

Queer Theory Goes Dancing

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I headed out with my partner Lauri and friends Dave and Karen for an evening of dancing. Intent on shaking our moneymakers, we took ourselves to a bar known for welcoming men and women and offering function over form. “We gotta find a good queer space,” Dave said. He reached into his man-bag and dabbed his forehead. “You know, somewhere I can be the fluid freak I am!”

As we settled into our chairs and rounded up three local brews and a diet coke, we took in the atmosphere, a blend of homo stereotypes (older dykes with standard-issue above the ears haircuts, young butches with tattoos and doc martins, aging fags doing interpretive dance) and pomo box-breakers (tranny boy grooving to ‘80s tunes, young men into each other but unreadable as gay, interracial young couples sporting a more gender-flexible look).

A middle age African –American lesbian, butch-femme couple sweetly attended to each other as they danced. Lauri said, “This may be one of the few places they can be out.” “Sad but true,” Karen said.

An older white gay couple at a near-by table nursed their beers, enjoying each other and the crowd. Twenty-somethings, singles, couples, and everything beyond and between buzzed about the place, on and off the dance floor, in and out of the NBA game on TV, up and down for more drinks.

“Yeah, this seems, OK,” Dave said. “Feels more queer than that boys bar we were at last time.”

“Yeah, I think this place gets its identity through ‘identity-not,’” I said. “You, know, it’s not sleazy, it’s not bling, it’s not cruise-y, it’s not boy or girl, black or white...”

“More queer, less specifying, huh?” Dave took a pull from his mug.

Lauri rolled her eyes, “OK, you two. Enough...let’s see you deprivatize right here and now, privilege some knowledges of the body, and get up and dance.”

We left our seats for the modest sized square laminate, vying for space with the growing crowd. Lauri and I did what 45 year old lesbians do on dance floors, while Dave and Karen proved themselves to be hot, hot, hot: hot dancers and hot for each other. His fluid hips, thrusting pelvis, and stylish exuberance made it clear to everyone there that did not know him: Dave had to be gay.

“Look at this,” Lauri said and nodded her head toward Karen and Dave. Still dancing, I moved into position to see what she could see. She pulled me closer so I could hear her, “All these dykes think Dave’s gay—they’re like, pushing him out of the way to get to Karen.”

“Yeah,” I said, “she’s fair game to them, a dateless dyke out with her good gay friend.”

A woman grooved her way over to Lauri in the middle of Justin Timberlake’s “Sexy Back” and asked, “Is your friend straight?” Lauri bought time, “which one?” “The blonde.” We looked over at Dave and his brown hair, albeit with some added highlights. Lauri scratched her own salt and pepper head, “straight, I guess,” as though she were choosing one of many possible answers on a multiple-choice test for which she

never studied. (Later, she admitted regret over providing an answer on the inquirer's terms. "I totally got sucked into an essentializing conversation—doh!")

We returned our attention to the activity a mere ten feet from us. There before our queer little eyes we watched our friend Karen—attractive, sexy, and blonde—become not only mis-read as gay/lesbian/queer (or, horrors! —perhaps the chic “bi-curious”), but also objectified, her confidence in her body and ownership of her sexuality placed under the gaze of a female masculinity that was doing a hell of a job of paying homage to the original misogynistic male version. This all because Dave was dismissed by the dancing dykes—who were circling Karen like wagon trains—as immaterial because he just had to be gay in their totalizing brains.

A woman asked Karen to dance. Karen smiled and shook her head “no.” Another woman grabbed her ass. Karen pushed her hand away. A third woman pulled Karen's arm toward her. Karen recovered her arm and turned closer to Dave. Ass-grabber inserted herself into Karen's space, physically insisting on Karen's attention, writing Dave off of the dancing page. How interesting, I thought. Dykes or straight men, doesn't matter—either group, when under the influence of patriarchy (and PBR), help themselves to women while rendering gays invisible and reducing women to objects.

When we headed off the floor toward our table, ass-grabber chivalrously brought Karen a glass of water. As we reached for our jackets and made leaving behaviors, ass-grabber looked past Karen, who was standing in front of her, made eye contact with me (apparently the butchest among us) and half-stated, half-asked, “You're taking her away from me?” I was stunned. Women's struggles to claim and own their sexuality seemed to implode in a space where transgressive genders and sexualities collided with the

reproduction of stratified traditions of sexual power dynamics and fixed notions of masculinity and femininity. What's a third waver to do??

Outside, we debriefed. Initially, we expressed concern for Karen. Karen shook her head. "I'm used to this. The only place it doesn't happen is at men's bars." She zipped her jacket up to the collar. "At straight clubs men hit on me; at lesbian bars, women do."

Dave said, "So it's only among 100% homo males you can experience your body for yourself?" Karen nodded, "Uh-huh, pretty much."

"Wow. How fucked up is that?" I said.

Dave smiled and said, "They thought I was gay, huh?"

Lauri and I were pissed. "I'm trying not to be more outraged than you are, Karen," Lauri said.

When pissed, I offer critical analysis. "It's transgressive and sexually liberating to be in that space together and for you to dance with the butch and other dykes, for all these kinds of women to be there and share that. It's oppressive and it reproduces hegemonic masculinity for women to hit on you and grab you when you told them to stop." I unzipped my jacket as I opened the car door. "Like, doesn't 'no' still mean 'no' even in a post-structurally destabilized sexual landscape?"

"OK, honey. I think we all got it," Lauri said.

On a roll, I continued. "In fact, shouldn't 'no' *really* mean 'no' in a world where gender specifications are rejected?"

I pulled the MINI away from the curb and cruised past the gender-troubling bar. Dave, still thrilled to have been read as gay, said, “If they thought I was straight, they wouldn’t have done that, huh?”

“Well, that seems to be how it goes,” Karen said. “When I’m out with a *real* man, no one bugs me. How come you’re such a sissy-boy man?” We all laughed as she gave him a playful punch on the shoulder.

“Ow! Don’t punish me because I don’t embody traditional masculinity!” Dave hunched his six-foot frame in deference in the back of the MINI. “You know you like me like this—makes room for your queer-butchy self.”

Needless to say, this experience provided much grist for the ensuing weekend’s mill. Lauri, Dave and I met two straight women friends for coffee the next morning.

“Wow. I’m kind of surprised to hear that women would do that to women—like, I would hope that they wouldn’t” Mary said.

“I guess maybe I’ve always kinda put lesbians on a sexual and political pedestal,” Nancy said. She broke off a piece of her scone. “Not that they’re perfect by any means or immune to cultural stuff. I’d hope women would stand by each other around this stuff,” she said and popped the baked good into her mouth.

Dave said, “Like women’s solidarity, huh?” We all nodded agreement into our latte cups.

We tossed around the notion of solidarity in a world of complex and intersecting social locations, identity markers, and social needs and agendas.

“After last night, I’d welcome some solidarity,” Lauri conceded, “even if it’s based on a social construct.”

“Well, yeah, gender may be a construction but the effects of the gendered system are real.” I stated what my crew around the table already knew.

Fantasies of solidarity were soon squashed at dinner that night with our ardently second-wave, once separatist (“I’ve come to appreciate some men”), all-women-should-be-lesbians, essentializing friend (don’t ever talk tranny with her).

“Oh, my! Lesbians were sexually *aggressive*—how delicious!” Susan shrieked in delight.

I proceeded cautiously, “So.... Are you thinking that being a straight woman denies Karen any claim to sexual self-agency and proprietary rights over her own body?”

“Well, no,” Susan tossed her pasta around her plate. “I’m not thinking about that as much as how amazing it is to hear about a group of lesbians being so confidently sexual.”

Dave buttered his bread, listening. It was Lauri’s turn to try. “Well, what if that confidence is at the expense of another women?”

I couldn’t wait my turn. “Like, it’s OK for dykes to do that to het girls because we live lower on the oppressed people food chain, or some shit like that?” If this was her idea of some kind of evolutionary event in sexual and gender politics, I wasn’t for it.

Eventually, we turned our critical gaze back onto ourselves. What did our experience reveal about the gap between queer theory and peoples’ lived experience? In what ways did the intersection of class and race play a part in how we looked at the bar patrons and how they looked at us? If bringing straight people to a gay bar was a queer practice for us, was it imposing, even oppressive, to those who seek a queer space free from straights? How is it that we have come to see our shift from essentialized notions of

identity to constructionist ideas as preferable—doesn't it reproduce a kind of essentialism (certainly an elitism)? Why can't we all just be friends???

The crucible that is the intersection of queer theory and queer lives reveals the confluence of the potential for radical change on one hand, and the frantic grasping onto that which we think we know to be immutable on the other. What will be forged out of this juncture continues to be a moving target, one which, given its queer nature, may never be static or clear. Walking into the bar, the four of us were hoping for a place where our little hodge-podge of identities could safely be together in a public space, a queer space, one which made room for all parts of everyone that came together to create it. Our bad. This was *not* a queer bar; it was a gay bar—a diverse gay bar but a gay bar nonetheless. The questions persist: Is the reproduction of misogyny something we can expect in a space where essentialized identity categories continue to be privileged? Would a queer space offer freedom from such oppression?

The dance that is queer theory is fluid, in motion, creating itself as it goes. And like many dances, its steps are open to interpretation. It works better with some music than others, and not all dancers feel inspired—or free—to move this way. The rhythm that drives it is tricky, at times hard to feel through the constant pounding from the beat of the binary.

