



4-15-2022

## To Be in Conversation: a Queer Theory Roundtable

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### Recommended Citation

Yi Zhang, Charlie; Williams, Elizabeth W.; Giesecking, Jack; Barrett, Rusty; Mandelo, Lee; and Monroe, Ivy (2022) "To Be in Conversation: a Queer Theory Roundtable," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 30, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.30.07>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol30/iss1/8>

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## To Be in Conversation: a Queer Theory Roundtable

### Authors

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## To Be in Conversation: a Queer Theory Roundtable

A Roundtable Interview with Rusty Barrett, Jack Giesecking, Elizabeth W. Williams, and Charlie Yi Zhang, *University of Kentucky*

Interviewers: Lee Mandelo and Ivy Monroe, *University of Kentucky*

*Jack Giesecking is an Associate Professor of Geography at University of Kentucky. He works at the intersections of critical urban and digital geographies, and feminist and queer theory. His research is engaged in research on co-productions of space and identity in digital and material environments, with a focus on sexual and gender identities. Giesecking pays special attention to how such productions support or inhibit social, spatial, and economic justice, as well as how research can be made public and accessible to those who need it most. His first book examines the production of lesbian and queer spaces in New York City as they relate to capital around the turn of the century, namely in regard to processes of gentrification and the ethos of what Giesecking calls "dyke politics," i.e. feminist antiracism and anticapitalism. Drawing on interviews and archival research, Giesecking argues that contemporary urban lesbians and queers often create and rely on fragmented places and fleeting experiences in those places. Like drawing lines between the stars that come and go in the sky, lesbians and queers are connected by overlapping, embodied paths and stories that culturally and politically bind them in their ways of making urban space. Giesecking call this pattern constellations. Accordingly, A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers, 1983-2008 (NYU Press, 2020) is a historical geography of contemporary lesbian and queer politics, culture, and economies in New York City told through my participants' distinct yet overlapping constellations.*

*Elizabeth W. Williams is Assistant Professor of Gender & Women's Studies at University of Kentucky. She completed her PhD in History, with a minor in Feminist Studies, at the University of Minnesota. Her research interests include the history of race, gender, and sexuality; imperialism; Post/De-colonial studies; and Queer Theory. She is currently working on a book manuscript, tentatively titled "Primitive Normativity: Constructing Race and Sexuality in Colonial Kenya." This project argues that white Kenyan settlers contrasted the deviance and dysfunctionality which plagued "civilized" sexuality with the supposed normativity of African sexual mores and practices. Ironically, by presenting Africans as vulnerable to sexual contamination, settlers were able to oppose processes like urbanization, education, and Christianization that threatened white supremacy in the colony. Elizabeth has taught courses on a variety of topics, including the politics of sex scandals, the history of sexuality, and global GLBTQ identities. She is enthusiastic about cats, feminist crafting, and Foucault, not necessarily in that order.*

*Charlie Yi Zhang is an associate professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Kentucky. He specializes in neoliberal globalization and its cultural and material articulations*

*through gender, sexuality, race, and class in the Asia-Pacific region. His monograph, Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China, is forthcoming with Duke University Press. At the center of Dreadful Desires is a vibrant landscape of public intimacy—as what Zhang calls “the borderless Loveland”—that subtends and underpins social upheavals across China and the globe. Drawing upon discursive analysis, empirical data, and ethnographic fieldwork as well as popular culture texts, he delineates how love is orchestrated as an apparatus of sentiments integrating individual subject making with exploitative biopolitics to serve collective interests of the Chinese state and transnational capital. Zhang’s publications have appeared/are forthcoming in leading journals of gender and sexuality studies and Asian studies, including Feminist Studies, The Journal of Asian Studies, Feminist Formations, and Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies. He has received research awards in China and the US.*

*Rusty Barrett is an Associate Professor in the Linguistics Department at the University of Kentucky. His research examines a broad range of issues in sociocultural, descriptive, and historical linguistics, including the book From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and Gay Male Subcultures. In addition to his work on language, gender and sexuality, he has conducted a great deal of research in Mayan linguistics. With Kira Hall, he is co-editor of the forthcoming The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality (Oxford University Press).*

**Lee Mandelo (LM):** *A little bit of introduction: this is the queer theory roundtable, with the faculty from the recently taught social theory seminar in the spring of 2021. We’re going to talk a little bit about what drove you to make the course, how it went especially during the pandemic, and some of your method-and-theory thoughts. So our first question is, how was the decision to teach a seminar on queer theory together made? Was there any particular, special impetus that drove your decision to do so?*

**Elizabeth Williams (EW):** I think I was probably the primary organizer, and part of it was that I really liked the idea of teaching with other faculty – because it ends up being that you get to essentially take a class, which is fun when you’re a professor and to like learn more about what your colleagues are doing. But also, I wanted to create a class that would talk about queer theory, but not reproduce the very US-centric and white-centric norms of queer theory. So, I assembled folks that I thought could talk about queer theory without reproducing that dynamic, and that’s how we got this particular crew.

**Jack Giesecking (JG):** I was excited about Elizabeth’s vision. I didn’t know I was going to be the U.S. person! I wind up being in an echo chamber, quite often, or there’s always a case of “one other place.” But, having known Elizabeth for a while and learning so much about queer theory in the queer African context from her, I was like, “what would Charlie teach me?” Our fourth member was originally supposed to be Vanessa Holden the historian, who received a fellowship, so we were lucky to have Rusty come aboard instead. It was like, “I don’t know these worlds and

I *want* to know these worlds, I want to know how they think and what they read and what's important to them.” So, that's what excited me about it, and the idea of talking to students who cared about this too. Just to be in a conversation: that seems like a magical experience I would not otherwise be able to do in my life.

**Charlie Yi Zhang (CZ):** So for me, I was always thinking about teaching queer theory class that focuses on queer of color or transnational context, but I never got a chance to. I was going to teach it as a 2016 graduate seminar, but because of my schedule I couldn't do that. So when Elizabeth first reached out to me, that quickly clicked with me – and thank you so much for taking the lead and trying to make this happen – so I was very lucky to be part of this team. Also like Elizabeth said, I taught social theory before. I learned quite a bit from my colleagues and, especially, I learned quite a lot from our guest speakers, which became a very important turning point for me to change the way I wrote my book [*Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China*]. I benefited quite a bit from my previous experience. So when Elizabeth started this conversation, I quickly said ‘Oh yeah, we should do it. That's fantastic!’ And I totally enjoyed that. That's just how I feel about this project. Thank you again, my colleagues, for teaching me so much, and I learned quite a bit from the materials that you put together.

**Rusty Barrett (RB):** I was a last-minute add-in, so I don't really know. I wasn't part of the planning or anything, and since I was filling in, helping out was my main motivation. Yes, because I didn't know... I knew Charlie, but I didn't know Jack or Elizabeth.

**JG:** Thank you for taking a chance on us!

**RB:** No, it was great.

**EW:** Rusty also allowed us to add a lot more about indigeneity, which I think was particularly valuable, because the way that I was conceptualizing the course was to get away from the US. I think having Rusty there, being like ‘actually if we turned *into* the U.S. in a more critical way, it's also a very productive place to be’ – although Rusty also talked about indigeneity beyond the US – that was a really helpful point of view to have.

**RB:** Thanks! I also wanted – as when I found out I was going to be part of the class, I had just two days before being named director of Latin American and Latinx Studies – I wanted to make sure there were things included from Latin America and Latinx individuals.

**Ivy Monroe (IM):** *Our second question continues on this theme of planning and organizing things. So, did the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic affect your proposal for this course, or your selections for course content? Does the virtual format of the seminar differ for you in significant ways as co-instructors from how you would teach an in-person seminar?*

**EW:** The proposal was submitted before the Covid-19 crisis, so it didn't really impact that, but it obviously did impact the way we taught the seminar. One of the ways was that, ironically, we were able to ask more guest scholars to participate because we weren't having people visit in person. Less money was being spent per speaker, which meant that we were able to have five speakers total with the assistance of a Gaines Center mini-grant. That ended up really being beneficial. I think for me, one of the downsides is that graduate seminars are long and exhausting, and that is exacerbated greatly when you are doing it on a zoom screen. I can't even bring, like, baked goods.

**JG:** It did feel like a little queer/trans haven though. You know, to have it pop up and to see our faces. Every week I was like, "All right, okay, that's great!" You know, these people have been great, great, great, *great*. Also to shout out to Elizabeth who did all the structuring of all the online modules: she is a Canvas wizard.

**CZ:** I think the whole organizing process was quite smooth, the way we divided the work evenly and had multiple discussions about how to put it together. So for the organizing part I don't think the Covid-19 pandemic impacted that much, but for the delivery of the class, I think because of the nature of the online teaching... We couldn't have face-to-face interaction, and in that regard I mean the kind of atmosphere – the affective connection that should be built, that can be diffused through face to face teaching – is lost. At the same time, as my two of my colleagues just mentioned, we got the opportunity to have more speakers, which turned out to be beneficial. And I really enjoyed all of the speakers that we had for this past seminar.

**RB:** I don't really have anything to add. It was sort of... I mean, I still have never met Elizabeth and Jack in person. So, it was sort of odd to form a community of the class without ever actually being together.

**JG:** Yeah. It felt like a lot to *share* so much together, taking a leap and trusting. And we knew, I knew, I was told by every faculty member how wonderful Rusty was, but we hadn't met Rusty in person. So, it was exciting to take that leap working together, and to hear the things we all shared in class. That idea of sharing is really powerful and it took... yeah, a lot of vulnerability too.

**RB:** Same here. I'd heard wonderful things about the two of you even though I'd never met you.

**LM:** *Yeah, I think as a student who was in the seminar, it was the same trade-off. We got some heavy hitting, awesome guest scholars to come whose work I'd read for years, but we never got to be in a room with each other. Particularly with such intimate and difficult material, that can add a challenge to the conversational topics – because you don't have that built sense of affective connection, to Charlie's point. That leads us to our third question, which is: could you describe*

*the process of selection for those guest scholars who presented in the seminar? Why did you pick these particular folks, and maybe is there some fun secret background knowledge? Was there anyone that you wanted but couldn't schedule, or who you wish you could have added if you had more time and funding?*

**JG:** I can't believe we couldn't invite Michel Foucault, that was really a bummer. [laughter] I think we all would have liked to bring him back, and Jeremy Bentham too.

But no, I was astounded by who we got to come. I think at first, we thought we would only have one speaker, and we had to agree. We were like, “who could we all bring in?”, and you know, Rod Ferguson, we could. Then we found that actually the budget was moving around, and we were able to bring even more speakers who we each really respected. That was good, to have five of these amazing people. I had never gotten a chance to talk to Martin Mananlansan, though he had already written the blurb from my book, and I think he's the coolest. I had talked about his book before – *Global Divas* is so easy to teach, students get so into it; anyone can read it, any level can read it, and get so much out of it. He has such great, smart conversations. And then reading it with somebody who's actually a linguistics professor – really having Rusty there, and everything Charlie reads bringing in affect, and Elizabeth too, so it was great. It was great, and the students thought so too.

**CZ:** I still cannot get enough from Martin Mananlansan, and thank you so much for inviting him. I really enjoy whatever he has done. It turned out to be the case that he was one of my tenure reviewers! At the time, I think he was reviewing my tenure case, but I didn't know he had already done that until after the seminar.

**JG:** And you brought Wen Liu, who I went to grad school with – we had gone on this amazing trip to Palestine. To this day, from that journey together years ago that's how we met, we never stayed in touch but I read her stuff. Then here Wen comes into the class! To see this amazing body of brilliant work, beautiful.

**CZ:** Great! Also Rusty brought Karma Chávez, and I haven't seen her for a while, so that was a very happy moment for me to see her again, even just virtually.

In regarding who we should bring in, we did have the conversation and reached an agreement very quickly about Rod Ferguson – and then we found out the added budget, and tried to reach out to the speakers we have our personal connections to, or our preference. I think it worked out very well. I learned quite a bit from the speaker Elizabeth brought in on Queer Studies in Africa [Neville Hoad], and what he wrote in his book resonated a lot with me, which I'll talk about later. So, I feel very grateful that my colleagues have brought this wonderful group of people.

**RB:** Yeah, I thought it was interesting, the sort of overlaps between people one of us would pick that the others knew somehow. It was surprising, but it really helps bring things together, I think.

**JG:** It was a very sweet moment, I think, when Neville saw the list. He came to us like, “no way this group, oh my god I can't believe I got invited with this group of people.” They all were really excited. I had really not engaged with Karma’s work enough before, and then, what a freaking speaker! And so generous, just getting to have those two kinds of talks with those two scholars – with Neville giving this fabulous talk, and being so personable too. I mean, I could just imagine us hanging out with Neville until the wee hours of the morning.

**EW:** I didn't know any of these people beforehand – I had read their work, but I didn't know them as humans, even though Neville’s book is a very big deal for me. So, I had a nice little fangirling moment with each of them. We ended up having a bonus speaker too, because right before we taught, we found out that Rusty is buddies with Rudi Gaudio. He agreed to come to class, and I think he ended up being a really exciting speaker and super personable. I've taught that book for years so it was exciting for me to meet him as well. One of the fun parts of doing this is that you just get to meet these super-smart people that, for me, I'd only ever encountered on the page – then you see them as human beings, which is always a very exciting moment.

**JG:** And also, these are all people whose work I never went farther with. I had just finished my book, and I had been reading a certain body of queer theory... and here, everything expanded and slipped into these other worlds. It was amazing. Yeah, it was being really freed from the ideas that I had about queer theory in grad school, that small world.

**IM:** *Yeah, I'm loving hearing about this collaborative process by which you all put this course together. The syllabus for the course also seemed to reflect back that collaborative nature. Looking over it, are there additional topics that you wish we had been able to discuss?*

**EW:** Keguro Macharia’s book came out right as we were finishing, and as you may have picked up, I'm a stan. So, that would have been really nice – and also, it would have been great to have him come talk to us, if we could have. That's one thing I would have liked to include: that book.

**RB:** I wished we’d have included readings on India or South Asia, because there's so much interesting stuff that is such a challenge for a lot of the ideas we were talking about. I thought that would be nice, but we can’t do everything.

**JG:** I really adored how many people loved *Trans Care*. I wish I would have taught that work a little bit earlier; it was one of those texts that brought a lot of people together. I didn't realize how many... how everyone would feel the way I felt about the book, which it seems the world is increasingly feeling, and so I would have put that earlier.



**CZ:** I wish I could have added more materials about transnational boys' love – and I know Lee is a bit fan of it – that's getting very, very big and popular. I've seen quite a few new special issues and anthologies, and I just got a few invitations to contribute to these works. But at the time when I was preparing the texts, I didn't think about it. But you know, in the future I would definitely add more, and maybe Lee will be able to help me.

**LM:** *Yes! And that actually – it's a bit of a jump from here, because we're discussing how much fun collaboration is – but now I want to ask for some of the fun gossip. So, when you were putting the course together, because everyone's from different spaces and places in the academy, were there any methodological or theoretical disagreements? Any amusing little clashes, where you thought of things differently, that came out of co-teaching – because I think that's the fun part of co-teaching sometimes. Any good stories there?*

**EW:** I hate that I don't think there's much gossip to spill! I think part of the way we approached it was just to let everybody have their expertise, and they got to pick what they wanted to do in separate units. But I think there were, like... one of the more interesting and fun moments for me was when we read that piece that everybody *hated* – the really bad piece, we shan't name it. I just thought that was an interesting moment, watching everybody come to the conclusion that it was okay to be like, “This sucks. Let's talk about why it sucks,” and that ended up being one of my favorite moments.

**JG:** I think my favorite moments were when people would start ranting/jamming. Like, I remember Rusty going off about the way he sees things, and I was like, “how do you do that? I cannot do that with language.” Then Charlie started jamming on affect once, and I do not do that. How do you do that? I've listened to Elizabeth talk about her work for years, but then to see her teach it and to read it with her was wildly different. And I think it made my work a lot stronger. There's just not a lot of geographic thought and theory with queer theory, and I didn't want to teach my book. So that was the one thing I wish I would have gotten to share more.

**LM:** *I will add in for the transcript: questioning productive differences totally counts as gossip, I was just being a provocateur. [laughter]*

**EW:** Another thing that was interesting about teaching via Zoom is how much the chat became a part of our class. I feel like I was actually often guilty of using it in a distracting way – which in the future, I would probably try to rein myself in. But it was interesting to see how people would engage with each other, and with the topic, in the chat at the same time as the discussion. We were having this in-class, out-loud conversation, but the chat box gave permission to be more *queer*, really. To be more... campy and colorful, and playful, about the topics. But it was weird that it was happening simultaneously, often within or beneath the formality of the seminar. That

was something that I don't know if it was good or bad, but it was instructive and interesting to see how that little format change opened up a whole different kind of discourse.

**CZ:** So, I heard from other colleagues that when another team taught this social theory before, that when each member of the team disagreed with each other they kind of fought during the class and challenged each other a lot. That was not the case for this class, obviously! Also I want to echo what Elizabeth just said: the chatting function really made this class more interesting and more active. We added a lot of information, sometimes gossip-information, through the chat – which made the texts more vivid, so we can actually see what happens beyond the words. That helped us to better understand what is being said, what has not been said, what *should* be said in the text, so I think that's a fun moment for me.

**JG:** We also had a really quiet member of the class, we didn't speak but always was in the chat, and I loved that they were there. That was great! Then everybody's animals were there, too. I also felt really nerdy, but I was always like, “there's so many things I would teach you about, so here are all those things that you should know, and here's this citation and here's this, who's who,” and the four of us would start going in the chat to reference people that you might not know. In the chat I could be like, “okay here are all the citations for the things that we're saying,” because I hated getting that information getting lost, and dying to know it. So I loved that too, that we could have these citational connections. I loved the camp, I loved the wit; the jokes were really great. I didn't think it was distracting for me, but I couldn't pay attention to both at once. I'd have to pause and then catch up, but I liked it. It felt like everyone could be more honest, more themselves. And then that part where we're not meeting in person, with this really personal material, becomes a little bit safer and more human.

**RB:** I love that people would just post citations in the chat, sometimes even just links to a book or something. There were so many times where I would click on that link and bookmark it for later, and it was something like, “oh my god I need to read that.” It was a really great format for that, yeah, like Jack said.

**IM:** *Perfect. On a very related note, I have an entire bookmark folder that's just queer theory seminar citations I'm working my way through, so thank you all for that.*

*In light of our current moment in the fight for queer rights where the rights of trans athletes, access to gender-affirming care, and continuing regulation of what bodies are acceptable within broader heteronormative structures, what role do you see theory, queer theory, having?*

**EW:** I think one advantage of talking about queer Africa in this respect is that scholars that write about colonialism are always really attentive to the ways that some lives are rendered disposable, to the kind of political processes that produce slow deaths, and to the ways that people are

targeted by states... but also the role that discourses of othering, and discourses of normativity, play in giving the state permission to do that. For me, those bodies of scholarship that consider both coloniality and queerness are really exemplary about the way that they think through the intersections of these things.

**RB:** Yeah. In terms of colonialism, part of why I wanted to invite Karma Chávez is because of the way she connects theory with actual, personal activism. I feel like the ideas that come about in theory often end up influencing activism, and the things that activists are doing influence theory, so it's a symbiotic relationship.

**CZ:** In addition to these discussions about scholarship and theory, we need to always remind ourselves that we are living in this kind of world. The reality, one of the biggest challenges that we are facing collectively now, is the new emerging – it's nothing pronounced or declared – the new Cold War, between the U.S. and China. And so regarding queer scholars from the Sinophone world, for example, Howard Chiang and Wen Liu: they use queer theory, or use this kind of intellectual tool, to engage this challenging peak moment. Their works helps us better understand many of the subtle, unsaid aspects of these global, genealogical dynamics, and the ongoing power struggle, which I think is very important. That is a vital tool for us to better digest and understand what's going on. Also, some of the readings that I included such as the piece by Howard Chiang and Alvin Wong, specifies how we actually *use* queer theory as a tool to revisit geopolitics – the struggle for power and exploitation that is actually happening now.

**JG:** I'm going to cite *Detransition Baby*, page 187:

In her 20s, she watched straight people progress in their careers or get married or discuss employer-matched 401(k)s. She had once confided in her fashion designer friend, a young gay man, of her sinking feeling that she had fallen behind. In response he bought her book on the concept of queer temporality. The book was deadly boring.

In lieu of the book, Reese read as many blog posts as she could find on the subject. Her friend was right: The notion of queer temporality was comforting. Of course, she told herself, the flow of time and the epochs that add up to a queer life won't correspond to the timeline or even sequence of straight lives, so it is meaningless to compare her own queer lifeline to a heterosexual's lifeline as though they were horses on the same racetrack, released from the gates at the same moment. And that was just for your run-of-the-mill queer. Now imagine you were trans! You would have to go through at least two puberties! By age thirty, the financial ads said, you should have saved two years' income for retirement. But at age thirty, the trans girls Reese knew held most of their investment portfolios in the form of old MAC lipstick shades they'd worn once; they spent workdays sending each other animated gifs and occasionally getting trolled online by actual 13-

year-olds.

When I was reading this I was thinking about, again, how the thing that I love about queer theory is that young people get a hold of it. Everyday queer and trans people get ahold of queer theory, and it means something to them around the world. It's this language that we have. In my own work, I was shocked by how many people could cite different queer theorists, and that they meant something to them – it meant that our ideas mattered, and that we mattered. So I think in the ways of making sense of our lives *weirdly* that queer academics, queer and trans academics, have this ability to talk to all queer and trans people who want to touch these ideas. It is really beautiful and exquisite. Building on what my colleague said, bringing these ideas about what's happening in everyone's lives back to everyone else, really calling for that kind of care and mutual aid, for change and radical action, is the resistance that we need.

**EW:** Here's a wee bit of gossip: when we first proposed this topic, there was some pushback against the idea of “queer theory” being the topic for social theory, because it's usually considered an abstract object. So people were like, “well let you could make it ‘queers’ or ‘queer’ instead?”

But part of the way that we tried to argue for it was: there were people saying queer theory was too narrow, and we were trying to say, it's *actually* this incredibly diverse body of scholarship! It's going to be particularly expanded by the approach that we're taking, where we're trying to decenter whiteness and decenter the West as a concept. But also, one of the things we pointed out was that there were so many graduate students who were really interested in this topic, and not enough classes being *offered* on queer theory. We then got a relatively large enrollment for the seminar, I believe fourteen people, which is much bigger than the crew this class usually draws. That felt affirming, because we were like, “look there is actually a significant demand for this scholarship and people are finding it relevant,” people are finding it useful not only for understanding their work – but also, to some extent, for understanding their lives. That goes toward the theory and praxis thing, where we often think about them as being oppositional, as if you have to pick one or the other, but they bleed into each other.

And it doesn't have to be the same for everyone. Some people are going to locate an idea through reading a book like *No Future*, and some people are going to locate that idea through blog posts that talk about *No Future*, and some people are going to encounter that through José Esteban Muñoz reading *No Future* to filth. Some people are going to have known this all along from their life experience. I've often found that it feels emancipatory, to find something that you've known all along and then suddenly see someone writing about it in a way that explains it – in words you might not have ever been able to explain, while giving you permission to take that idea seriously. Because now it's not just something that you feel, but is something that has been given an institutional stamp of approval as a “good idea,” or an idea worth talking about in a particular way. That is one of the advantages of engaging with a body of theory whose history

or genealogy comes out of activism. It's not the reverse. Queer theory develops because of a set of activists practices. In many ways the development of it as an academic discipline is a response to activism, right? The demand that the academy think about these issues, and the demand that people in the academy that aren't queer think about these issues from time to time as well. Sometimes putting it in theoretical language is one of the ways you force that change.

**JG:** And you also mentioned Edelman, Muñoz; I was also thinking of Berlant, but I think all four of us when we were making the syllabus were like, “Okay, they're not going to make it in here.” I had the week covering Herring and Rifkin to think about it, and some of us added to each other's weeks. So I thought, how can we not do Scott Herring at the University of Kentucky – we have to do anti-urbanism. That was really interesting for me. I was like, “should we do this?” Then we got to that week and I got a lot of notes, private dm's, saying, “Oh thank god you did this, I didn't know where I fit. The rest was all so urban.” And then yeah, I think that then I was like, “oh, should we have done *Cruel Optimism*, should have done *Cruising Utopia*?” I think we all thought about that.

**EW:** Our thinking on that was that those were texts people were likely to encounter on their own, so we wanted to pivot people towards texts they would be less likely to encounter.

**LM:** *Yeah, you jumped ahead and beautifully answered part of the next question! To tie things together, and to reframe the next question: recently Judith Butler had a piece in the Guardian about the connections between the global right's rise being predominantly oriented around gender and queer issues, regardless of their other disagreements politically. I think we're seeing a lot of transnational movement towards fascism and right-wing leanings in a variety of countries – which maybe our queer theory reading helps us, as students, conceptualize what's going on in global politics. So, I wanted to give a shout out to your teaching in terms of that broader context of readings, and to see if you had thoughts about current politics in this moment... or, ideas that you wanted to follow up on in terms of transnational queer theoretical issues, what gender and queer theory are doing for you there?*

**EW:** I would say, in addition to them being about gender and sexuality, they're almost always about race – whether or not they're saying that, they're about race. Sometimes talking about gender and sexuality operates as a cover for talking about race in particular ways, and queer theory – or at least the kind of queer theory that we tried to highlight – is particularly good at picking up on that strategy of power.

**CZ:** So, that's part of what I do regarding my own scholarship. I've been observing these politics and geopolitics, and in many ways, they always take shape – or take different shapes – through the lenses of gender, sexuality and sometimes race, as Elizabeth said. Maybe in a less pronounced way, gender and sexuality become very powerful. Just check what Putin said a few

days ago, about the challenging of this “global left” that is rallied through queer politics, through gender fluidity, and that kind of thing. That's just an example of how this right-wing authoritarian move is actually engineered and energized through their communities, rallied through gender and sexuality. Another example is the Chinese president, who is attacking the so-called “sissy man,” the queer man; that's a big push behind doing whatever he's doing globally. We also had Trump, and I don't need to repeat what he said, but we see this connection in the global right, or among right-wing people: they get together through this narrative and these strategies. So, in that regard, I think queer theory and queer studies will play a more crucial role as a tool for us to unpack, unentangle, and dissect these things for us to better see how what we are going to do will lead to a better future for all of us. I think it's very important.

**JG:** I went to the CUNY grad center, where David Harvey teaches *Capital* every year; he pulls out this old copy of *Capital 101*. I have been to so many Marx reading groups over the years. And it's so weird, but I now read *Trans Care* every month. It's so tiny. It's so portable. I see something new in it, every time, and I think a lot about what Hil's talking about – public and private space. It's something I've been thinking about for a while, but it's given me more words. I always want grounded words and ways to think about the attack on, the eradication of, even a *discussion* of public space. Where is that? So I've just constantly been caught up in that, and what Elizabeth and Charlie said, so very much I agree with it. I also think a lot about disability during the pandemic: who doesn't have spoons, and who's just not there anymore. You don't even know who's not there anymore, literally who's *gone*, and also, just who disappears for a while.

**CZ:** I just want to add that David Harvey has always been challenged for lacking the perspective of gender and queerness, so he does need to become more open-minded; or, at least to talk about it. The “left” means the queer perspective, and the queer perspective can make huge contributions to what is being discussed by many of those leftists who rely upon political economy as a Marxist tool. We do need to add to that, by joining our ideas and what we do regarding queerness and queer politics – I just want to add that.

**JG:** Yeah, and how much of the U.S. queer movement was based in Marxism back in the day – coming together and thinking of queerness, or gayness, as a *class*, and lesbian as a class, is kind of wild. Yeah. David's not great with race either, but you know, he's great at some things. He's great at lecture, he's very encouraging. I told this story on Twitter: I was in an elevator with him, and I have this fellowship at the Center for Place Culture and Politics that Neil Smith was supposed to run, but suddenly he was in a museum in Spain (as one does). So he couldn't run it, and David took over very generously for him. So, we were in an elevator with David, and I really didn't know what to say about my work. I was afraid of talking about political economy, and was just pure cultural geography at that moment. And he's like, “I read this interesting thing about lesbians.” And I was like, “cool.” And then I said, “I read this interesting thing about capital.” And he said, “oh, oh I see what you did, that's funny.” I heard later through my buddy who said

like, “he loves your work, it's new to him,” so he could read anything and get into it.

And there are those people, but you don't see the change, it doesn't come out in their writing – it doesn't filter into their work where these identities appear. So, you hear the same thing over and over again. Yeah, the left leans on the same people; I think of Judith Butler being in *The Guardian*, now that Judith Butler... I mean, Judith has been speaking out forever, and turning down awards, and now Butler is being a leader at this moment. I... wow, how would we have seen it coming.

**IM:** *Yeah. So going off of that: all of you are talking about queer theory in terms of addressing the global right, and in terms of addressing the need for academia to evolve and change, and account for more experiences. So, if that's where queer theory is now, I was wondering where all of you might see it going in ten years?*

**CZ:** I think more and more people, more scholars, are coming from different contexts and dealing with different sets of issues. They will speak up and they will produce more scholarly work in the future. The purpose of this class is to dismantle queer theory from being a U.S.-centric and white-only field for a long time. But very sadly, I just saw a new anthology published maybe a week ago by New York University Press, called *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies* – but the topics and the entries for the anthology are still very U.S.-centric. The scholars in that collection care about what happens in the U.S., particularly in the West, but – and this was very disappointing to see – they actually didn't include any people or any work about other parts of the world from what I've seen. People from other places start to push these kinds of boundaries, and to try to add them overseas; I have friends who have been speaking up about these kinds of things, and they have started to publish work on those topics. So, I think in ten years from now, we'll definitely see more and more work in that direction coming up.

**RB:** Yeah, I think Charlie's right: there will be more diverse voices in queer theory. Also, I think trans queer theory is where things are now – that people are reorienting, because the ideas of trans scholars are being listened to. The people who are just now being listened to, like trans scholars and scholars of color, who have been overlooked by mainstream queer theory are really the future of the field

**JG:** I think that grappling with COVID will take forever. I think disability will take that up the most, as disability came out of queer theory anyway; like, that's what they cited. They will rewrite queer theory. And I think climate change will rewrite queer theory. I think these devices, you know... the revolution will not happen on an Apple device. How will we reckon with the things that brought us together, like Tiktok? But what we should be learning is, it's never gonna stop – and the algorithms, they are so evil. In the future of algorithms and data centers and energy politics and climate migration, a lot of diversity will come from massive amounts of

climate migration. Not only outside the U.S., but inside the U.S., like 2 million people in the US are expected to migrate for climate change reasons in a very short time. So, those are the things I think about: the digital, the climate, disability, and then whatever pandemic comes next. How do we recognize that kind of ordering?

And to extend what Rusty said about transness and gender, I see a lot of people going back to lesbian theory. There's all this great stuff that got written in the early 90's. That's when Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*, and you can't hear over the din of this brilliant work, all this other great gay and lesbian stuff was coming out that now a lot of people are rereading, taking up, trying to think through. That's going to do something really powerful. I gave a talk at Bard, and it's Bard so it's queerer than queer, and they're like, "I identify as a lesbian." What I said is, if Bard's students started identifying as lesbians and if Superman's bisexual, that's great. We need more bisexual men, this is great. There are these things that are changing that are going to have these effects, down the road, but I think they're really important.

**EW:** I'm going to be the voice of pessimism here, and say we're right at this moment where queer theory might be co-opted by the university in particular ways. Which is one of the ironies of this far-right reaction against all of these commie radical professors teaching our children that it's okay to have two mommies, right? The irony is that this is the very moment where queer theory runs the risk of being co-opted by the neoliberal university in ways that take the fangs out of it, and in ways where the university can point to that queer theory class, or these five professors, or this seminar, and say "well look we've handled our... We've handled that whole queer problem," at the same time that it fails to make meaningful investments in things that would actually *benefit* queer and trans students. I think if we're going to avoid the de-fanging of queer theory, it's important to look in the directions folks pointed out: transnational trends and disability studies as a method of refusal. There's always a debate about how much one can refuse that kind of co-optation from within the neoliberal university, but it does seem to be important that we try to at least make the attempt.

**JG:** And that's part of, I think it's part of the reorder of things, Rod Ferguson's book, right? That's part of that argument is which, we didn't read that book. So, you know this kind of tokenization, that's a word we haven't used enough since the 1990s. It's here and it is de-fanging.

**LM:** *Yeah, that's an excellent set of answers, thank you for those. Now we're at our last question—*

**JG:** Oh, and one thing to say about that book that Charlie had talked about, the *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality*: it's so not white. It's very American, but it's so not white, and I think that that was the focus. I think it's *Keywords for American Studies*, but I don't know if they advertise it, they just say *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*. So they have, like... if it said that...



but still, it should have a transnational approach, because American Studies does transnational work too. So yeah, just wanted to say that.

**LM:** *Yeah, so, I think that actually I was about to go there with a question on the way things are changing. What I take from this class, is how much I have noticed Charlie's point being necessary to consider in a lot of debate on the Twitter sphere of scholars. Arguments arise between otherwise-marginalized American writers, who are well and truly having problems acknowledging they're from the Imperial core, when being fairly critiqued by scholars from the Global South. Even people I happen to like have shown themselves in that negative light, and I think that's a shift to acknowledge. As in, it doesn't really matter what your position is in the U.S. in some ways if you are thinking globally, it is a position of privilege and access; like, we don't need to be playing Olympics with these issues, and American scholars could use to pay a bit more attention to the rest of the world. And I didn't see that happening in public so much ten years ago, genuinely.*

*I think that's a good part of what I carried out of this class, as a student. So, I wanted to see what you as faculty – from each other, from the students, from the guest speakers – what do you carry out of this course? What you grew on you, or what are you still thinking about afterwards?*

**JG:** I went back and read Rusty's book. I read the book, and then went back and read the things we talked about. I went and read Rusty, Elizabeth, and Charlie's literature, and from there read other works. You know, something came out in GLQ on queer Africa, and I knew what they were talking about! I'm not going to read the same stuff over and over again, right? I went through and was like, "okay, how do I stitch these together to read the next thing." So for me, during the pandemic in 2020 I read a lot, and I kept reading all summer and fall, so thank you for that. It is such a generous gift to learn from all of you, and to learn from our students.

**RB:** Yeah, I think for me, the class would have changed a lot about what I'm working on and what I'm doing. So, having that time to learn from other people, and also explore white de-centered queer theory, has led me to rethink how I look at the linguistic research that's already been done. I am actually working on co-authoring an annual review of an anthropology article on sexuality discourses, and the main argument is going to be that it's really about power, colonialism, racism, all those sorts of things. So, the class has really been a really positive influence on my own work.

**EW:** I usually think a lot about teaching after every class that I do, and one great benefit of this class was getting to watch other people teach, which is not something that we get to do very often. Also, because most people who are professors don't have any pedagogy training, there's something beneficial to seeing how other people approach it. That's one of the things I'm taking away, trying to be a little less rigid in the way I approach teaching, and trying to adopt some of

my co-leaders' approaches when thinking about how to teach.

**CZ:** I think the most beneficial part of this class is that I was able to observe scholarly work balanced with the new stuff that is happening right now. I'm a pretty isolated person, especially during the pandemic, so I don't know what happened in the outside world... but I did learn quite a bit from all the conversations that were happening during the class, especially through the chatting function. That pushed me to think about not just the new approaches, but also new topics, and new things that can be the object of analysis. That helped me. To step out of my own comfort zone, to cover new topics, new issues, and new trends is always important for me.

**LM & IM:** Thank you so much!