

Queer Spiritual Space Conference Abstracts

Abstracts

Kath Browne: 'Dyke Spiritualities at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival'

This paper rather focuses on some of the plethora of spiritualities enacted, and restricted, at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. It explores the entanglements of sexuality, spirituality and Michfest, addressing womyn's festival spaces beyond, and including the party. The wider chapter upon which this paper draws addresses key empirical material under five themes connecting the lesbian tribe through spectacle spirituality; the scared ordinary; Michigan Magic and the extraordinary; finally the chapter has two sections that address the complex place of 'traditional' religions in a space that seeks to contest patriarchy and offer alternative ways of living, specifically exploring Judaism and Christianity. The paper concludes by debating dyke and queer spiritualities, arguing that whilst the label queer may be rejected as masculine focused and erasing womyn, womyn's spaces can be read as queer in that they contest normativities and offer new ways of living, loving, engaging and being. Yet, the normativities of Michfest (re)produce other forms of othering and exclusions by reversing the contemporary hierarchies of religious practice in the USA.

Elizabeth Dinnie: 'Sex and the Spirit: Visible Selves, Invisible Identities amongst LGBT New Agers'

And, er, the last years its definitely very clear that I needed even to identify myself again as a lesbian to make it visible because its very easy in this still heterosexual world to become invisible, especially if your, if you don't have a relationship and people don't see with who you are, it is very, erm, it, it is automatically believed that you are heterosexual, and I thought for that reason I have to, even in a spiritual or in a community on a spiritual base, I have to come out as a lesbian again, yeah

(Hazel)

The inclusiveness of New Age spirituality makes it appealing to people who align themselves with alternative sexualities and want to retain an element of the sacred in their lives. However, many New Agers do not identify with the labels or culture of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender sexualities. For some, the use of categories to describe their sexuality is seen as constraining; others simply don't like being labelled. This means that queer spiritual spaces are transitory, ephemeral phenomena in New Age circles. Social theorists have pointed out this paradox; that fixed identity categories are a necessary basis for political action yet collective solidarity is often bought at the cost of oppression and exclusion.

Stephen Hunt: 'The Secular Rhetoric and Strategies of the Christian Anti-Gay Lobby'

In line with other elements of the non-heterosexual liberation movement, lesbian and gay Christians in the United Kingdom have sought to organize and mobilize in the political sphere as well as the church setting. Their aim is to extend and protect what they regard as fundamental human and civil rights. A countervailing Christian movement, articulated through various factions, has arisen to confront the non-heterosexual lobby. This paper explores the strategy adopted by conservative groupings seeking to forcefully reply to their highly vociferous opponents who have appealed to both church and secular agencies with the language of "rights". Such a response increasingly involves a discernible shift from a discourse of "sin" and biblical prohibition as the conservatives engage in their own secular rhetoric related to "rights" – religious

and otherwise, thus arguably indicating wider processes of “internal secularization” within the Christian churches.

Patrick James: ‘Queer Spiritual Spaces – Online’

The Queer Spiritual Spaces project has a significant online presence with a website, blog, forum and a Second Life installation.

The website itself is a space for giving information about the project and the researchers as well as providing contact details for anyone that is interested in the case studies. The website is flexible in nature so that it will fill a variety of browser sizes and is thus suitable for monitors of all sizes as well as mobile devices.

The blog has provided a platform for news updates about Queer Spiritual Spaces and the forums have been used for private discussions amongst the Queer Spiritual Spaces team as well as open discussions for any who have registered. In addition forums have been set up for individuals within a case study to have discussions within their own group.

Queer Spiritual Spaces’ Second Life installation is situated on New Brighton Island and is the first dedicated queer spiritual space on Second Life, or indeed in any three dimensional online environment.

“Queer Spiritual Spaces Online” presentation will feature a walk through of the Second Life installation and a guided tour of all the aspects of the Queer Spiritual Spaces online presence.

Amna Khalid: ‘Queer Spirituality: The Muslim Experience’

Mainstream Islam censures queer sexuality and consequently queer Muslims either move away from Islam or use the strategy of ‘queering’ the Quran and Sunah to explore their spirituality. In so doing they shift the locale of authority from the external institution to the self. This paper avers that queer Muslim spirituality is a result of the personal journeys of these Muslims to understand and create coherent identities.

Moreover it suggests that queer spiritual spaces are not fixed/located either in text or geographically. They tend to be more fluid, imaginary at the personal level. Queer spirituality is therefore better understood as a whole experience, a journey which is inextricably connected to other dimensions of identity, including sexuality.

Finally this paper suggests that the *institutionalisation* of queer spaces on the basis of faith and spirituality with the express purpose of creating open and inclusive spaces tends to create new orthodoxies and new margins. Inherent in the process of group identity formation is the need to exclude. Queer spirituality thus tends to be a very subjective and an individual practice.

Sally R. Munt: ‘Queer Quakers’

This case study commenced with contacting key British and North American stakeholders in the Spring and early Summer of 2007, to discuss with them the best way of including LGBTQ Quakers in our research.

These initial contacts proved to be invaluable in locating several clusters of participants: a regional existing “local Quaker lesbian and gay group” comprising members from several different Meetings, both urban and

rural; a UK national organisation “Quaker Lesbian and Gay Fellowship”; a national group in the USA for Quaker Lesbians, whose annual conference gathering was attended as participant observer by Heather White. Members of three Meeting Houses: one in the US state of Pennsylvania, one in central London and one in a South Coast of England city, were all involved in the project in various ways, and we also had helpful communication with the Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Concerns, USA.

Consequentially, the interviews and focus groups took place in late Summer 2008. Overall, 11 individual interviews were conducted, and 3 focus groups, from two countries, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, with 24 participants. The transcriptions of recordings produced 125,000 words for analysis. In addition to this, there were numbers of email and telephone correspondences with Friends who could not or did not want to participate in a recorded interview or focus group, but were interested in responding to the project and making their own observations.

Sharon Smith: ‘How Queer Is Buddhism?’

This presentation briefly outlines the project’s findings regarding Queer Buddhists. It looks at the different ways in which participants in this section of the study are positioned within the Buddhist groups/traditions with which they are affiliated. The findings suggest that most Queer Buddhists are successfully negotiating space in Buddhist groups/traditions. This is possibly due to the largely neutral attitude of Buddhism towards same-sex love compared to other religious/spiritual traditions, and the tendency of most UK Buddhist groups to be more welcoming towards queer people. However, the findings suggest that hierarchies of gender identity, ‘race’ and class work to establish who has most visibility and voice within the spaces that are being opened up. This may be because of the heteronormative gender regimes that operate within Buddhist traditions and the tendency of most UK Buddhist groups to be white, male and middle-class dominated. The acceptance observed by the study is also often marked by homonormativity. Despite this, the anti-essentialism of Buddhism combined with their greater inclusivity has meant that many LGB (if not TQI) Buddhists can find spaces where questions of sexual identity can be put to one side if not abandoned altogether. In this way Buddhism may develop queerer spaces.

Robert M. Vanderbeck: ‘Global Anglicanism and the Sexuality Debates’

For several decades, the worldwide Anglican Communion has been embroiled in a series of increasingly fractious debates about homosexuality, including the morality of same-sex relationships, the blessing of same-sex unions, the ordination of gay clergy, and the consecration of gay bishops. The Communion is often described as being ‘in crisis’ or at risk of a ‘schism’ as a result of these issues, and the 2003 consecration of an openly gay man, Gene Robinson, as Bishop of New Hampshire in the Episcopal Church of the US has become a particular focus of the crisis. This presentation draws on research from the AHRC/ESRC project ‘Sexuality and Global Faith Networks: A Social Topography’, which also includes Gill Valentine, Kevin War, Johan Andersson, and Joanna Sadgrove, all of the University of Leeds. The project involves fieldwork in the US, UK, and South Africa on the significance and consequences of the debates in global Anglicanism over sexuality. The presentation gives particular attention to the team’s ethnographic fieldwork at the Lambeth Conference 2008, including the discourses and tactics of pro-LGBT groups who were present at the event.

Heather White: 'Finding Queer Seekers Online (and other accidental discoveries in the quest for the "non-aligned spiritually curious")'

Heather White presents research on spirituality within LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersexed) networks formed on Internet sites like Facebook, MyOutSpirit.com, and Second Life. The study methods relied on participant-observation and interviewing conducted on the internet. Heather will talk about the unique challenges and benefits of "netographic" research as she also discusses findings from her research, which suggest a wide variety of ways that LGBTQI people navigate religious connection and belonging through digital technologies.

Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip: 'Researching Sexualities and Spiritualities: Some Critical Reflections'

Drawing upon my research on British lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) Christians and Muslims in the past decade, this talk aims to highlight selective theoretical, methodological, and ethical themes. It begins with the issue of being theoretically and culturally sensitive in the study of this partly hidden population, and the relevance of methodological pragmatism and pluralism. It then discusses the challenges of sampling and the dynamics of the insider/outsider status. The talk concludes with a call for research on the LGB population to take seriously intersectionality and diversity, and the role of religion/spirituality in LGB lives and politics.