogeneity of women grouped under it without losing political coherence. The degree to which either approach has succeeded in these simultaneous aims is obviously debatable, but the point is that queer and feminism are allied in this mode of openness to revising their own identities.

Alanna Beroiza worried that the heterogeneity of queer is undermined by “the semantic umbrella of a single term,” and this is probably true. How can a name signify its own cacophony? Beroiza uses the term “LGBT” in her essay, which indirectly implies that the acronym escapes the “umbrella” problem of “queer.” Indeed, the acronym holds distinct identities within it and seemingly refuses to make a choice between them. But it doesn’t declare a clear political direction (as does feminism, for example). Or does it? I would argue that LGBT (or, to erase the binary between queer and lesbian/gay, LGBTQ) enacts many of the ideals Queer Theory initially intended. As an acronym, it is more than a name: it’s a method. The listing of letters here infuses the term with elasticity, pointing to the difficulty of naming a group that continues to add new members. It builds communities; it models intimacy with others. It is awkward, difficult to say, but that’s how political movement should be. When you look at it, especially if you aren’t sure what all of those letters stand for, it is recognizable but in a fuzzy, uncertain way. The acronym, particularly as it continues to evolve (LGBTQIA . . . ) forces us to pause a bit, to reach a little in order to understand what is trying to be signified. It involves our powers of interpretation, our knowledge, and our ignorance. It enacts a process.

Could queer or feminist alone do this same work? The preceding debate suggests that, for many thinkers, they cannot (or, at least,
often don’t). In her critique of “queer,” Roof points out that “[a]ll these ‘identities’ are themselves products of a particular environment of commodity culture, patriarchy . . . that structural binaries that co-produce hetero and homo, normative and queer as themselves aspects of the very same way of thinking” (102-103). I would suggest that the additive quality of “LGBTQIA . . . ,” with an emphasis on the ellipsis, resists binary thinking; it is neither an odd number nor an even. (I think of Irigaray’s argument about how being/having “not one” challenges the insistence upon counting and sorting in patriarchal thought. One could even suggest that the letters of the acronym “LGBTQIA . . . ” touch each other like Irigaray’s “I/you”—without a condom, without distinguishing between identities.) Dennis Allen argues that queer, “despite the baroque proliferation its meanings, may not be the best way of understanding the increasingly complex realities of our current situation” (107). But how better to respond to the tension between complex realities and stubbornly binary conservative political mechanisms than with “baroque proliferation”?

Loyola University Chicago

Notes

1. See Endrass, Howitt, Lee and, Webb.

2. In an earlier response to this essay, Carina Pasquesi noted a lack of acknowledgement of “queer theory’s roots in the radical feminism of the 1970s” on Judith Roof’s, Dennis Allen’s, and my parts. My discussion of Radicalesbians here is, in part, meant to complicate the notion that a direct genealogical line can be drawn from 1970s radical feminism to queer theory.

3. For an example of the critical discussion that emerged at the nexus of feminism and queer theory in the early 1990s see Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects.”
4. I attended Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine from 2005–2009. The name of the student center changed during that time from the Queer Trans Resource Center to the Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity.

5. Queers & Allies is the name of the undergraduate and graduate student group at Rice University in Houston, Texas dedicated to the issues of people in the “GLBTQIA” community, as the acronym appears on their website, http://prideblogs.rice.edu/about.

6. In Johnson v. Robison (415 U. S. 361; 94 S. Ct. 1160; 39 L. Ed 2nd 389; 1974), the Supreme Court defined a “suspect class” as “deserving special judicial protection” and possessing “an immutable characteristic determined solely by the accident of birth, and not being saddled with such disabilities, or subject to such a history of purposeful unequal, or relegated to such a position of political powerlessness as to command extraordinary protection from the majoritarian political process.” The recent Perry v. Schwarzenegger, (704 F. Supp. 2d 921, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 78817) found that was no “rational basis” for preventing same-sex marriage but did not yet deem sexual orientation a “suspect class.” It never entertained the any notion of “queer.”

7. See for example, Suzanna Walters, “From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can’t a Woman Be More like a Fag?),” Signs 21 (1996): 830–69.

8. On the issue of names of GLBTQ resource centers, the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals lists 513 members in its 2012 annual report. See https://lgbtcampus.memberclicks.net/assets/annual-report-2012-web.pdf. Of the LGBT campus resource center mission statements gathered in in the consortium’s allied “LGBTQArchitect” archive, the word lesbian comes up 129 times, while the word queer appears 62
times; see http://architect.lgbtcampus.org/mission_statements. This data is not meant to substitute for a social-scientific survey of naming practices, simply to suggest that a sample of two centers, one of which has subsequently been renamed, is not a precise indicator of widespread trends in naming practices.

9. Here Warner is paying homage to Leo Bersani’s landmark essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” where Bersani claims that sex distresses people and therefore, they do not like to think about it. See Warner, “Queer and Then?”

10. At the 2012 MMLA conference, part of the paper I presented included a discussion of one of my favorite Queer Theory classroom moments, teaching Tim Dean’s Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking. Dean neither condemns nor condones the actions of gay men who purposefully fuck without condoms, but rather opens up a space for dialogue about intimacy and risk. Arguing that all acts of sex and intimacy are based on risk, Dean reads barebacking cultures as rejecting a hierarchy that rewards some sex acts as safe (monogamy) and pathologizes other acts (unprotected sex with strangers). Yet my students, like some scholars responding to Dean, found it difficult not to condemn barebackers as self-hating, mentally disturbed gay men. However, after I challenged them to de-dramatize the act of barebacking and instead consider the risks surrounding all forms of pleasure and intimacy, students found themselves confessing to all kinds of risky behavior, both silly and serious. A discussion of quotidian examples of risk made it possible for students to open themselves up to what barebacking represents beyond an identity-based analysis of just gay men having condomless sex. Students were able to understand the risks we all take in order to experience the pleasure of our own bodies as well as the bodies of others—strangers and not. This was an important moment of generosity and open-mindedness, a moment where students could get beyond an act that scared them, maybe because it made
them think about their own vulnerability and mortality, and think imaginatively and critically about intimacy, risk, the shame we often cast onto others, and the sexual hierarchies we sometimes choose to reproduce.

11. On the transphobia and misogyny in mainstream feminism, see Serano’s “Trans Woman Manifesto” in *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. On the important intersections among feminist, trans and queer, see Leslie Feinberg’s “Learning from Experience” from *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*.

12. See *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carol Vance. As an acknowledgment of the debt that queer theory owes to radical feminism, Northwestern University held a conference in April 2003 revisiting the Barnard conference: “The Ends of Sexuality: Pleasure and Danger in the New Millennium.”


15. In her conference paper, Beroiza claimed that the pleasures of the “cunt” were not the same as the pleasures of the “cock.” I wonder what she means by this—do all women have cunts and all men have cocks, do all women experience the pleasure of the cunt, or all men experience the pleasure of the cock? Do they even want to? What is a cunt, a cock? I suspect that there is a
trace of biologism at work in the evocation of these words, but it is their metaphorical resonance that detaches them from the gendered bodies that they are supposed to define.


**Works Cited**


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