

Introduction to the Special Issue: Strange Bedfellows: Queer Negotiations with Homophobia in the Arts, Politics, and Religion

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Strange Bedfellows came into focus in the fall of 1999, at about the time of the beginning of the U.S. presidential primary campaigns. In their primary debates, Democratic Party presidential hopefuls Al Gore and Bill Bradley made it clear that same-sex issues needed to be addressed as part of their party's platform. How did candidates feel about same-sex marriage, domestic partnership, and anti-discrimination and hate-crimes legislation? With the Vermont "gay marriage" initiative serving as an actual contemporary case in point, these issues received a great deal of mainstream media coverage, and I began to wonder about the cultural implications of this kind of attention. What was one to make of the status quo's cultural embrace of some lesbian and gay groups? Did these newly publicly attended-to bonds hold out the promise of sexual and gender liberation as a right guaranteed by the state, or were these bonds an attempt to police and constrain queer activity? In effect, was this media attention to be read as an invitation for queers to assimilate, and if so, did this invitation augur a politics of inclusion or division, visibility or effacement?

I also began to wonder about the effects of this seemingly "open" climate on cultural domains other than politics, such as literature, art, and religion. How responsive could or would regulating systems in these areas be to queer presences? How, in turn, would institutionalized homophobia represent itself: would it announce itself as the vanguard of cultural norms and propriety; perhaps it would appear in drag? Further, was this particular cultural moment to be read in historical isolation? Were there other occasions in the past when queers had received comparable overtures or had met with a comparable rhetoric of tolerance? In this

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way, *Strange Bedfellows: Queer Negotiations with Homophobia in the Arts, Politics, and Religion* came into being.

This special issue features eight essays divided into three sections: “Queerness and Christianity,” “The Politics of Normalcy,” and “Queerness and Fascism.” Together, the essays examine queerness within a range of cultural frameworks: from contemporary religious and literary contexts to fin-de-siècle, fascist, and post-World War II European contexts. My hope is two-fold: that these essays taken individually will offer insight into the particular events, terms, and representations under discussion, and that taken together as a collection, the essays will provide critical lenses with which one may view current representations of queerness in the arts, politics, and religion.

“Queerness and Christianity” begins with Edward Ingebretsen’s “Jesus and Matthew: Monsters, Si[g]ns, and Wonders.” In this essay, Ingebretsen examines the powerful and contradictory readings of the crucified homosexual body as a locus for both spiritual atonement and spiritual monstrosity. For Ingebretsen, the brutal death of Matthew Shepard discloses the cultural recognition “that the angel and the demon, the prayerful and the depraved, mirror each other more than they differ.” Following this essay is Frederick Roden’s “Queer Christian: The Catholic Homosexual *Apologia* and Lesbian/Gay Practice,” which considers the Roman Catholic Church’s recent positions on homosexuality within the context of a historical overview of earlier Catholic treatments of same-sex desire. This overview consists of analyses of twelfth-century monk Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Spiritual Friendship*, Victorian writer John Bloxam’s 1894 “The Priest and the Acolyte,” and, finally, Marc-Andre Raffalovich’s 1896 *Uranisme et Unisexualite*, a text that, appearing here in English for the first time, Roden terms “the first modern Roman Catholic *apologia* for homosexual orientation.” Reading these works together, Roden insists that the Church’s recent homophobic pronouncements must be read against such works as these, which participate in a religious tradition of same-sex desire that actively queers Catholicism. The third essay in this section is Wendy Weber’s “Queering the Word: Patricia Nell Warren’s Adaptation of Christian Sacraments in *The Fancy Dancer*” (1976). Weber demonstrates how Warren’s novel draws on both the conventions of coming-out and conversion narratives in order to represent a young gay priest’s growing spiritualized awareness of his sexuality. Similar to Weber, Marian Eide focuses on the language of faith and its capacity to convey desire. In “Passionate Gods and Desiring Women: Jeanette Winterson, Faith, and Sexuality,” Eide considers the works of acclaimed lesbian writer Jeanette Winterson from her first subversive coming-of-age/conversion novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) to her recent fictions. For Eide, “[t]he language [that Winterson] borrows from her Pentecostal childhood allows her to describe a kind of charismatic experience of meeting between self and lover while recognizing the essential difference between partners, the foreignness of the beloved.”

Following “Queerness and Christianity” is “The Politics of Normalcy,” which considers various examples of the cultural assimilation of gay and lesbian writers. The two essays in this section argue that such assimilation inevitably results in homophobic backlash. The first essay is my own: “Radclyffe Hall, E. Lynn Harris, and Franz Kafka: Christianity, Queerness, and the Politics of Normalcy.” By analyzing two early twentieth-century texts, Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915), along side of E. Lynn Harris’s *Just as I Am* (1994), I examine the contemporary devolution of queer issues into the Christian-inflected “gay marriage debate.” Kafka’s horrifying coming-out narrative, in particular, demonstrates how same-sex marriage can function as a politically reactionary paradigm that holds out rights to some gays and lesbians at the expense of others whose gender differences and sexual practices cannot or will not allow them to claim marriage as an ideal. The politics of normalcy asserts its hold over other queer writers as well. So, for example, in “Courage in the Telling: The Critical Rise and Fall of David Leavitt,” Drew Patrick Shannon recounts the rise and fall of gay writer David Leavitt’s mainstream popularity. With the publication of *While England Sleeps* (1993), Leavitt found himself accused of having plagiarized an episode from English poet Stephen Spender’s memoir *World within World* (1951). Centering on this plagiarism charge, Shannon’s essay examines how the writer who has consistently insisted on the “normalcy” of homosexual desire found himself summarily dismissed by reviewers who had initially tolerated him as an acceptable [gay] writer. Leavitt found that his representations of gayness could not be read as acceptable revisions of heterosexual paradigms, no more than his novel could be read a revision of Spender’s memoir.

Concluding this special issue is “Queerness and Fascism,” which also contains two essays. First, James Jones’s “Acceptable Homosexual Heterosexuality: Hanns Heinz Ewers’s *Fundvogel* and Nationalist Socialist Ideology” considers Ewers’s 1929 novel, which Jones terms “a unique combination of seemingly antithetical ideologies.” Jones begins by providing the contradictory cultural context for *Fundvogel*. He discusses the rise of both the homosexual emancipation movement at the turn of the century and the rise of Nazism in the early part of the twentieth century. The novel, in turn, Jones argues, mixes Nazi values with homosexual representations that directly undermine those values. The result is “a rather fantastic plot,” in which, even as heterosexuality triumphs, homosexuality retains a masked presence. The final essay moves the reader from Germany to Italy. Luca Prono’s “Città Aperta o Cultura Chiusa?: The Homosexualization of Fascism in the Perverted Memory of the Italian Left” examines the equation of Fascism and homosexuality in Roberto Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta* (1945) and Vasco Pratolini’s novel *Cronache di poveri amanti* (1947), two key works of the Italian left-wing Neorealist movement. Prono argues that “by identifying fascism and homosexuality, both works limited their commemoration of the victims of fascism to heterosexuals and contributed to the erasure of a gay and lesbian holocaust

from historical memory.” He ends by cautioning that the Italian Left “has still not found a satisfactory way of dealing with the homophobic legacy of Neorealism.”

There is the saying in English that war makes strange bedfellows. Certainly, this special issue continually discloses how representations of queer desire necessarily raise spectres of intolerance. As long as dominant aesthetic, political, and religious institutions, furthered by their epistemologies, proscribe non-normative genders and sexual practices as “unthinkable,” “unspeakable,” and “monstrous,” queer desire will find a strange but persistent bedfellow in homophobia. Is there any way out of this dangerous, disturbing affair? Perhaps, like the essays in this collection, one can begin by examining the particular institutionalized epistemologies whose regulation of bedfellows is itself a war.