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Queering Syracuse: Remember When?

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This paper recounts the experiences of co-teaching a community-engaged seminar focused on study of sexuality and space in the city of Syracuse. This geographical focus grounded engagement and provides here a platform from which to address the difficulties of identifying communities organized around diverse, socially-constructed identities. The study of sexuality and space prompts a rethinking of how and whether sexuality operates in the city as a situated series of locations or, rather, a series of identities shaping all spaces. The paper explores a semester-long, student-driven discussion concerning queer as a category in relation to the study of sexuality and community. Through discussion of this scholarship, we engaged students in the ongoing process of figuring out what it meant to locate queer communities and to queer the broader community.

“Thank you for all the nice times. Thank you for all the remember-whens.”

Anne-Marie McDonald, The Way the Crow Flies, p7

1: On queer community

This essay offers reflections on our experiences as co-instructors of a community-engaged course taught in the spring semester of 2009 at Syracuse University that explored geographies of sexuality and space, including the relationships between sex and gender, and space and place. “Sexuality and Space: Queering



Syracuse” focused on the ways in which gender identity expressions unfold geographically, always contingent and contextual. Fluid understandings of sexuality prompt us to re-think the sometimes mundane geographies that we take for granted at a variety of scales, including the body, home, city, workplace, and nation-state. As is often the case in community-engaged teaching (e.g., Mountz *et al.* 2008), both students and instructors invested themselves within and beyond the class in ways that exceeded the reach of course materials, class discussions, and the general expectations of twenty-two undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a three-credit course. Months after the course ended, *remembering* has proven an important process as we recall, individually and collaboratively, the moments that taught us as instructors and that both enhanced and problematized connections between sexuality and community engagement.

A grant from Imagining America funded community engagement in the course with support for co-teaching, a public lecture series, and a final student-sponsored event. The course was also highlighted in the LGBT Studies Program and Minor’s thematic focus on sexuality and space. We (Mountz and Tweedy) gave the first lecture, which laid the groundwork for the class and community partners, explaining the design of the course and the larger project of queering Syracuse. The three subsequent lectures were given by prominent scholars in the field of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) studies: Professors David Valentine (Anthropology, University of Minnesota), Judith Halberstam (English, University of Southern California), and Michael Brown (Geography, University of Washington). At the request of community members who wanted to take the course but were unable to do so, we staged open reading groups coinciding with the guest



lectures, engaging community resources and facilities for meeting spaces.¹

The literature on sexuality and space begins with the critical assumption that space is not only gendered, but heteronormative. As Brown *et al.* suggest, “What we do makes the spaces and places we inhabit, just as the spaces we inhabit provide an active and constitutive context that shapes our actions, interactions and identities” (2007:4). The study of sexuality and space is thus the study of how sexualities are spatialized and how geographies are sexualized. This semantic twist carries implications for two distinct, though related, perspectives. Loosely, on the one hand, there is academic inquiry into the sexualization of particular places and spaces, such as bars, bathrooms, borders, home, and institutions. But the study of sexuality and space is not limited, or even expressly focused on, the study of sexual behavior. The partial integration of queer theory into the literature on gender and sexuality has disrupted ideas predicated on unified categories of gay or lesbian (Brown et al. 2007, Knopp 2007), a turn that has important spatial implications.

Queer theory also complicated our search for queer community. How would we find a community identified, in part, by socially constructed identity categories that disrupted mappable sites, populations, and communities (Brown & Knopp 2008)? Epistemological dilemmas to define and locate the diverse and dispersed communities that we had imagined engaging elicited creative geographical explorations. We began our search by contacting colleagues and friends in LGBT communities who helped us to compile a list of local community leaders and organizations. We sent a letter to each of these people and organizations in January 2009, inviting them to our opening lecture

¹ Those community members were unable to take the course for a number of reasons. For some, work schedules did not allow, and we realized that the number who were interested would overwhelm a course that was already over-enrolled with undergraduate and graduate students. In the future, we would like to follow in the footsteps of colleagues who have taught open-enrollment courses in the community.



on sexuality and space where we would invite and incite, and attempt to define some of the terms that mattered to us in the design of our lecture series: sexuality, space, queer, and community among them. We wondered if community members, whoever that category referenced, would really be interested in a lecture series given by academics from across the country. Fortunately, they were.

We began our first lecture with over 100 people in the audience. We knew that something exciting had begun, but we had no idea where it was headed or how it would go. We asked the audience to identify queer spaces in Syracuse. They had a lot to say, and tension over the term “queer” emerged quickly. One woman in attendance argued that more senior members of the LGBT community would not like or identify with our use of this term. Another prompted a discussion of the differences between queer space and safe space. As the discussion continued, we realized that some were thinking of these spaces synonymously, and we challenged this coupling.

Meanwhile, a revealing conversation about a neighborhood called “homo hill” emerged. One woman stood up and said that she lived on “homo hill” and named the location. A second stood up and said that *she* lived on “homo hill,” naming a different location. Finally, a third audience member responded that this was no mystery to decode: “homo hill” was wherever people saw gay folks living. This conversation illuminated the dilemma of locating queer communities, people, and sites.

2: On queer/ing space

As the semester began, we remained conflicted about our use of the term “queer.” Was it necessarily synonymous with the oft-uttered phrase, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender?” How would we use this word “queer” in more inclusive ways and still respect the historical roots, particularly given that the term had violent episodes written into its own history and the individual and collective



histories, memories, and bodies of our community. Was queer limited to recognized gay places? Or could queer be used more broadly to disrupt heteronormative places? We introduced our own complicated and ambivalent engagement with the term “queer” to our students on the first day of class, and that introduction engendered a semester-long conversation about language, politics, inclusion, exclusion, and activism surrounding the use of terms like “queer,” “queering,” “heterosexuality,” “LGBT,” and “transgender.” We struggled as a group with a desire for something we could articulate as queer politics and queer community; at the same time, we fought to maintain the very political elusiveness that the term elicits.

In mid-February, during the third class of the semester, a student complained that people seemed to share a lot of personal stories. Before we had a chance to respond ourselves, students’ hands popped up vigorously around the room. It seems they were already engaged in this fight, and eager to explain why. One student exclaimed emotionally that a lot of people had been waiting for a long time for this class to be included in the curriculum. He was invested in the mere existence of the course even before he attended class on the first day. A second student insisted that there was personal information shared because this was a feminist classroom in which positionality mattered. She had observed and invested in our teaching method, one that respected and elicited the inclusion of student experiences of living, working, struggling, and being in various communities.

The complications of queer surfaced again at the end when we received student feedback that we had not amply represented heterosexuality in course content. We remember not really knowing what to do with these comments that came in too late for us to address them or some of the very heteronormative exchanges that they reproduced in papers. We felt frustrated by the tension between a semester-long conversation about the complexity of queer that challenged a direct correlation with one’s individual identity and a class that was designed purposefully to



center LGBT lives. We thought of our discussions on red light districts in the city, prostitution, sadomasochism, and straight experiences in gay bars. Certainly, our aim had never been to imply that being straight was any less complicated than being gay. These multiple perspectives—the impulses to include or exclude personal experience, the desire to claim queer space in university curricula, and the feeling of being left out of that space—illuminate yet again the ongoing struggle within the classroom and the larger project to identify an inclusive collection of people interested and invested in engagement with LGBT communities.

Meanwhile, other people in the community had their own interpretations of the course objectives. In announcing the first public lecture that we would give in late January to introduce the course, lecture series, and main concepts, the *Syracuse Post-Standard* published its own interpretation. Avoiding use of the term queer altogether, the newspaper instead announced that we would speak “about what it means to be gay in Syracuse” (*Post Standard* 2009). We wondered if that would that have been an easier lecture to prepare.

Within the course, we included an interdisciplinary range of readings that addressed the concept of queer and an array of possibilities on what it means to “queer” space (Binnie 1995, Browne et al. 2007). We included readings to situate a geographical framework that centered the city and vice versa (Amin & Thrift 2002). Throughout the semester, ideas about queering the city were fictionalized (Feinburg 2006), imagined (Valentine 2006), consumed (Binnie 1995), privatized (Duncan 1996), masqueraded (Rose 1996), desired (Rofel 2007), mapped (Brown & Knopp 2008) and globalized (Oswin 2006). Through discussion of this scholarship, we engaged students in the ongoing process of figuring out what it meant to locate queer communities and to queer the broader community. The students were given two fieldwork “writing the city” exercises. The first assignment asked them to visit two sites: one where they felt comfortable and one where they felt uncomfortable. In reading the papers, we were surprised



by the limited number of venues students had selected. These were primarily heterosexual spaces of consumption such as coffee shops and bars. And the students did not necessarily recognize the continuous presence of sexuality, the ways sexuality was represented through physical place, decoration, dress, mannerisms, speech and interactions with those around them.

Several weeks later, the second writing-the-city assignment asked them to visit yet a third site, observe how *gender*, *sex*, and *sexuality* were produced there, and position themselves in that site while recording their spatial observations and affective responses. In reading the second assignment, we were again confused by the descriptions that, while more theoretically nuanced, still did not attend to sexuality in a sustained way. In class, we discussed the papers. One involving a description of a ride on a city bus prompted a particularly important discussion. The student had written thoughtfully about riding the bus to work and sitting next to nurses in uniform, witnessing a fight between a girlfriend and boyfriend, and observing the men sitting on the back of the bus. In his final paragraph, he claimed that sexuality was not visibly present. We engaged students in debate about how sexuality unfolded on the bus and about the ways in which he was—or was not—in fact “queering” the bus. We began to realize we had not done an adequate job of setting the stage for *how* sexuality presents itself in everyday life; that queer sites in the city need not fly a rainbow flag to claim space. We had spent so much time in those first weeks of class arguing about what it meant to queer the city (and unpacking the historical and political claims to that word) that we had missed some bigger part of the picture. This discussion was a difficult one for the class, and one that would resurface later in discussions of how students could collectively queer the city in their final projects.

These questions remained open throughout the semester both on and off campus. As we worked to design a course and associated events that also queered space in some way, the challenge of connecting the



academy with the local community was reflected in our search for appropriate locations to host events. The locally owned bookstore, run by gay entrepreneurs in Hawley-Green (known locally as a gay neighborhood) was an ideal site for the community reading group, but was not wheelchair accessible. The queer youth organization that also volunteered space was accessible, but occupied a hidden location in order to protect clientele. We would need to reveal their secret location only to those planning to attend the reading group. We struggled alongside students to find community locations that were queer enough for the final event. The process of choosing the location was as important as the final choice as the process illuminated criteria for a queer-friendly space.

The locations and their spatial implications were as important on campus as they were off campus. We worried together over what to wear for the performance of our first lecture, agreeing that suits would be too formal. As we walked our guest lecturers into the imposing Greek auditorium in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs where we had moved the lectures in order to accommodate the growing audience, we felt that there was something wrong with this space. The architecture of the auditorium countered both the process of queering community engagement and our interest in destabilizing hierarchies: its formality, the microphone it required, and the stiffer introductions it engendered. We worked within the space of the classroom to engage this conundrum and hoped that students would do the same in their final projects.

Toward the end of the semester, we asked the students in class to write down what the term “queer” meant to each of them. We received a wide array of responses that reflected the students’ own identities and social locations, but also embraced a nuanced respect for difference. In the next class, we asked students to work in small groups to design a typology of meanings of “queer” and to then represent this typology visually on the board. A burst of collective creativity, laughter, and

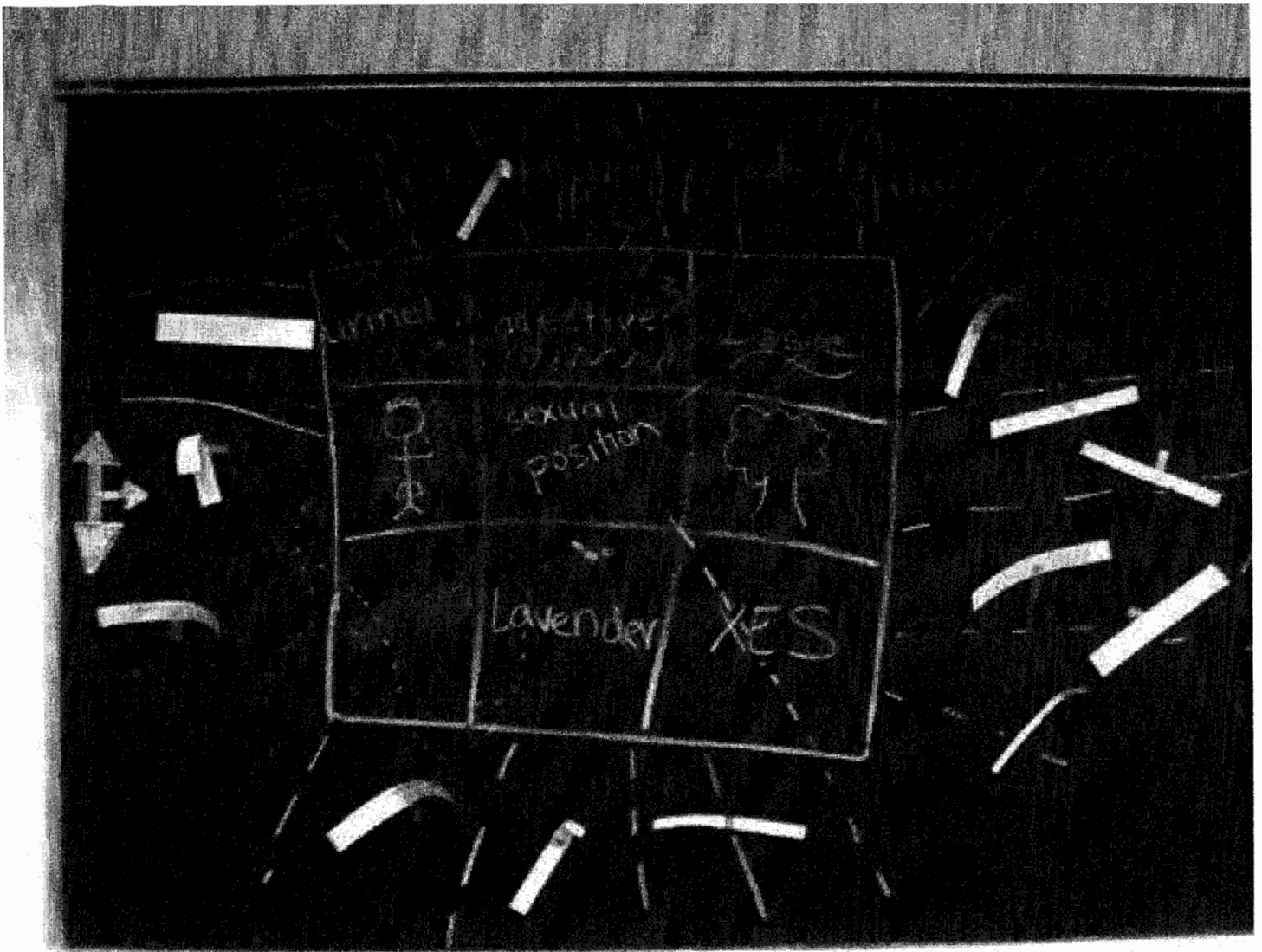


Figure 1: Diagram of Queer

blushing ensued. (See Figure 1, Diagram of Queer). These responses were incorporated into the final exhibit to highlight the multiplicity of meanings of the term.

3: Queer culminations

In addition to the three-hour, weekly seminar meetings, students collaborated to produce loosely-structured, culminating projects enacted at the end of the semester: planning a queer event, representing a queer city, and compiling a queer local community history. The culminating queer event where projects were presented was the final event of the semester where community members from across and beyond campus were invited to participate and students showcased their final projects. The following week, they installed their projects



for a second time at the Shine student union building on the campus of Syracuse University. There, community members continued to interact with the maps designed to queer the city.

In their final projects, the students responded thoughtfully to many of the arguments we had had throughout the semester about queering and where and how to engage LGBT communities. Each group took up the conversation in different and creative ways. The group that endeavored to map the queer city invited visitors to place pins with different colors onto large maps on moveable cubes in response to questions about where they would locate violence, safe space, consumption, and so on, in the city. (See Figure 2, moveable queer maps).

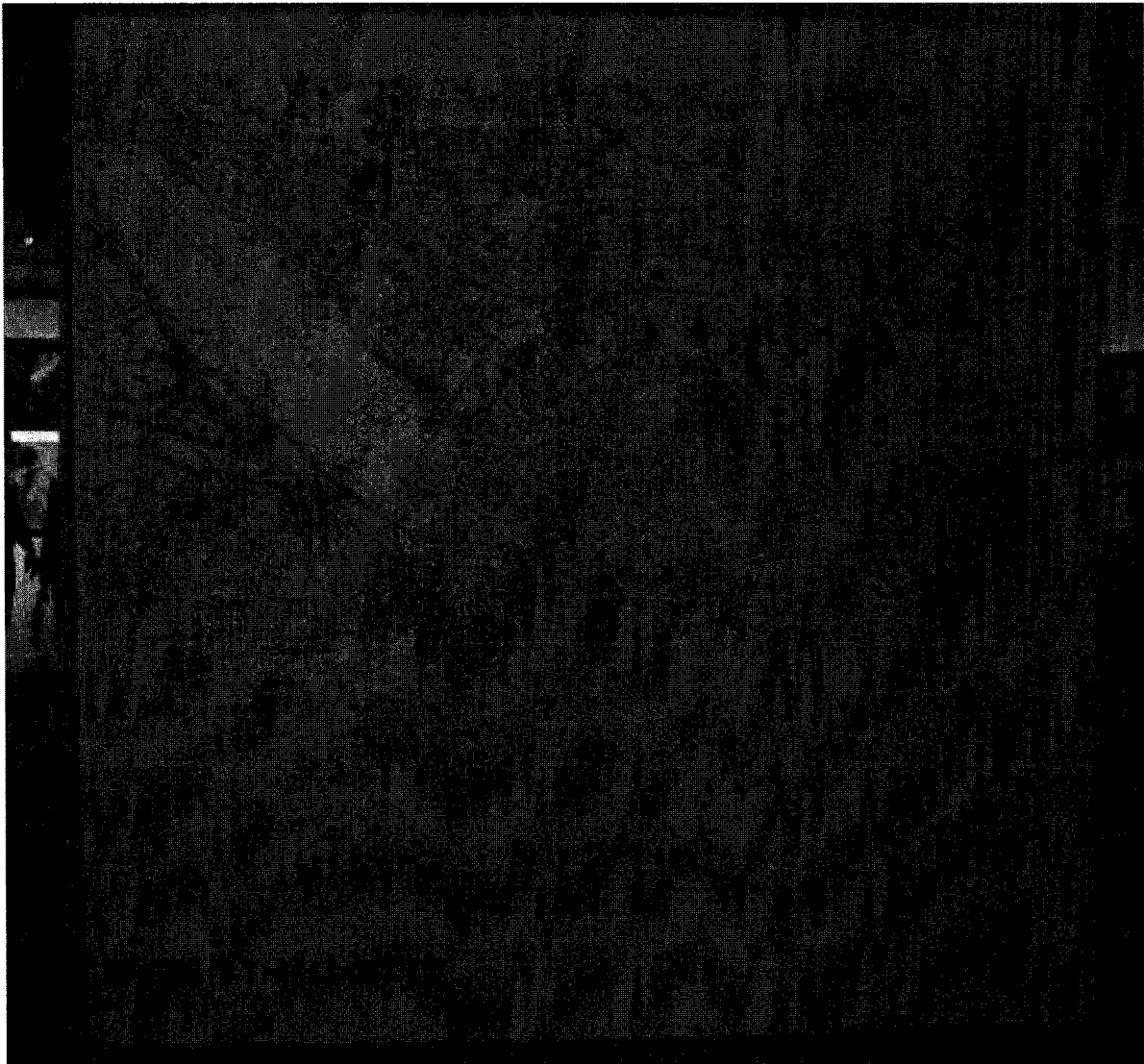


Figure 2: Moveable Queer Maps



Queering Syracuse

**Friday May 1st, 2009
4:00pm-6:00pm**

Artrage Gallery
505 Hawley Avenue
Syracuse, NY



Please join us in this community-wide event to celebrate, document and create a Queer Syracuse. Students from the Space and Sexuality class at SU have archived and mapped a Queer Syracuse, but your involvement is needed. Please bring small artifacts or pictures to add to our living map.

Performance by Keith and Ferasha
featuring Down to Funk.

Refreshments will be provided by
Sparky Town.

The LGBT Studies Program and Minor, Geography Department, and Imagining America are pleased to sponsor the Sexuality and Space lecture series and Queering Syracuse event with support from Anthropology, Cultural Foundations of Education, Communication and Rhetorical Studies, College of Human Ecology, Women's and Gender Studies, Sociology, English, the Writing Program, and the LGBT Resource Center.

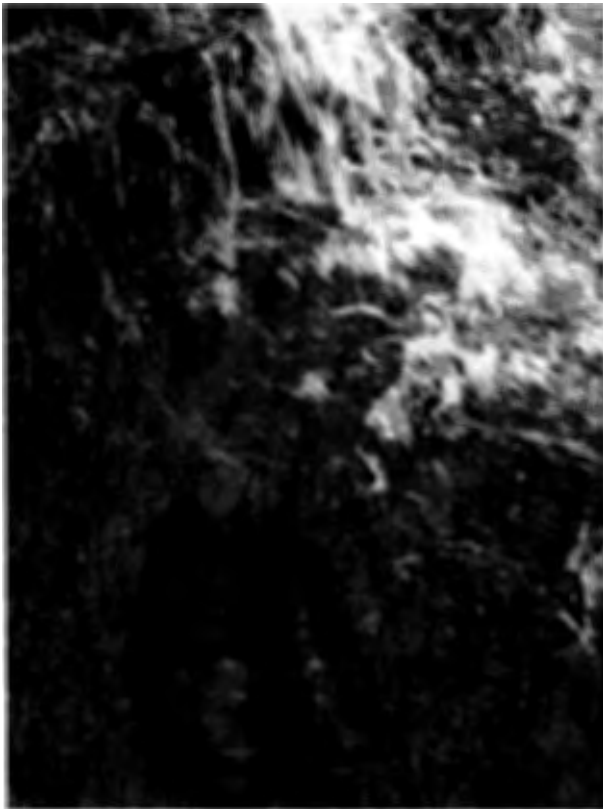


Figure 3: Postcard Invitation



Another group attempted a queer history of a local Catholic church with a long history of special services for members of the LGBT community. Another group actually planned the queer event where all of these projects came to fruition. They chose Artrage, an art gallery committed to social justice and located in Hawley-Green. They advertised this as *Queering Syracuse*, our culminating event (see Figure 3 postcard invitation). At the event itself, they set up a video camera for testimony where community members were invited to recall the past and imagine the future of LGBT communities and organizing in Syracuse.

Another student group showed a documentary video they made that captured a conversation about “queer” between three students driving back from spending an afternoon at an archive at a neighboring university. The conversation conveyed the circular arguments that flowed through the class on a weekly basis. The video ended with a pair of men’s shoes, worn by one of the women. (See Figure 4, photograph of shoes).



The final event proved queer in many ways. As we were setting up, we had an unexpected visit from middle-school students expecting ArtRage’s publicized exhibition who started interacting with the projects immediately, much to everyone’s delight. Their teacher rambled on nervously to the gallery director while the students contributed gleefully to the maps, marking and writing, “A lesbian was born here,” and “A queer played with her two moms here.”

Figure4: Photograph of Shoes



While the term queer was controversial and sometimes pulled us apart due to multiple definitions, it is also what pulled us together through events, political projects, and classroom discussions. A few days before the event we became obsessed with obtaining black hats with QUEERING SYRACUSE in white block print. The hats represented a visual display of solidarity and teamwork after a semester of political and intellectual debates. These hats kept one of us up for three nights “straight” worrying first about whether we *should* get them, next about whether we *could* get them, and finally, once ordered, whether they would be ready in time. A girlfriend kindly picked them up and delivered them at the final hour.

In the end, it mattered little that we had no universal definition of queer. We had struggled throughout the semester to think about sexuality through a geographical lens that went beyond identity to include and complicate and be complicated by place and space. Queering Syracuse—or any space, for that matter—was not a moment of complete and victorious transformation of heteronormativity, but an open moment of bodies in action with the potential to open up new futures continuously and simultaneously. The students found a way to represent the multiplicity of queer through food, spatial arrangements, activities and activism, multiple historical narratives, diverse people in attendance, multimedia and multi-layered representations, and colored chalk feet traced outside on the sidewalk. As we were packing up, an actual rainbow in the sky rewarded us, reminding us of the contextual, the contingent, the fleeting, the hopeful imbued in queer projects, and reminding us to “remember when.”



Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank Imaging America for generous support of this endeavor, with a special thank you to Director Jan Cohen-Cruz. We also thank Margaret Himley and Andrew London, Co-Directors of LGBT Studies, for their commitment and enthusiasm in all aspects of the course. The experience would not have worked without the students who bravely signed up for the course and committed themselves to fifteen weeks of extra work and discussions that never felt complete. We would like to extend our thanks for the generous participation of community members, including the LGBT Resource Center. We are also grateful for feedback from the editors of Reflections on this paper.

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