

Who Are You? Dialogue

Gay or straight? Sexual identity is getting more academic—and mainstream—scrutiny than ever, yet its influence on different facets of our lives is not always simple to see. As the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Studies department at the College prepares to run its first set of public panel discussions and lectures this spring, Sarah Lawrence magazine gathered five members of the community to ponder any connection between their sexual identity—all are queer—and the work they compose, direct, perform, write, critique, or examine in the classroom. For more information about the LGBT Studies events open to the public, please call the Office of College Events at (914) 395-2411. The dramatis personae of this issue's "SLC Dialogue":

Julie Abraham, a literary critic who teaches LGBT Studies at the College, is working on a book, *City People: The Homosexuality of Urbanity*.

Composer **Chester Biscardi** is director of the College's music program and holds the William Schuman Chair in Music.

Performance artist and puppet director **Dan Hurlin '79** has been awarded a 1990 "Obie," a 2000 "Bessie" and a 2002 Guggenheim fellowship; he is currently on both the dance and the theatre faculties of Sarah Lawrence.

José Muñoz '89, associate professor of performance studies at New York University—where he teaches courses on critical theory, race and sexuality—is the author of several books, including the forthcoming *Feeling Brown: Ethnicity, Affect and Performance*.

Carol Zoref '76, MFA '97, a fiction writer and essayist, is the Sarah Lawrence College writing coordinator.

SARAH LAWRENCE: What is the relationship between sexual identity and creativity? More specifically, do you think there's a connection between your queer identity and the work that you produce?

CAROL ZOREF: Can you broaden that question a little?!

CHESTER BISCARDI: Well, seriously, I never thought there was, until I got involved in a recording project, with works by gay American composers. When they asked me to be on this first CD, I said, "No, because I don't see any relationship between my being gay and my work." But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that, of course, there's a connection. Anything we do reflects who we are. If part of what I am is being gay, does that translate into the music I write? I still don't really have an answer to that.

DAN HURLIN: I know a lot of gay-identified artists whose work doesn't overtly deal with gay and lesbian themes. And I know a lot of gay and lesbian artists whose work is overtly about issues of being gay and lesbian. That's something I've always wrestled with. The content of the work that I produce is not overtly gay and lesbian, but obviously it's coming from a queer point of view because I'm queer. But I'm making pieces about things that interest me.

JOSÉ MUÑOZ: I don't believe in the gay brain or the gay art-making gene, or any hard-wired, preprogrammed sort of impulses toward making art or culture. But a lot of queer people who have been shut out of mainstream art and culture practices seem to have an impulse to construct a world that they've been left out of. This impulse organizes a lot of queer art and queer culture-building—which was never possible twenty years ago because of systemic silences around sexuality and gender.

JULIE ABRAHAM: The distinction that you're making between overtly gay and lesbian material and "something else," Dan, is a distinction that the culture makes, and we propagate a narrow idea of what constitutes gay and lesbian material. In doing so, we exclude huge amounts of work that you include vaguely under the term "queer," the work that gay and lesbian artists produce when it doesn't fit into already preconceived, very narrow notions of what gay and lesbian work is. And if we look beyond that, we have a much more complicated picture.

ZOREF: Twenty years ago, when I thought about writing, I thought about what I could safely include in my work. And now my thinking is more about what I may have neglected to include out of some impulse for which I take greater ownership. I don't approach things in the same way I might have when I was a younger writer. One was an early form of self-censorship; now, if something is not there, it's because of my neglect, not because somebody else is establishing parameters for me to follow. There's been a shift in creative responsibility—which has actually paralleled my own evolution as a writer, where I actually do feel more responsible for my work because I feel like I can.

ABRAHAM: So is the basic issue here creativity, or are we talking about social, structural questions? Censorship or lack of censorship? Expectations on the part of readers and editors and authors themselves?

ZOREF: Writing and publishing are two different things. Publishing concerns open up a Pandora's Box. A lot of very good work is being published, but unfortunately a lot is not. What is commercially viable is often different from what people are writing.

MUÑOZ: And then you think about the stuff that does get published in the name of gay and lesbian identity, and what can't be published under those rubrics, right?

ZOREF: Lesbian mysteries versus lesbian literary fiction.

ABRAHAM: But can we make a substantial distinction between writing and publishing? Publishing, presentation—or what gets grants and what is seen—has to have an effect on what people produce. People don't produce in a vacuum.

ZOREF: Aside from young writers who have to write their coming-out story, what then? What do you then write? That's where the transformation becomes difficult, trying to get to the point where you're just writing what you need to be writing about—which, as Dan said, are the things that interest you.

BISCARDI: It's becoming clear to me that music is a separate issue here. When you deal with visual imagery, you have some relationship to the issues we're talking about. With music, what does that mean? Music is so abstract. When I first began thinking about this was when I was discussing it with the group of people who were on this first gay American composers' CD: We were using "loneliness" and "loss" and "wistfulness" and "sadness," terms like that to describe our music. But I realize that's just not true. When I first came out, in my early twenties, was also when I started writing music again—music that was very abstract and very angry and narrowing. Yet that's not how I felt as a sexual being at that point, and my music has now become more sensual and open. But back then, it didn't jive with what it meant to be a gay man in the early '70s. So music just doesn't make any sense in this context, actually. With literature, it does. With plays, it does. Can you go back and read John Cage through a queer lens? So much of what he was doing was Japanese-based, was about otherness. It was about somebody who goes to a different culture and brings it and reinterprets it and becomes—

MUÑOZ: But what is being gay and lesbian in this country other than being "other?"

BISCARDI: But that's kind of a philosophic point of view, and it's really not about the art itself. Or are the two the same?

ABRAHAM: A discussion like this requires that you take a set of cultural ideas about what it means to be gay or lesbian, and then you apply them to the artwork. If you believe that to be other or to be lonely or to be

wistful is to be queer, and you find that in the work, you make the conjunction. But before you can do that, you've already made a whole set of assumptions about what queerness is.

ZOREF: On the one hand, you see this really rigid idea of what it means; and on the other, it sort of means everything. So then how do you talk about it?

MUÑOZ: That's the hard thing about queer, right? You don't want it to just be a free-for-all, you know. But you also want it to be inclusive of a whole bunch of different people whose sexualities and genders have been stigmatized in different ways. It's a tricky little balancing act.

ABRAHAM: Another part of the problem, it seems to me, is when people get into saying that all forms of opposition are queer, all forms of radicalism are queer, all forms of disturbance...anything that's not absolutely rigid and conventional.

MUÑOZ: There was that horrible moment in the '90s, when everyone was queering everything. The Renaissance was queer, everything's queer.

ABRAHAM: Once we've announced that everything is queer, then what?

MUÑOZ: Nothing means anything then. You need to insist on the historical specificity of queer lives and struggles, while remembering that "queer" is not merely a new place holder for "lesbian" or "gay." It's meant to describe the different ways in which people whose desires don't correspond to a social norm survive and potentially transform the world.

ZOREF: Maybe that's the difference between interpreting and creating. It's what I'd call the narcissism of the creative process. The less I worry about others, the stronger my work becomes. But I think about one reader, my ideal reader, and she's the person I write for, an idealized reader who will understand what I'm doing. When I'm not doing it well, she knocks on my door and says, "This isn't interesting, and it isn't accomplishing what you want." When I was first writing, I wrote poetry. I thought about poetry as the closet of my creativity, because I was able to be so abstracted: I could eliminate all exposition. When I began to write in prose, it was my way of writing "out." I don't believe this is true for other poets, but it was true for me. And in that regard, being a lesbian has informed my creative sensibility. But finally, I can't think too much about the audience except for that one idealized reader. Whatever happens after that, happens after that.

MUÑOZ: Chet, do you have an ideal listener?

BISCARDI: I was actually just thinking about that! No, not at all. I don't think in terms of that.

HURLIN: Mine is one who loves me and will pay 35 bucks for a ticket. But let's go back to the question about working alone. When I collaborate with other people, I automatically go into the process assuming that they know better than me: The composer composes, because he's a better composer than I am.

BISCARDI: Oh, you're an ideal collaborator! Can I work with you sometime?

HURLIN: But as far as having an ideal audience, I don't even think about one person. I really try to weigh things against what interests me. Does this fall into the category of something that interests me? Or is this, too, something I'm not interested in? Or can I make it more what I am interested in? I know what you're talking about when you say "the narcissism of the creative process."

ABRAHAM: Is your ideal reader always a woman, Carol?

ZOREF: Yes, that single, imaginary one in my head is. Which has nothing to do with who I want my actual readers to be. Toni Morrison said that when she began writing novels, one of the things that she was looking for was to create the kind of novel that she wanted to read. So, in a certain way, my ideal reader, in part, is me.

MUÑOZ: That's also true of me, and I write criticism and theory. But the first book I wrote was a book for a former self, you know. It was for the "me" in graduate school who never had this book available. I'm always trying to fill a gap or a void.

BISCARDI: I do try to write music that I hear as being something I haven't heard before. I'm not interested in duplicating the same thing, regurgitating the same thing. Certainly in music right now, everything is possible. I do hear that "ideal" thing—but I hear it in my head, not because I think so-and-so wants to hear it or this audience wants to hear it or because if it's done in Carnegie Hall, it's more important than some other place. I don't think in terms like that.

HURLIN: I did a showing-in-progress once, and I had to suffer through a post-show discussion. One of the people in the audience was a guy who apparently wrote the book on audience development. He hated the piece, and he raised his hand and said, "Who have you made this piece for?" And

I basically said, “Anybody who paid eight–fifty to see it.” And he got very upset. We actually got into a big argument there, because his whole point was that he was trying to say that discovering one’s audience is part of one’s job as an artist. I kept saying, “Look, I don’t think it’s the artist’s job.” The artist’s job is to do what they’re doing. The presenter is the person who knows his or her community and knows who’s going to pay eight–fifty to see it.

BISCARDI: It’s interesting. About two months ago, I met with a conductor, who is very well known and I won’t name, who is married, but who is clearly gay. I thought, “We can really have a very sensitive discussion about the issues of what’s really important in your music.” Instead, his take was, “This is my audience. And in order to sell subscriptions, this is the only type of music we can present. And I’m sorry, Chet, we cannot have you, because you will not reach this audience.” I sat there and I thought, “Well, clearly his being homosexual has nothing to do with anything of value here.” I felt he had sold out something about himself.

ABRAHAM: We seem to have slid right from the subject of homosexuality and creativity into a discussion of narcissism and creativity. Homosexuality has often been understood as a form of narcissism.

MUÑOZ: I don’t think we need to abandon narcissism per se. But why is narcissism considered so pathological?

ZOREF: Well, wait a minute—

MUÑOZ: Why is this mode of self-absorption in the self, its gender, always a bad thing necessarily?

ZOREF: That’s exactly what I was going to say. Back up! Narcissism is not necessarily pathological. To look at yourself and say, “Hmmm, these are the ways in which I’m narcissistic,” is not necessarily problematic. But we all know people who are unable to unbound themselves from the self. That’s a problem.

ABRAHAM: I understand that. I was pointing to the mirroring of conventional ideas that we’re potentially leading ourselves into. **MUÑOZ:** For me, the other end of the narcissism and creativity thing is on the level of reception and the level of social, which would be the political. I know one of the most important moments for me was when I came out while I was at Sarah Lawrence. One part that was really interesting about being here was working not only with the institution, but against the institution in relationship to politics and activism. I’m referring to the sit-in [in the

Spring of 1989] that I helped organize with other students of color of different sexualities. It informed everything I went on to do in graduate school, everything I've done so far in my career. We can talk about "a creative moment." But that creative moment, for me, falls flat unless it resonates outside of some individualistic concern and addresses the social, the communal, the ways in which people belong to each other and know each other in the world.

HURLIN: How about when we teach?

ZOREF: Teaching is a completely different thing, where I'm no longer allowed to be narcissistic, because then it's about them. Teaching is about encouraging students to be productively narcissistic, so to speak, trying to find a way to help them come faster to their own voices than they imagine they could.

ABRAHAM: In a sense, whether we're teaching or writing criticism or constructing works of art, we're all engaged in the process of culture-building. For me, it's crucial to constantly expand expectations about what the issues, the elements, of these queer cultures might be. I want to work against narrow assumptions: "This is a lesbian or gay work here, and that is the rest of the world." "This is a gay play, and that is a real play." "This is a lesbian film, that is a regular film." Or, "This is about queer people, but really about humankind or loneliness or universal values or whatever, and so not queer work." Historically there's a constant splitting off of works of art identified with homosexuality. But the splitting off can be politically motivated, even hostile. We can conceive much more broadly of queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, cultural projects.

HURLIN: But there's an interesting complication there, which is the economics of making art. There was a time when presenters across this country—and they still are—would have their gay and lesbian festival. They wouldn't do any gay and lesbian work on their main stage, but they would kind of ghetto-ize them into doing a little black box—three weeks of gay- and lesbian-identified work. The artists would end up having to become complicit in that ghetto-ization, in order to do their work.

ABRAHAM: That, I think, is a really important factor, and sort of brings us back to our earlier talk about presentation and publishing. I think the separate space at the festivals is crucial for getting the word out there, because that's how many people will get to the work. And you can do in that little three-week run in the black-box theatre all sorts of things, too, and try to push the envelope—and keep pushing to not be in that separate space.

SARAH LAWRENCE: Do you ever worry about being defined as strictly a creator of “queer material,” as opposed to work that, in people’s perception, moves beyond that separate space?

BISCARDI: I don’t see that as an issue for me in my line of work.

ZOREF: I do worry about it when I write. I’m working now on a novel that is set in the 1930s, told from the point of view of an 80-year-old woman. After I had written a good part of the first draft, it was clear to me that she was heterosexual. But there are a lot of people in this novel. And I thought, it’s impossible that they’re all straight—where are the gay and lesbian people in this novel? Am I going to write a novel where everyone’s straight? It seemed statistically impossible. And then the gay characters presented themselves.

HURLIN: I used to worry about it, but I don’t anymore. It didn’t interest me to think about it. And so, I thought, why should I be worried if it doesn’t interest me? Yet there was a period when I felt that my work needed to be more gay- and lesbian- identified. But then I thought, “I don’t want to.”

ABRAHAM: It’s interesting that what gets lost in a discussion like this is that, of course, heterosexual people have sexual identities, too.

SARAH LAWRENCE: Perhaps that will be our next “Dialogue” discussion.