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Ghost Dances: A Trans-Movement Manifesto

Susan Stryker

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At this event, the authors invited a panel of three guest speakers to introduce Sexuality, Health and Human Rights and draw attention to its major contributions and challenges. Rafael de la Dehesa, an assistant professor of sociology, anthropology, and social work at CUNY, College of Staten Island, commended the authors for effectively straddling the divide between academia and activism, for detailing the impacts of global capitalism, the "war on terror," UN agencies and human rights regimes on local and national settings, and for analyzing secularism and religious conservatism from the same critical perspective. De la Dehesa also raised interesting questions about the authors' ambivalent position with regard to secular politics: should an understanding of religions as complex and diverse mean dismissing a commitment to secularism?

...HOW TO BUILD SEXUAL RIGHTS AS DISCOURSE AND ADVOCACY, TRANSFORM IDEALS SUCH AS EROTIC JUSTICE AND SEXUAL FREEDOM INTO REALITIES, IDENTIFY AGENTS AND IMPORTANT DECISION-MAKERS, AND CREATE SHIFTING SPACES FOR DIFFERENT VOICES TO BE HEARD.

Ananya Mukherjea, an associate professor of women's studies and sociology also at CUNY's College of Staten Island, noted the authors' healthy skepticism toward the emerging conceptual framework of sexual rights at the same time as they embrace its aspirations. Mukherjea also commended their skillful theorizing of desire and motivation, which have, of late, often been diluted or obscured in sexuality studies and policy platforms in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In particular, she found the critique of human rights groups that remain silent on issues of sexuality, and of the recent trends toward re-medicalizing HIV/AIDS, to be especially illuminating and important contributions to related bodies of literature and approaches to advocacy.

A third colleague, Nomvuyo Z.T. Nolutshungu, a doctoral candidate in political science at CUNY's Graduate Center who is writing a dissertation on transitional justice and human rights, was grateful for the authors' treatment of human rights as insufficient yet indispensable, and their vision of how human rights policies could be improved. She was especially taken by their recommendations that sexual rights be individually relational rather than universal, necessarily transformative of boundaries of inclusion/exclusion, and expanded and made locally as

well as globally relevant through broad coalitions of diverse social movements.

In terms of the book's challenges, all three of the presenters spoke of the same general concern: the challenges of effecting change. That is, they wanted to know how to build sexual rights as discourse and advocacy, transform ideals such as erotic justice and sexual freedom into realities, identify agents and important decision-makers, and create shifting spaces for different voices to be heard. Sonia Corrêa responded to this concern in her closing remarks, admitting that, indeed, these are dilemmas that perplex the authors as well but are far too complex to be resolved in a single publication or by only a few authors. *Sexuality, Health and Human Rights*, rather, is intended precisely to raise these types of difficult questions and to inspire activists and academics to keep thinking and struggling: remaining actively engaged in sexual rights debates yet always challenging the issues from an outside viewpoint.

This event was cosponsored by the Program in Political Science at the CUNY Graduate Center; the Women & Gender Studies Program and the Political Science Departments at Hunter College; and the secretariats of Sexuality Policy Watch at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and at ABIA in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Nancy Worthington is a member of the SPW – Columbia Secretariat Team

GHOST DANCES: A TRANS-MOVEMENT MANIFESTO

Susan Stryker, Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, delivered the 17th annual David R. Kessler Lecture in LGBTQ Studies on November 14, 2008 at the Graduate Center. Paisley Currah, Associate Professor of Political Science, Brooklyn College, and Joanne Meyerowitz, Professor of History and American Studies at Yale University presented the testimonials.

Following is an excerpt from what Stryker called a "secular sermon" that envisions some much needed trans-movements to draw vital links between the gender-sexuality analyses and critical problems threatening our cultural and ecological survival.

Several things coincided to shape the space from which this lecture emerged. The first was an email from a list I'm on, soliciting creative, artistic responses to climate change. The second was a call for proposals for a symposium on "subversive imaginaries." The third, an ongoing conversation with a dancer friend about critical embodiment practices. Fourth, the tangle of thoughts sorting themselves out into various bits of prose and syllabi then being demanded by editors and administrators. Fifth, the backdrop of an historical presidential election soliciting us all to dwell upon "the fierce urgency of now." And finally, the call from Sarah Chinn at CLAGS letting me know I'd have the honor and opportunity to pull something together to say tonight: when she asked me for a title, "Ghost Dances" is what popped out.

THE FIRST MOVEMENT: MOBILIZING AFFECT

It began in an elegiac mood. The musician Antony Hegarty sent around an email asking people who had communicated with the band Antony and the Johnsons for thoughts on global warming, as part of the process that informed the making of their recent EP, *Another World*. The piece I wanted to pull together tonight starts in my own response to Antony's music, and in a conviction that I trust s/he shares, that in transgender affect lies a transformative power that must be brought to bear on our multiple current crises.

Receiving that email inspired the following response, "Ghost Dance:"

...
 why is it that
 we the secular
 now sense Apocalypse
 when we augur the signs of the times?

Surely that old tale is too worn out,
 too ill-used to be true.

And yet . . .
 the ice melts and the oceans rise,
 the forests burn and the well's dry.
 Plague, pestilence, and famine
 stalk the cities and the desert-places alike,
 and everywhere there is war or the rumor of war.

....
 And yet . . .
 ...
 Let us not yet lie down to die.
 ...
 Let us give up what is dead to the dead.
 Let us love what we have lost forever by letting it become a ghost.
 Let us live, if only for one moment more, if with but the slimmest of hopes
 and with no illusion at all.
 Let us then face the music—and let us begin to dance.

Let our bodies be moved in ways our bodies have never before been moved
 Let our feet set new patterns to the ground
 Let the ground give rise to ways of touching
 That have never been grounded before.

About the same time that I received the email inviting thoughts on the environmental catastrophe unfolding around us, I received a call for papers for a symposium Judith Halberstam was conducting at the University of Western Sydney called "Queer and Subjugated Knowledges: Generating Subversive Imaginaries," which not only resonated with thoughts I'd previously published on transgender studies as a critical practice for desubjugating embodied, experiential, and affective knowledges, but also aligned with the mood evoked for me by Antony Hegarty's query. Here's an excerpt from the call for papers:

...it is possible to imagine other forms of being, other forms of knowing, a world with different sites for justice and injustice, a mode of being where the emphasis falls less on money and work and competition, and more on cooperation, trade and sharing. The work that animates such knowledge projects should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naive. Building upon recent theorizations of the alternative, this symposium invites manifestos, performative lectures, surprising presentations, all committed to imagining life otherwise and thinking collectively about alternative epistemologies, methodologies, life narratives, cultural productions, modes of being and doing.

Because I've been spending time regularly in Sydney since 2003, working there with an exciting group of colleagues at the Somatechnics Research Centre in the Department of Critical and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University, I was eager for any prospect of going to Australia, and proposed the following abstract:

"Ghost Dances" is a secular sermon that unabashedly advocates embracing a disruptive and refigurative genderqueer/transgender

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TRANS-

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Transsexual, transvestite, transnational, transgender, transformative...trans. This flexible, revolutionary term implies space between the either/or and in this provocative collection, pioneers in the field of transgender studies explore how the concept of "trans" has drawn attention to the porous areas between definitions: between young and old, the real and the imaginary, and especially man and woman.

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power as a spiritual resource for social transformation. It does so somewhat elliptically by drawing upon the history and anthropology of cultural regeneration movements (such as the Native American ghost dance ritual) to chart a transformative path for contemporary society from a thoroughly reasonable despair towards an equally rational joy. It blends queer critical theory's inside-out deconstruction of Western ontology with language lifted from world religion traditions to offer jaded cynics the prospect of belief without irony. Specifically, it deploys the trope of choreography to articulate the series of movements we must make—weaving back and forth across the subject/object divide of the dominant epistemology—to begin enacting new and sustainable relationships between embodiment, subjectivity, and environment. More vitally, it calls upon listeners to begin physically moving their bodies according to new patterns—new habits capable of generating a new habitus, new habitations, and new habitats—thereby materially linking individual actions with global transformations. If we are to survive, it is time to let go of the old world. It is time for transfigured flesh to dance a new world into being.

I decided almost immediately that I really couldn't make it to Sydney this year, but that's when I received the invitation to be here tonight, and I thought "Ghost Dances" would be an appropriate offering. I'm humbled and abashed by how little progress I've made toward finishing the piece that I initially envisioned, and that I promised to deliver. I wanted to be like a musician tonight, performing a polished original composition. Instead, I feel like I'm doing a few structured improvisations. I feel like a character in a Jorge Luis Borges short story, saying "If I were to have written a novel it would have gone something like this."

THE SECOND MOVEMENT: A QUEER HISTORY OF THE GHOST DANCE

There is a long history in this country of Euro-American people appropriating cultural forms (along with pretty much everything else) from the earliest inhabitants of this continent, and of making fictive identifications with "Indians" for a variety of rhetorical purposes. In organizing my intentions in this lecture via the concept of a "ghost dance," I'm skirting the edges of that history of white appropriation of Native American cultural forms, and perhaps, some might say, actually, if inadvertently, walking down that well-trodden path.

The Ghost Dance—singular and capitalized—refers to a short-lived pan-tribal spiritual and political movement that originated among the Northern Paiute people of western Nevada in 1889. That movement had various names among the various peoples who embraced it, and was first given the name Ghost Dance by white observers trying to translate a set of concepts about this life and its relationship to an afterlife that could be migrated across colonization's epistemological divide only with great difficulty and a measure of loss. The Ghost Dance movement, which I understand as a response to cultural genocide and ecological devastation, was based on a vision by the Northern Paiute shaman Wovoka, who later adopted the Christian name Jack Wilson. In his vision, Wovoka was transported to an abundant land teeming with life, where the living and the dead would be reunited. There, in this otherworld, he was given a dance which, if performed at the proper intervals, would hasten the arrival of that longed-for reunification. Wovoka's message, and the dance, spread rapidly across North America among many of the First Nations, changing somewhat as it traveled. Some among the Sioux, recently confined to a diminished reservation in South Dakota, came to believe that dancing the Ghost Dance would bring the buffalo back to the plains, that it would make white people vanish from the earth, and that wearing special Ghost Dance shirts would render the wearer impervious to bullets. The infamous Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 was the tragic result of the U.S. military response to a band of Sioux leaving the reservation to dance the Ghost Dance.

What seems inspirational and instructive to me about the Ghost Dance is not the particular content of its ceremonies, which properly belong to others, but rather the conviction among a people that how we physically move our bodies, individually and collectively, has the power to transform both ourselves and the world. As anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace pointed out many decades ago, in his study of *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, and as ethnologist John Mooney, the first Euro-American student of the Ghost Dance, pointed out in the 1890s, cultural revitalization movements, often involving communal dance and ecstatic vision, have a long human history: in the experience of genocide, in the aftermath of colonization, in the midst of environmental degradation, how is the meaning of life made anew, through our actions? By invoking the evocative label "ghost dance" in my thoughts today, it is to this broader history of collective cultural transformation that I intend to refer, rather than toward any particular ritual or tradition. My goal is not to acquire the ceremony of another, but to ask, in all seriousness: what would a "ghost dance" look like for us? How can we, in the belly of the beast of catastrophe capitalism, invoke a new vision that brings us together to change ourselves and change our world?

U.S. LGBT communities of the past several decades have crafted their own special variant of the appropriable indigene, in the assertion of a



SUSAN STRYKER

special affinity between queer and Native American cultures. The most striking example, given my present theme, is the story told by Harry Hay, founder of the Mattachine Society and the Radical Fairies, in *Radically Gay* (pp. 28-31). Hay tells of being a child visiting a relative's ranch in western Nevada in 1925, and of having been recognized as "different" by an old Paiute shaman who went by the name Jack Smith, who offered the young Hay his blessing. Years later—1969, to be precise, at the very historical moment that gay liberation was erupting in the wake of the Stonewall riots—Hay was politically involved with a traditionalist Native American group, which had just acquired the recent Dover reprint edition of John Mooney's rare, long-out-of-print monograph on the Ghost Dance. Hay thought that "the whole traditional movement has a lot of the same type of prophecy and visionism in common with what was going on in that time—sort of reinvoking it, making it possible to apply it in the twentieth century." It was in reading Mooney that Hay first learned that Jack Smith's Paiute name was Wovoka, and that he had been blessed as a child by the originator of the Ghost Dance movement—thus forging a symbolic link between contemporary white radical gay culture and indigenous spirituality and politics.

The transgender movement that gathered force in the early 1990s similarly rooted itself in an imagined past that valorized indigenous forebears. The pamphlet that first popularized the word "transgender" as a collective term for a politicized grouping of multiple gender-variant communities and identities, Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*, painted an idyllic picture of traditional cultures in which, before the advent of capitalism and European colonialism, gender-crossing individuals held positions of honor and esteem. Feinberg wrote movingly of "transgender warriors" who, like shamans of old, possess a certain kind of knowledge, an awareness of the potential for self-transformability nestled in the heart of a living culture, and who are therefore called to lead their people. Whatever Feinberg's vision lacked in historical specificity it made up for in emotive force: it was a story that effectively situated the current socio-political oppression of gender atypicality firmly within history's long march, and one that yoked the longing for a better future to the redemption of a vanished past though our actions in the present day.

The question at the crux of my talk is essentially the same as Feinberg's, stripped of the romance of the transgender native: what would it mean for those of us who consider ourselves to be trans today, for those of us who know from the ways we have lived our embodied subjects in the world that radical change is within our power both individually and collectively, what would it mean for those of us who are trans to assert ourselves as spiritual leaders in a movement for cultural transformation?

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OF OCCUPYING THE MOST
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THE THIRD MOVEMENT: A SECULAR SPIRITUALITY

The first step, for me, is to rethink what both "leadership" and "spirituality" might mean, as well as what we mean by "trans." To begin with, leading is not a matter of occupying the most advanced position, but rather of gesturing in the direction that one should go. It is a movement conducted by one's own body that can serve as a template or pattern for the movements of others. And as for spirituality, as a secular person it is vital for me to think of it as fully immanent in the material world, rather than as transcendently apart from it.

I would like to suggest that contemporary critical theories of gender and sexuality offer what amounts to a secular materialist account of the soul or spirit. We can see it in the line of reasoning that runs from Spinoza through Deleuze to inform the current wave of attention to "affect," which is imagined not as feelings emanating from the individual in response to the experience of the world, but rather as a quality of being that draws the individual into greater or lesser degrees of connectivity with the environment. We can see it in the work of Michel Foucault and his followers, in their discussion of biopolitics, which turns modern European political economy on its head. Thomas Hobbes had it exactly backwards, in other worlds, when he wrote, in the preamble to *Leviathan*, that Man, imitating nature, creates an artificial being, or Leviathan, called the commonwealth, in which "Sovereignty is an Artificial Soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body." If, following Foucault's reformulation of power, we think of soul or spirit as that which animates us, as that which is the concrete essence of who we are as a particular subject, as that vital force which is coextensive with our bodies but nonidentical to it, and as that which survives our individual death, then it is the soul of Man that is an artifice constructed by the nature of Leviathan.

Since this is a secular sermon, allow me a moment of scriptural exegesis. I take my text from Michael Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume One*, from the chapter "Right of Death and Power Over Life," in which Foucault argued that sovereign power evolved two basic forms of acting on human life, which, rather than being antithetical, constituted the twin poles of power's development. The first of these poles, designated the "anatomy-political," disciplined the body's biological substance in order to maximize its productive capability while simultaneously increasing its docility, and it aimed at the body's "integration into systems of efficient and economic control." The second pole, designated the "biopolitical," took charge of the "mechanisms of life" with which the biological body was imbued: its generative and reproductive capacities, its overall health and longevity, and so on, which functioned a resource upon which sovereign power could draw. The anatomy-political and biopolitical poles of power, Foucault contends, are "linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations."

It is this "intermediary cluster of relations" that I have taken to calling the somatechnic: a capillary space of connection and circulation between macropolitical structurations of power and micropolitical techniques through which the lives of bodies become enmeshed in the lives of nations, states, and capital formations; a site where current forms of capital and sovereign power seek to reproduce themselves through us even

as we seek to live the life of our bodies for ends that sustain our own peculiar means of living; an experiential space of which we are sensually aware and in which we are subjectively present; a situation we could call our embodied soul or self or spirit. It is a space defined as a space of passage, by the quality of being a “trans” space, and it is a site of agency, I would argue, at which we may begin to enact and materialize new social ontologies.

We have all become accustomed, over the past 20 years or so, to queering things. How might we now begin to trans them? I have always been charmed by those mad drawings of the “topography of the subject” that Lacan offers in *Écrits*, and want to offer my own playful version here to illustrate the kinds of trans-movements that I think we are all capable of making.

X

Imagine the figure “X” as a minimal schematic representation of a matrix, of the concept of intersectionality applied to the embodied subject—not merely all those technes, dispositifs, discourses, and Foucauldian relations of power that converge upon, overwhelm, and thereby constitute the spacetime of embodied subjectivity, but also food chains, respiratory circulations, transmissions of genetic code, and the like. These are the solid lines of the physical (material and energetic) world, organized according to specific culturally and historically variable patterns, that allow us our concrete being. In crossing and entangling themselves in a particular spacetime, (that is to say, in transing one another) they make us the thing that we are, in a Heideggerian and Old High German sense of thing as “a gathering.”

O

Imagine next the figure “O” cut upon the X in such a way that the ends of the crossed lines extend beyond the circle’s edge, in an operation that introduces entirely new categories of possible crossings, or trans-movements, between inside and outside, depth and surface, foreground and background. This is the circle of subjectivity, demarcating the parts of the world designated self and other, and which by definition must cut across the lines of the physical world that organize themselves as us. Subjectively maps itself onto spacetime only partially through the extension and organization of our sensorium, which cuts the world into those parts experienced as sensation and those parts experienced as object: casting the circle of subjectivity is also a practice, a learned but modifiable way of recognizing, or failing to recognize, the connections to be made across the cut.

WE HAVE ALL BECOME
ACCUSTOMED, OVER THE PAST
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WE BEGIN TO TRANS THEM.

V

Imagine next figures with a “V” shape, occupying the spaces between the outstretched arms of the X, their crotches placed near the crotches of the X inside the circle of subjectivity but with their lines spreading, ever wideningly, into the extrasubjective world. The registration of the V figures is slightly off-line of the X figure so that they mark the interstitial space chiasmatically related to the concrete space of the X: they represent a space-between whose shape is the complement of that which is materially present. The V figures introduce yet another category of trans-movement—poetic ones that grasp the possibility of reversing foreground and background, inside and outside, depth and surface to shift across the boundary between the actual and the potential, the real and the virtual, the physical and the phantasmatic. This is the ghost space, to return to my metaphor, that haunts the existing shape of the presently organized world, and which, in upsurging from the interstice, offers the possibility of remaking a world.

I

Imagine now a final set of figures in the form of an “I,” that create lines bisecting the V-spaces, and which represent a final set of trans-movements: these are the sutures that reach toward the horizon of material possibility and anchor themselves there, across the open interstitial spaces of poetically grasped potentials, and which then, in a return movement toward subjectivity, can gather and fold the fabric of spacetime into self in a novel fashion. These movements thereby materially reconfiguring that portion of the matrix of possibility that subjectivity maps as itself. Through repetition, these are the choreographic trans-actions that begin to impart new pattern to the world, though which we dance a new world into being.

THE FOURTH MOVEMENT: SOCIAL ASSEMBLAGE

In closing, I would like to gesture toward the ways in which the trans-movements I have been describing at the micro-level of individual subjectivity can begin to link to larger, macro-level political and social assemblages.

It is common, in contemporary queer cultures, to consider trans communities and identities as later additions to previously existing homo and bi communities and identities: we speak of an LGBT community, in that order. Other sequences of assembly of course are possible. What might a social movement look like in which trans-related concerns were considered central and initial, rather than peripheral and appended? Rather than enumerate the possibilities, I’ll be content, for now, to leave these to your imaginations.

I would like to end with a comment on the recent election of Barack Obama, with its message of change and hope, which provided an incapable backdrop as I worked to pull my thoughts together for my lecture tonight, and which in some measure informed what I have to say about envisioning a new world, and can serve as something of a template for the kind of trans-movement I envision: one that links the broadest possible constituencies together in a common goal.

In one my classes this term I taught Judith Butler's essay on Pierre Bourdieu, "Performativity's Social Magic," in which Butler remarked on what she called the "subversive expropriability of the dominant." What happens, she asks:

when those who have been denied social power to claim 'freedom' or 'democracy' appropriate those terms from the dominant discourse and rework or resignify those highly cathected terms to rally a political movement. . . . ? What is the performative power of claiming an entitlement to those terms—'justice' . . . 'democracy'—that have been articulated to exclude the ones who now claim that entitlement? What is the performative power of calling for freedom or the end of racism precisely in order to counter the workings of the dominant discourse?

In our broader political environment in the United States, we have just witnessed one such subversive expropriation of dominant discourses, and I'll end by soliciting you all towards another such moment. If we are all assemblages, particular knottings of spacetime that give us our particular being, if we all are capable of trans-movements that allow to assemble ourselves with the world in new ways, how can we all begin moving together in new ways that create conditions in which the political promise of a "freedom of assembly" becomes articulated in viable, life-sustaining ways?

Thank you for your time tonight.

NEWS BEYOND CLAGS

BROOKLYN COLLEGE TO OFFER MINOR IN LGBTQ STUDIES

BY JESSE BAYKER

Brooklyn College became the first CUNY school to offer undergraduates a minor in LGBTQ Studies when college faculty approved the proposal in December.

"Students have been clamoring for a queer studies program for a long time," said Paisley Currah, a political science professor who led the committee working on the program. "We've always had sexuality-related courses in a few different departments, but until now there was no overarching program pulling it all together into a cohesive whole."

An influx of new faculty whose training and research focuses on sexuality and LGBTQ populations, combined with student demand, generated the energy momentum to create the program. For the past year, Currah, along with Gaston Alonso, Mobina Hashmi, Flavia Rando, María R. Scharrón-del Río, Jeanne Theoharis, Barbara Winslow and about 20 other faculty members, adjunct instructors, and students worked to create a minor in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Studies.

Jeanne Theoharis, a political science professor and Endowed Chair in Women's Studies, called the minor "a long overdue institutionalization of what scholars and students have known for decades: to understand American and global history, U.S. and world politics, art, literature, and culture, a critical understanding of sexuality—and the experiences of LGBTQ people more specifically—is crucial." "I am proud to be part of an academic community that understands the importance of telling all stories," said Hana Quinn-Feit, President of the student-run LGBT Alliance.

The 12-credit interdisciplinary minor will be offered as part of the Women's Studies Program. Students will be required to complete the new anchor course, "Fundamental Concepts in LGBTQ Studies," and will choose three other courses from a roster that includes offerings cross-listed with Africana Studies, Anthropology, Classics, Education, English, Health and Nutrition Science, History, Political Science, and Television and Radio.

In addition to five courses in sexuality studies already offered at Brooklyn College, six new courses for the minor have already been added to the curriculum, and several more are under development this year. Students will also have an opportunity to complete a community internship in LGBTQ institutions for credit toward the minor. More information about the program is available at <http://sites.google.com/site/lgbtqstudiesbrooklyn>.

Jesse Bayker is a History major at Brooklyn College. As part of his work for the LGBTQ Studies minor, he will be interning at the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in the spring.

LGBTQ STUDIES MINOR IS A LONG OVERDUE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF WHAT SCHOLARS AND STUDENTS HAVE KNOWN FOR DECADES: TO UNDERSTAND AMERICAN AND GLOBAL HISTORY, US AND WORLD POLITICS, ART, LITERATURE, AND CULTURE, A CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUALITY—AND THE EXPERIENCE OF LGBTQ PEOPLE MORE SPECIFICALLY—IS CRUCIAL.

JEANNE THEOHARIS,
BROOKLYN COLLEGE