

The Constant in My Life

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In a 1934 essay, Eiland and Jennings (2014) remind, Walter Benjamin characterized Kafka's gift for "study" as an "oblique attentiveness to aspects of a forgotten 'pre-world,' a sphere of inchoate myth whose laws determine the course of daily existence" (p. 601). Is sexuality such a "pre-world," hardly "forgotten" but maybe mythic, unacknowledged—except as scandal—in academic life? I am not suggesting any homology between sexuality and scholarship, but a reverberation perhaps? My generational, class, gendered, and racial locations—and my efforts to contradict them—must have been in play in the apparent promiscuity¹ of my intellectual and sexual life.

Coming of age in politically conservative Westerville, Ohio—in the 1950s a small town, now a sprawling suburb of Columbus—contributed to my sexual-subject formation. I dated Sue Smith in junior high school, Patsy Bean and Judi Wood during high school. These were appealing girls whom I wanted. Alas, they were respectable girls—I could bring home to my parents no other kind—and I graduated from high school a virgin. I dated Sue Wakefield and Betsy Bowers² my college freshmen year, both of whom were also appealing and, yes, respectable.³ Not until a year later—in summer 1966 I transferred from the Conservatory of Music at Capital University in Columbus to study history at Ohio State—did I bed a girl.⁴ As I reflect on those years from today's queer perspective I recall that there were boys whose bodies I noticed but sex didn't occur to me, not until Jeff Girard.

It was fall quarter 1968, my junior year at Ohio State. One very early morning after a night of heavy drinking I pulled my still drunk but pretending-to-be-asleep best friend and roommate on top of me. There might have been a kiss or two, but no entries or orgasms. Jeff didn't share my enthusiasm, and so we went our separate ways, me back to my girlfriend—his ex-girlfriend Cindi (how gay was that?)—and he onto yet another girl. Sometime afterward I had sex with someone I must have met at a gay bar but I didn't like it (the bar or sex with the guy), so I set "gay" aside. My senior year I spent with Karen, with whom I enjoyed fantastic sex over and over again.⁵ Karen had a son—David—maybe four years of age; we were somewhat of a "family." When I moved to Long Island, New York, that August, I said goodbye. If there's determinism—as Benjamin seemed to think—it is implied in "decisions" I made contra common sense, seemingly in the service of some "law" I did not divine. Leaving Karen and Columbus qualifies as one of those.

After teaching English at Paul D. Schreiber High School in Port Washington, New York—where I was privileged to have a passionate affair with Betsy, then developed a crush on Kenny—I returned to Columbus to finish the Ph.D. During that year (1971–1972) I there were women—one affair, several one-night stands—and one sexual experience with Kenny who'd come to Columbus to see me. When in 1972 I moved upstate New York to teach at the University of Rochester, I shared a cottage in the middle of an unfarmed field with two women, both of whom—Marjorie Harper and Nancy Fruchtman⁶—I'd met on Long Island. After that ménage disbanded, I moved into the first of a series of places I shared with others my age—I was then in my mid-twenties—who smoked weed, drank, meditated, and slept around. At one point I had a crush on a guy named Billy Boaz, but he wouldn't budge.

At the Zen Center on Arnold Park in Rochester I met Denah Joseph. I fell hard. On September 15, 1976, our son was born: Gabriel, now married to Jane Virga, the father of four-year-old Olympia, one-year old August, and Rhein, born December 3, 2015. After breaking up with Denah I resolved⁷ to be gay, announcing the news to parents and friends. Almost thirty and a son on the side—Denah departed Rochester with him for California where he grew up—my initiation into "gay culture" was fast and furious. I enjoyed the presence of a mentor: Ron Padgham, who taught interior design at the Rochester Institute of Technology and studied for his doctorate with me.⁸ The paintings he found for me hang in our home in the northwest Washington woods. Ron became a dear friend and I miss him still.⁹

My parents were distressed at my announcement. Dad's concern seemed limited to its impact on my career. After the tears dried, Mother accompanied me on more than one occasion to gay bars; it was as if the ex-night-club singer suddenly was in her element again. After fooling around (as we used to say)—it was pre-AIDS still, although not for long—I fell for David Parker, a Ph.D. student in the

University of Rochester's History Department. It was a passionate affair that blew apart a year later.¹⁰ After fooling around for a while I met Frank Cordello, with whom I lived for three years, breaking up when I left Rochester for LSU in 1985. In Louisiana I fooled around—again—especially after my son returned to California in 1992, and I moved into the French Quarter in New Orleans.¹¹

When I had “come out” in Rochester, it had been to family and friends, not to colleagues at work. No doubt my move was noticed but uncommented on, except by those to whom I was close there: Madeleine Grumet, Peter Taubman, Philip Wexler, Margaret Zaccone. For me coming out had been no acknowledgment of my true but previously repressed identity. Sex with other men for me was an impulse first, then an idea, a political cause, always a subjective experiment, cause and consequence of an inner project of reconstructing what others had made of me.¹² Just as being sexually involved with women had not precluded noticing other guys, being gay did not end being sexually drawn to women. An ambivalence about identity remained, contradicted by the zeal with which I embraced my new gay life.

That overdetermined quality is discernible in my first foray into gay studies, a piece I composed while visiting my son in California, published two years later (1983) in *JCT*. In it I juxtaposed the work of Nancy Chodorow and Guy Hocquenghem—unlikely bedfellows—to argue that any pre-oedipal identification with the maternal body made likely men's internalization of mothers' desire, including heterosexual mothers' desire directed toward men. Even the sons of lesbian mothers know, *au fond*, they are “girls.” Infamously Hocquenghem had proclaimed “from behind we're all women,” and Chodorow, to my mind, provided the backstory. In 1981, matrifocality and the universality of homosexual desire constituted my “queer” reply to the macho Marxist emphasis on “reproduction theory”¹³ then dominating curriculum studies in the United States.

Queer also animated my move back to the study of race during the next two decades. In 1968 I had been astonished by Eldridge Cleaver's insistence that race was also about sex. Along with Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), I chose Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968) for the eight-grade English class I (“practice”) taught at Theodore Roosevelt Junior High School in Columbus in spring 1969. Students' somewhat stunned sullen silence persuaded me I was in over my head teaching poor black kids, so I declined the Roosevelt job offer and accepted instead an invitation to teach white, mostly upper-middle-class kids at Schreiber High School. I was in over my head there too.

During those two years I was consumed by teaching, and by studying, as I continued the M.A. work that I'd commenced in Columbus the summer before, undertaking independent studies with Donald Bateman and Paul Klohr (both of whom would serve on my Ph.D. committee). I recall reading *The Greening of America*, which endorsed the country's homosexualization, as well as works by Paul

Goodman, John Holt, George Dennison (who wasn't gay), and Edgar Friedenberg. On Long Island I faced students only three years my junior, many of whom seemed older developmentally than I was. Certainly they were more worldly than I, leaving me astonished, insecure, curious. Somehow I kept my calm, studying as much as teaching them.¹⁴ They studied and taught me, helping me find my way. That fall 1969 I stumbled onto the Grateful Dead at the Café au Go Go on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. Maybe there were a dozen of us in that room that night. Not a year later I heard them again at the Fillmore East, surrounded by thousands of loud listeners, including several of my students. I listened to Led Zeppelin in Carnegie Hall (of all places). One night I listened to James Taylor (again with half-a-dozen others) and maybe in that same Café au Go Go. I spent out-of-school time with students, with their parents, as well as solitary time with myself, studying, trying to reassemble something subjectively coherent out of what I was experiencing.

Despite Nixon's election in 1968, few of us seemed to notice the end of the 1960s. While circumstances had changed, my self-demand to experiment sexually, intellectually, and with drugs had not. I had tried much of what was available, including marijuana, LSD, even Quaaludes. It was cocaine, not LSD and marijuana, that sent many of us "straight" from the sixties into the eighties, but I didn't become thoroughly acquainted with cocaine until the 1990s when I was living in New Orleans.¹⁵ I get ahead of myself.

The truth is that I used to get ahead of—or was it behind—myself a lot in those days. Maybe studying—the constant in my life—was a sort of scrambling to catch up, to grasp what (or whom) I was chasing (or fleeing) and why I seemed always out-of-sync with myself, sometimes startling myself with what I did (and didn't) think and feel. I hadn't planned to pull Jeff Girard onto me; I couldn't believe I was actually leaving Karen and Columbus for Long Island. As an undergraduate studying the concept of "socialization" helped me understand why there could be noncoincidence between me and my experience; "interpellation" came later. Making something else out of what others had already made of me seemed my ongoing situation, even ethical obligation. Such "subjective reconstruction"¹⁶ involved "talking back" to the internalized "cop" who kept calling me. Coming-of-age is more complicated than what I had sketched in 1984 to University of Rochester undergraduates.¹⁷ Then I referenced the gendered relations among history, the workplace, and the production of personality. Yes, it was a whiff of economic determinism and that not a year (publication-wise) after having snorted "machismo" at the Marxists in my field.¹⁸

That field—curriculum studies—had been recently resurrected as theoretical, no longer organized around school-based curriculum development, the Kennedy administration's national curriculum reform ending forty years of that. Theory was no match for misogyny, the concept with which I decoded the scapegoating

of schoolteachers.¹⁹ Demoting teachers from public to domestic servants was a gendered agenda, intensified later in the name of No Child Left Behind, a poor and probably black child, adding racism to misogyny as the main motivators of the manufactured crisis,²⁰ a nightmare that became the nightmare of the present for millions of teachers and the children (reduced to “learners” and, bottom-line, test-takers) they taught. From Cold War to cold hard cash, there was always a political problem male politicians were covering up, never taking responsibility for Sputnik or global economic blunders but recoding these as due to an absence of academic “standards” in schools, remedied they said by demanding “accountability” in a “Race to the Top.” Corporate greed²¹ now takes the form of “technology” in the classroom, educational experience upended by test scores, somehow the symbol of salvation in an era when “numbers” are no longer cute guys but the “bottom line” erasing experience and with it meaning, those concepts now relics of an earlier not yet “post-human” time. In U.S. public schools for one hundred years—first slides, then film, then radio, followed by TV, computers, and now tablets—technology has been a history of hype. It is also a gendered and racialized history: during the Weimar Republic technology was embedded in a fascist mix of masculine mobilization and imagined Aryan (male) superiority.²²

Given matrifocality maybe there has always been a “crisis of masculinity,” the concept to which I went to understand the gender of racial violence in America.²³ There is nothing far-fetched about castration, except that it was enacted, repeatedly, in lynching. “Power” proved an inadequate explanation for this peculiar practice, and the clue came not only at the site of the phallus but its timing: the apex of lynching was 1892, and that was the year the crisis of masculinity was, historians suggest, at its most intense. That history I summarized and juxtaposed to women’s engagement in the antilynching campaign and the civil rights struggle more generally; racial violence, it seems, has been a matter between men. “I AM A MAN” said the signs striking sanitation workers held during their 1968 strike that brought Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis. As “blowback,” interracial prison rape was, I noted, also about racialized manhood.²⁴

Blowing back may have been in play that mythic night in Noah’s tent, but all we know from Genesis 9:24 is that upon waking from too much wine Noah “knew what his son had done unto him.” The so-called Curse of Ham had been referenced as the biblically legitimating incident for other sins of the flesh, for example, the sexual assaults that accompanied and structured slavery. Father-son sex seemed the primal scene not only of racialization. In that study²⁵ of the Curse of Ham I reported anthropological research detailing how older and younger men seemed sexually stitched together. To “book-end” that study of race, religion, and reparation I reviewed maybe the most infamous instance of the father-son sexual sublime: the memoirs of Daniel Paul Schreber, the German judge whose breakdown followed his feminization by none other than God-the-Father himself.²⁶

While my interest in queer theory had started subjectively, without institutional support, being affiliated with the Louisiana State University Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) program encouraged it. Through WGS I enjoyed friendships with colleagues across campus; my partner Jeff Turner and I hosted parties at our place not only for Curriculum and Instruction but for Women's and Gender Studies faculty and students as well.²⁷ After moving to the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 2005 I attended one Women's Studies meeting but quickly concluded that an additional monthly meeting would not do for the aging overcommitted academician I'd become. Overcommitted was also why I withdrew from the Coordinating Committee of the UBC program in Critical Sexuality—it now has Institute status—as I found out fast that the Canada Research Chair is as much promissory note as it is an honor.

But Jeff has come to like it here, “here” being the woods of Northwest Washington State where he gardens and I study. Jeff Turner and I celebrated our twentieth anniversary on September 26, 2015. We were married in our house in November 2013, and then again in December, the second (symbolic) time in a double ceremony with our dear friends Mary Aswell Doll and Marla Morris, an event held in our son's Brooklyn brownstone. Among the guests were our granddaughter Olympia, and our friends and colleagues Janet L. Miller and Elizabeth Macedo.

I met Janet Miller during fall term 1972, about the same time I met Madeleine Grumet, also my M.A. student. It was my first term teaching at the University of Rochester; both women taught me feminist theory and practice, subjects to which I had been introduced by Gabriel's mother Denah. In the late 1970s Peter Taubman was influential²⁸ for me; he completed his doctoral dissertation on gender politics, inspired by Foucault's recently translated *The Order of Things*. By decade's end Denah and I were split up, I was gay and sleeping my way through Toronto.²⁹ In the early 1980s I served as external examiner for James Sears, whose doctoral dissertation at Indiana University was not on gay studies—for which he became famous soon after³⁰—but on teacher education. In Bloomington I met his pal and fellow student Patti Lather. Also during these first years as an “out” man I met Dennis Carlson, teaching then at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in nearby Geneva, New York.³¹ Dennis covered for me at Rochester while I spent a term at Colgate University. As my career comes to a close, I find myself returning³² to queer theory. I might assemble between two covers queer pieces now scattered here and there, relics of that “pre-world” of scholarship—sexuality—to which I remain attentive. We'll see where study takes me.

NOTES

1. Certainly I've "slept" with several "bodies of knowledge," but not indiscriminately as the term suggests.
2. Betsy contacted me last year; how remarkable to hear from her again! She is now retired from a career in the Ohio public schools.
3. "Respectable" meant passionate kissing and fondling of breasts (and in that order) were possible, but no genital penetration was permissible.
4. We'd met in a bar just off campus; her name I have forgotten.
5. Now an old man, I have reflected on the "best sex" I've ever had in my life: Karen was one of the two. The name of the other person I've now forgotten; I do recall he was a Turkish immigrant to Toronto whom I met there around 1980.
6. Nancy, now Nancy Chatfield and living in New Mexico, has been in touch in the last year.
7. The decision was political and personal, as Denah and I had been involved in discussion groups with other (heterosexually engaged) couples discussing feminism, gay liberation, and the role of gender in American politics. As political protest, thousands of heterosexual women were becoming lesbian, contesting the patriarchy then considered to be the core of American reactionary politics. For me, too, the political became personal.
8. His dissertation research is referenced in Pinar et al., 1995, p. 1135.
9. Ron and his partner, Chuck, died of AIDS in 1988.
10. A year after we split up, David died, his illness undiagnosed. I've wondered if it might have been AIDS. Somehow spared, I remain today HIV-negative.
11. I describe that period in Pinar, 1994, pp. 253–268.
12. "Subjective reconstruction" I call it now (Pinar, 2012, pp. 207ff.).
13. Schools were said to reproduce the socioeconomic order: see Pinar et al., 1995, pp. 244ff.
14. I published the essays they'd composed in one of my classes (Pinar, 1971).
15. I wrote about both: cocaine (Pinar, 2006, pp. 43–70) and New Orleans (Pinar, 2004, p. 260).
16. Pinar, 2012, p. 207ff.; Pinar & Grumet, 2015, pp. 191–219.
17. Who invited me to address that undergraduate forum—women's studies?—I can't recall (Pinar, 1994, pp. 183–189).
18. I remain whipsawed by determinisms, most recently by Penney's (2014) provocative work. Thanks to Nelson Rodriguez for recommending that book.
19. Pinar, 2007, pp. 155–182.
20. Berliner & Biddle, 1995.
21. Moving curriculum online (Pinar, 2013), cuts costs in the short term, teachers recast as auditors confined to contract work, while money previously allocated to services to children rerouted to software and the (de)vices that use them.
22. Pinar, 2012, pp. 170–173.
23. Pinar, 2001.
24. Pinar, 2001, pp. 1012ff.
25. Pinar, 2006.
26. Pinar, 2006, pp. 89ff.
27. At one party Michel Serres chased my handsome guy around the kitchen.
28. Peter remains influential for me, as do Janet and Madeleine.
29. Where I kept, for a while, a pied-à-terre.
30. See Pinar et al., 1995, pp. 396–399.

31. Where Madeleine Grumet would also teach for a time, before moving onto Brooklyn College and, finally, to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.
32. I've spent the last decade working on the internationalization of curriculum studies, with projects on Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa. The report of each is now available in book form. For a summary, see Pinar, 2015, chap. 3.

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