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The Morphology of Sex: Tracking Change in the Sex Discourse at Augustana College

Robert E. Burke

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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Robert Burke

The Morphology of Sex: Tracking Change in the Sex Discourse at Augustana College

WGSS 350: Queer Theory

Professor Kiki Kosnick

Fall 2019*

Audre Lorde Writing Prize Submission

Long Analytical Essay

*This paper was updated with a short new section, "2020," in March 2020.

Dear friend,

*Go with the flow
Be thoughtful of those downstream
Slow down and meander
Follow the path of least resistance
for rapid success*

*Immerse yourself in nature,
trickling streams,
roaring waterfalls,
sparkles of light dancing on water
Delight in life's adventures around every bend
Let difficulties stream away*

*Live simply and gracefully in Your own True Nature
moving, flowing, allowing,
serene and on course
It takes time to carve the beauty of the canyon
Rough waters become smooth
Go around the obstacles
Stay current*

The beauty is in the journey!

– Ilan Shamir, “Advice from a River”

The town of Kaskaskia, Illinois is a special place, and it's very queer in a way. On land once inhabited by the Illini people, it was later settled by the French and later served as capital of the Illinois Territory. It was situated on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River. Over time, however, human changes to the landscape along with repeated flooding in this section of the river caused the Mighty Mississippi to carve new channels in the landscape – paths of least resistance. Kaskaskia was briefly an island surrounded by water. The Mississippi now runs east of Kaskaskia, putting Kaskaskia on its western bank – the Missouri side of the river. The river meandered over time, and the town went from one side to the other.

I am not writing a paper about fluvial geomorphology, water resource management, or flood engineering. But this absolutely is a paper about pioneering new paths and evolving political boundaries, though not in the spatial sense. This is a paper about sex, and how time and society affect where certain types of sex have fallen just 370 river miles upstream from Kaskaskia at Augustana College. The line between normal sex and abnormal sex may seem fixed to us today, but looking into our institutional history shows that this boundary can and does move for a variety of reasons, and that there may have been a time where the line was less clear or non-existent. To accomplish this goal, I make use of Gayle Rubin's concept of the "sex hierarchy," and apply it to archival materials from Augustana College's Special Collections to show the meanders and morphs that have taken place here at Augustana over time. Using archived issues of the Augustana Observer centers student voices and first-person accounts, which are valuable for assessing cultural norms and experiences over time. Essentially, I'll be making use of a snapshot approach: assembling case studies of events at a few points in history to craft an analytical narrative that brings society's panopticonic eye on sex to the forefront.

Two key theoretical pieces of the puzzle will be helpful in explaining cultural attitudes toward sex. The first is a piece by the aforementioned Gayle Rubin: in her 1984 essay "Thinking Sex,"

she explains that gender of attraction isn't the only component of sexual desire and behavior, and highlights that there are a variety of variables that a culture can define and defend as acceptable and unacceptable forms of sex. This, of course, goes against conventional Western discourse that defines "sexuality" as something that's termed straight, gay, bi, pan, you name it – the terms, though, are all about gender of attraction as it relates to one's own. Beyond "hetero vs. homo", Rubin includes

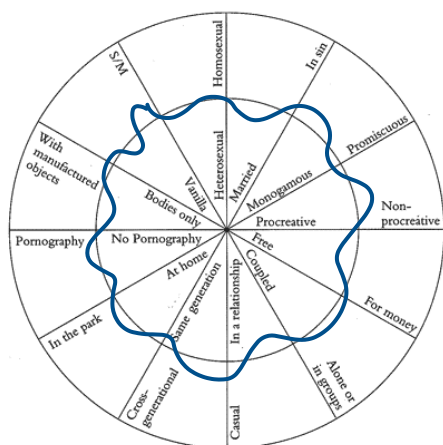


Figure 1 The sex hierarchy. The charmed inner circle is made up of those categories nearer the center. I argue that the line separating this inner circle from the 'bad outer limits' is more like a meandering river than a fixed political boundary and have illustrated this concept here.

other variables in the "sex hierarchy": married vs. not, monogamous vs. promiscuous, free vs. for pay, coupled vs. alone or in groups, in a relationship vs. casual, same-generational vs. cross-generational, at home vs. in the park, no pornography vs. with pornography, bodies only vs. with manipulated objects, and vanilla vs. S&M (281). Rubin argues that the former category of each pair constitutes the "charmed inner circle" (Figure 1) in which things like heterosexual sex and married sex live in our society.

Different cultures delineate where along each spectrum the meandering line falls. Therefore, the inner circle varies over time and space, and there is certainly an "erotic DMZ" (282) as she calls it, in which not-quite-normal-but-not-too-sick behaviors live. Kaskaskia would be an example of one of these demilitarized zones. I would further argue, using Foucault's (1978) logic, that new categories may enter the circle when they become a *thing* for which the culture identifies variety, and that categories may exit the circle should a society stop perceiving difference in the terms of that category. This is what got us to the "circle" idea in the first place: while "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault 1978, 43). Kaskaskia's "move" across the river that served as a state line would have been politically insignificant before Anglo settlement – the border as a theoretical concept, spatial or cultural, is a European-heritage and capitalist invention

reflecting political ecological values of private property, ownership, and control. Homosexual practices were, in fact, quite common (and unnamed as such) even in Europe before the Victorian period. Homophobia has not always been an internal principle of Western society; rather, it was a large-scale cultural regime that at once identified gender of attraction along with other spectra as grounds for sexual judgment.

The second important theoretical framework comes from Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, who make a similar argument that “hegemonies” – what Rubin would likely define as “charmed circle” sex – “are nothing if not elastic alliances” (1998, 553). While the circle’s political boundaries are elastic, it is still tightly controlled by those inside. *It’s only cool if the cool kids say it’s cool.* We teach this concept early in life: in gym class, when we lift the parachute, huddle inside, and pull it down behind us to trap the air, we see how an organized group with a common goal can gain full control over a circle’s airtight seal.

Further, sex becomes a private matter – it is “burdened with an excess of significance” (Rubin 279) and overwhelmed with “the love plot of intimacy and familialism” (Berlant and Warner 554). This is co-constructed by our Western society through the Victorian period, and an indirect public performance that indicates what your private sex life looks like becomes important. There’s a charmed circle for this performative identity, too – there’s the normal way to act, and the way to act that suggests something queer about you. Berlant and Warner call the normative way the “national heterosexuality” (553), and those who play along not only reify the status quo of the public, but they are encouraged and rewarded to do so (Berlant and Warner 1998, 557; Rubin 279). As with the parachute, it is expected that you participate, and your failure to do so can cause collapse. *You shall conform.* This system of reward and panopticonic persuasion is the result of a “national-capitalist privatization” of both personal identity and politics (Berlant and Warner 1998, 553)...the idea is that since sex proper is made “private,” several other non-erotic practices become included in the hegemonic

cluster of heterosexuality, and to this day hold society with a strong grip to a point where anything but this “hegemonic cluster” being dominant is unimaginable (Berlant and Warner 1998, 557).

By the Mighty Mississippi...On a Rocky Shore...

Given that my focus is stationed in place at Augustana College, this grounds the spatial variation and allows us to focus on the temporal. I show such sociocultural changes across the last 50 years¹ through a series of archival snapshots illustrated by theory, drawing largely on Rubin (1984) and Berlant and Warner (1998).

1972

“For the sad part is that underneath all the rhetoric, the simple fact remains that Bateman is a homosexual and this is the chief reason for his leaving” (Gesling 1972b, 4).

In November of 1972, an instructor by the name of Lane Bateman left the college after a sexual relationship with a student was discovered by college administrators. The reporting around the topic suggests that the student body was largely “ready to accept as a fellow human an instructor who is homosexual” (Gesling 1972b, 2). President C.W. Sorensen seemed to insist that the college had an image that was to be maintained for a variety of largely economic reasons, despite the Lutheran Church in America’s² 1970 statement calling out legislation or police action against “the sexual behavior of freely consenting adults in private” (quoted in Gesling 1972b, 2). It is clear that “teachers dating students, while not encouraged, is certainly not frowned on” (Gesling 1972b, 2). It wasn’t about that. While Bateman was not fired, informal conversation among administrators took

¹ I use this timeframe to facilitate a manageable workload. Besides simply being a shorter span of time, overt documentation of sex and sex-related topics is rather difficult to find prior to the 1960s.

² This was the official name of the church body to which Augustana belonged at the time. It has since merged into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which is also referenced later in the paper.

place, and Bateman was informed that things wouldn't look good for him should he stick around.

Sorensen is quoted:

I felt concern for the personal difficulty the man was in – sorrow and regret. Being homosexual is incompatible with the 'good life' Augustana tries to uphold. Bateman perceived his own incompatibility [sic] with the school and decided to leave. *If I knew a prospective teacher were a homosexual I would not hire him* (Gesling 1972a, 2; emphasis added).

It becomes even clearer in reading Bateman's resignation letter that the only person who wanted

Bateman gone was Sorensen.

Personal injustice aside, we have Gayle Rubin on standby. She would readily point out that in this place and at this time, private heterosexual sex between teachers and students is permissible, whereas talked about, casual, homosexual sex between them is damned. We have a rare primary source that actually uses and predates the hierarchical language of Rubin:

[Dean Ribbeck] drew a hierarchy in student/teacher relations, saying that it was alright for an unmarried³ to date someone of the opposite sex, even have an affair if it were discreet; definitely questionable if either the teacher or the student were married; and highest on the list if the two were of the same sex. He admitted that this was a definition set by society but felt strongly that it should be regarded in view of admissions and support from alumni and the community (Gesling 1972a, 4).

This gets at the erotic demilitarized zone that Rubin mentions...inside the sub-circle of student/teacher relations, it's not too bad if they keep it private and neither are married, but being "of the same sex" is a much higher offense than anything else. One or two of these things might be okay, but there seems to be something exponentially additive about straying outside the inner circle: it's not simply the sum of doing each of the bad things, but each further 'offense' multiplies the sin of the former. Berlant and Warner might point out that capitalistic forces (securing private funding

³ It remains unclear whether this is referring to an unmarried teacher and/or unmarried student; the source simply says, "an unmarried."

for the college) is directly responsible for shaping our cultural norms. As a result, the individual spirals. Society, under the grip of national heterosexuality, ensures this. Rubin states:

Individuals whose behaviour stands high in this hierarchy are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits. As sexual behaviours or occupations fall lower on the scale, the individuals who practice them are subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions (279).

Bateman's case in 1972 seems to be an example of one who spirals out at the hand of Sorensen's regime.⁴

1980s

"The only thing Commies and homos respect is power. Then let's get down to business and nuke the bastards" (Augustana Observer Editors 1984).

You might recall that Kaskaskia was briefly an island town, with the Mississippi River flowing on either side. The older western channel still exists, though higher in elevation than the new channel. The river therefore still spills into its old western channel during extreme floods – climatic flare-ups and weather emergencies. It creates an island once more, leaving no answer to the question, "Which side of the river is Kaskaskia on?"

Perhaps the Bateman issue was an isolated episode of hope, or maybe it was the hard rightward swing of national politics that brought incensing tension around queer issues back to the table. The satirical 1984 April Fool's Day lampoon edition of the Observer may certainly read as lighthearted, yet the issues that the editors have chosen to amuse themselves with and the language through which they convey their good humor certainly reveals an inner value system that is ignorant of the degree of injustice for those they are describing.⁵ A lengthy "half-baked editorial/slanted

⁴ Later in life, Bateman was arrested for possession of child pornography. I do not intend to condone this shameful conduct; he certainly deserves no pity for it. For this reason, I limit attention to his perspectives and use his Augustana story more so to focus on the institutional attitudes toward queer individuals.

⁵ The editors seem to jokingly acknowledge issues surrounding the publication: *"The Administration found out that we were running our Lampoon this week and they got all pissed off and said that they would burn our transcripts and tell us to go to hell if we swore or degraded homosexuals in this issue...Our apologies on the whole matter. Better late than never and best humorous than no attempt at all"*

opinion” makes several comparisons between Russian communists and “homos” or “faggots,” outlining the need to exterminate them all through extremely militant methods involving punches, nukes, and the front bumper of a 4x4. This piece is preceded by an amusing piece posing historic campus building House on the Hill as a “passion palace” of a brothel, loaded with language that overtly describes accepted/acceptable male desires and the encouragement of heterosexual sex in excess. On the next page sits a blank list of “Some Good Reasons Why Reagan Should Be Re-elected.” Another article advertises the first meeting of The Holy Order of Bitching and Whining, whose purpose is “to find offense in everything that anyone tries to do at Augustana.” This issue seems to be a distillation of several complex social issues into a singular and misguided ‘politically correct’ type of thing: yet another article describes a “bi-ticket” for Reagan and Rev. Jesse Jackson, which would make a bi-partisan, bi-racial, and “surprisingly bi-sexual” ticket, as “Reagan also announced that he will be undergoing a ‘special’ operation” before the election. In the “Lewd and Really Personals,” the “fags in 223B” are warned by “The Studs (i.e. the rest of the floor)” to turn off “that gay Bowie shit and get some real taste in music, or you die” (Augustana Observer Editors 1984, 1-12). This joke recurs in 1985: “Now you’re gonna suffer, homos. We’re gonna tie you up and jam RATT in your headphones until you get cool like us.” At least the 1985 edition alludes to the paper’s status as an “allegedly liberal newspaper” (Augustana Observer Editors 1985, 1, 6).

There’s a lot here for us bitches and whiners to unpack. As a lampoon edition, the paper gives us a rare peek into offhanded takes and the dominant discourse of the time. We can look at this discourse through the lens of Berlant and Warner: national heterosexuality is certainly at play with an assist by narrower Augustana or college student culture. Public nationalism and talk of heterosexual sex are explicitly in the circle. “Faggot passivists” are at a militantly othered distance outside

(1984, 1). The lack of authors (other than John and Jane Doe) throughout the issue might additionally highlight the liberties taken knowing that accountability will not be pursued.

the circle, as is anything that queers the public discourse. I bet the fags in 223B were kind and registered to vote.

2005

“If I want to read a Harry Potter book while listening to Howard Stern and engaging in a bisexual atheistic orgy with a woman in a SpongeBob costume and a man in a Charles Darwin mask, that’s my choice” (Foss 2005).

Moral conservatives didn’t suddenly sprout up like weeds in the mid-2000s, yet their prevalence and grip certainly seems to have galvanized during this time. “Moral conservatives,” according to *Observer* opinions editor Tom Foss in 2005, are a growing group among Republicans “who want to leave no stone unlegislated in order to protect us all from just about everything.” Foss contrasts moral conservatives’ push for control over social life with the same group’s claim to resist strong government. In a way, he constructs a new charmed circle: outside it sits “violent TV, violent video games, gays, assorted non-Christians, terrorists, Muslims, diversity in general, public nudity, partially-nude statues, cursing, sex, sex education, pornography, Howard Stern, books, the Internet, Darwin, uppity women, dangerous minorities, nail clippers, Harry Potter, dissent, free press, dangerous ideas and free speech.” He later calls these “the things that make this country, and life in general, great.” The religious right, he claims, is sweeping into our bedrooms and TVs. Creating a national model of normative culture, and cracking down on deviance.

Perhaps the rise of the moral conservative *was* a turning point of sorts, if a silent and graduated one. Foss identifies the mid-1970s as the beginning of this shift, and traditional conservatives are partially to blame for allowing the likes of Roy Moore, Rick Santorum, Jerry Falwell, and James Dobson to hijack the party and shared consciousness of American society. He further identifies that it’s not about protecting people from themselves, but about tightly controlling “choices that might hurt their power base or their fragile sensibilities.” It is, in fact, about power – the power to

construct, control, and maintain it as well. The national heterosexuality identified new categories of behavior, in which normal and abnormal are cross-stitched with sexuality.

2012

“While many homosexual students at Augustana feel they are comfortable on campus, Augustana still needs much improvement in the understanding and respect of homosexual students.” (Raines 2012).

“If we say we do not discriminate, our policies and practices should honestly reflect it.” (Bahls 2012, qtd. in Dooley 2012).

By 2012, an evident cleavage emerged between Augustana and many students’ hometowns. Though Augustana was certainly not quite yet a gay haven, many students from small-town religious backgrounds had found it a welcoming atmosphere. Name-calling, stereotypes, whispering, and giggling were much more tolerable than the threat of church conversion therapy, familial tension, or fear of being kicked out of school. There is certainly some type of relative gratification at play here, as several openly gay students describe circumstances that are still rather oppressive while making the case for Augustana as a “safe, open home.” There are even some discursive elements that suggest this disparity: the author’s use of the terms “homosexual” and “sexual preferences” show a surface-level understanding of queer-identifying individuals. But for them, it’s that where they come from is even worse that makes this environment – much closer to inclusion within the charmed circle – feel so sunny and relieving for these refugees of homophobic environments. Certainly, these students identify these day-to-day annoyances as room for “improvement in the understanding and respect of homosexual students,” and even provide some recommendations for curriculum and institutional support.

This article is among the earliest that documents Augustana College as a refuge for queer people. Just a few months after this article’s publication, President Steven Bahls announced that the college would now allow same-gender weddings and “blessings of unions” on campus after the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s 2009 Statement on Sexuality that left same-sex ceremony

decisions up to individual congregations and the college's 2003 extension of employee benefits to same-gender couples. Pastor Richard Priggie, who had pushed for this decision after two gay couples approached him, said that "this wasn't a tough sell at all," referring to getting President Bahls and the Augustana community on board.

2020

"Just because they're suspended doesn't mean we're going to stop. There's still a lot that needs to be done." (Misener, qtd. in Doak 2020).

Events in 2020 represent a shift in the positionality of queer people at Augustana, as queer student activists successfully called for administrative action against an Augustana fraternity. At the Phi Omega Phi's informal recruitment event in February 2020, the fraternity played a slideshow showing portions of Augustana women's naked bodies and directed potential new members to look at the photos. But in this case, potential new members—namely, queer-identifying men—took the reins to derail this dominant cultural regime that degrades women and enforces heteronormativity, making use of the college's Title IX and bias reporting mechanisms. One student remarked:

It's objectifying women. It's degrading. It's just inappropriate. It's awkward for people who don't like to think that's an okay thing to do. I know for me, when I got to rush and they started showing the slideshow...I'm standing there with like two other guys who are gay and we're all like, "This is weird, this is like heteronormative – it's gross – I don't want to see this, I don't care to see this. I'm sure even straight guys who are here are like, 'this is kind of weird'" (Bates, qtd. in Cone and McMillan 2020).

The fraternity has a history of receiving accusations of assault and harassment, and the reporting in 2020 shows that the most current and most successful acts of protest include several contributions from queer-identifying individuals (Cone 2020, Cone and McMillan 2020, Doak 2020). Due to their activism which was broadly bolstered by the student body, the fraternity has been suspended as the college explores next steps (Doak 2020). Students who view this as a very minor step continue the push into the future.

Today & Tomorrow: A Reflection

I live here, and I live here today. I'm a snapshot! I'm a piece of the puzzle and a part of the institutional culture, having been a member of this community since 2016. This is to say that I certainly think we are in a better place in 2020 than 2016, 2012, 2005, 1985, 1972...I could self-report my experiences and behaviors, but my words – as those before and after me – are certainly not an objective attempt to describe the landscape. I feel sufficiently welcomed, included, and valued as an individual, but I know that not all do, and we are not in a place yet where it's something we don't have to think about. I know that we could be doing much better. It would also be against the grain of my paper to say that I am able to understand all the possible injustices of today while currently living it – time certainly lends itself to clarity and changing views. That's at the root of this kind of work.

The Bigger Picture: Urbanity and Higher Ed

I do know that there is something about place that is important in shaping experiences. Rather than describe the minutiae of my Augustana experience, I offer some summative ideas of other scholars. Social and economic theorist Richard Florida in his *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) controversially suggests that the presence of certain creative class types – gay people, Bohemians, artists, and musicians – serves as an indicator of a place that is thriving economically. There are some concerns with his analysis – some say he tends to focus on exceptional (read: wealthy) minorities rather than the systemic problems of the working class – but conventional wisdom as well as my experiences suggest that there is at least some grit to this idea. The world tends to economically reward places that go to great lengths to include and diversify.

Austerity urbanism, a post-2008 form of urban planning that embraces whatever it can to save a dying city losing private investment, sometimes turns to diversity, equity, and inclusion out of mayday economic necessity rather than other reasons (Peck 2012). It is absolutely based on Florida's principle. While it may seem dehumanizing to think about promoting inclusion through these

means, a thriving place is one that includes queer people nonetheless. This austerity approach is often used – even by proponents – under neoliberal capitalism. Is it good? No. But it responds subversively to the methods employed under Berlant and Warner’s (1998) national heterosexuality – use the privilege of being inside to change things from within. But in the case of austerity, those in the charmed circle of privilege must perceive being at risk of falling out of it in order to act against its grip. This does not guarantee freedom from the whims of those inside to the folks outside. We are not afforded that luxury by the powerful.

We might view the college’s approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion in this light. In recent years, the college has turned to inclusionary policies in order to address racial and other disparities (Johnston 2018). But is this all done in an austerity framework? There is little incriminating evidence that this is the case. Augustana touts that broad administrative moves such as these are driven by student action, and my experience (mostly with work on the Climate Change Task Force) reflects this. The Cabinet *could* make broad sweeping changes to just about anything – inclusion, sustainability, the brand of ketchup used by Dining Services – but our leadership insists strongly on the tradition of shared governance. The point of this rambling parable, here, is that we’re moving in the right direction, and it’s happening for the right reasons. Whether this approach will work, time will tell. Audre Lorde, also recognizing the symbolism of an inner circle famously points out that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984). Perhaps these tools, though, will get us close enough to reaching the power needed to craft our own.

The Inner Picture, or To the Next Queer Who Picks This Up

I thoroughly enjoy the thinking of Amelia Abraham (2019), who describes a queer utopia as something deeply rooted in a fight...in identifying injustice and pushing for a free place...utopia isn’t a place we reach for, it’s an experience that we get to have *anywhere* by dissolving borders, binaries, and boxes at every turn. We, as queer people, are designers of our own lifeworlds. We are certainly not

immune to changes in the national dialogue, and in many ways, these widespread dominant norms manifest themselves in local phenomena. But I'm not writing all this to simply show that we have always been products of nationalized scripts. To say that we are eternally subject to the whims of the powerful that control the discourse. Rather, it is my hope that whoever may come across this report might be able to do something meaningfully queer with it. Dig deeper, dig wider. Dig until your river is so wide and so deep that the notion of a charmed circle and bad outer limits has sunken underwater and been forgotten. Let the landscape go wild. Keep in mind that it was, in part, human engineering of the physical landscape that caused the Mississippi to seek a new channel. Remember that this human engineering was a massive-scale attempt to create navigable channels for transport, and certainly had the support of the federal government, persuaded by a well-oiled and well-organized group of boosters. They knew that a man-made, consistent, clean, reliable, and nationalized channel would help them turn a profit.

We, too, can weaponize the privilege of knowledge to create power. We shall do so in opposition to the wealthy and the powerful. The ground beneath us is constantly shifting regardless of what lines we put on it. Perhaps its time we recognize the dynamic nature of the earth and the beautiful people that occupy it.

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