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Queer Pedagogical Desire: A Study Guide

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Matt Brim. "Queer Pedagogical Desire: A Study Guide." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 41.3-4 (Fall/Winter 2013): 173-189.

We are in a queer pedagogical moment in the academy. The moment is not new, but a number of recent books have dramatized it and made it more urgent. In the past two years, studies by Robyn Wiegman, Roderick Ferguson, Sara Ahmed, Judith Halberstam, and David Halperin have illuminated the political, historical, phenomenological, theoretical, and affective contours of institutionalized queer teaching and scholarship. These books allow me in this essay to reflect in a timely way on a recent queer pedagogical intervention of my own: writing the study guide for Jim Hubbard's 2012 documentary film, United in Anger: A History of ACT UP.^{<1>} My narrative traces the history of the study guide, charting its contexts, goals, and methods, in order ultimately to identify and confront murkier questions about its creation.

Having never used or read a study guide, why was I writing this one?^{<2>} Why was I so committed to the project? What simultaneously charged and freighted this rather intense moment of queer pedagogical engagement for me?

In Object Lessons Robyn Wiegman considers just such questions in terms of professors' aspirations to turn political commitment to critical practice. "What is it we expect our relationship to our objects of study to do?" she asks fellow practitioners of identity knowledges (2012, 337). Here, Wiegman considers the "many projects of academic study that were institutionalized in the U.S. university in the twentieth century for the study of identity" (1). Those projects include women's studies, ethnic studies, American studies, and queer studies.^{<3>} Like academics throughout the university, the inhabitants of identity knowledges want something from their objects of study. But educators in these fields nevertheless stand apart "because they

invest so much in making explicit what other fields do not explicitly name by framing their modes and manners of analysis as world-building engagements aimed as social change” (4). In fact, Wiegman suggests that the pedagogical objects of identity knowledges are assembled by practitioners precisely in order to carry out or pursue a critical obligation to social justice.

But the pursuit of justice through critical objects is fraught, filtered through and by institutionalizing processes. In his recasting of identity knowledge formations in The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference, Roderick Ferguson argues that the “interdisciplines” of ethnic studies, women’s studies, and now queer studies mark the management of difference by power through the academy in the aftermath of the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Minority pedagogies thus represent a form of controlled affirmation, “power’s newest techniques for the taking of difference” (2012, 22). Ferguson sees the current moment as particularly resonant for examining the absorption of modes of sexual difference into administrative contexts (209). But ironically and purposefully, the academy’s organization of identity knowledges, including sexual ones, further disrupts the impulse toward justice that Wiegman investigates, and it does so in part by conferring an official status on that work. The serious-making process of what Jack Halberstam calls “disciplinary correctness” (2011, 6) charges even/especially the ostensibly irreverent interdiscipline of queer studies with the burden of understanding its work to be a high-stakes intervention. À la Wiegman, what can we possibly expect of the critiques we level (of gender, race, nation, sexuality) in an institutional environment that so variously recontains them? And ultimately, “how coherently do theoretical innovation and critical commitment line up with the world of living things?” (189).

While Wiegman examines objects of study as broad disciplinary formations driven by justice-object relations, my goal here, more modestly, is to consider my relatively petit objet, the

study guide.<4> For, I argue, the guide manifests a similarly mediated commitment to queer studies pedagogy. Although this sort of analysis of a single pedagogical artifact certainly overburdens the admittedly fragile study guide with the weight of disciplinary meaning, it nevertheless grounds my analysis in the details of the pedagogic choices and contexts that help to materialize that engagement. What then, in the context of teaching United in Anger in queer studies courses and subsequently writing the study guide, did I want my object of study to do within what Sara Ahmed calls “the diversity world” of higher education (2012, 12)? Taking up Ahmed’s phenomenological model for understanding our diversity commitments, I imagine the study guide as a concretely located commitment that diversity workers can “follow around” the university as a practical way of pursuing justice and, therefore, articulating the relationship between political desires and their pedagogical investments. This methodology dovetails, in fact, with the nature of my desire for the guide because the question of what I wanted my petit objet to do becomes a question of where I wanted the study guide, the pedagogical embodiment of my queer political desire, to go. Where, then, did it come from, where is it going, how might it arrive there, and why might it not arrive in ways intended? The ongoing story of creating the study guide is my fantasy of queer pedagogical desire on the move.

Why Me?

In the fall of 2011, Jim Hubbard graciously agreed to screen United in Anger for my LGBTQ literature classes at the College of Staten Island (CSI), which is part of the City University of New York (CUNY). The question-and-answer session that followed the viewing revealed much about my students’ understandings of HIV/AIDS and the history of AIDS activism in the United States. Before and especially after the screening Jim and I began to think

earnestly about the institutional life of the movie and the opportunities it presented for students to encounter the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), nearly all of them for the first time.<5> Initially, then, I found myself drawn to and drawing on Jim's commitment to preserving a history of one of the most important and successful activist organizations of the past fifty years. I had originally met Jim through his longtime collaborator and coproducer of United in Anger, Sarah Schulman, who is my colleague and mentor at CSI. Jim and Sarah co-founded the MIX NYC experimental film festival in 1987, were members of ACT UP, and are creators and curators of the ACT UP Oral History Project (actuporalhistory.org). My pedagogical connection to the director and the coproducer of United in Anger (they had visited my classes to screen the film several times) and my personal friendships and deep admiration of their work combined to form a commitment to the project. Professionally and affectively, I became attached to the study guide.

That attachment was also significant for me because it affirmed my commitment to queer pedagogy, for the film effectively teaches a model of queer politics and activism to students.<6> Prior to writing the study guide I had taught all or portions of United in Anger about ten times in courses at a variety of curricular levels, from general education English classes at the associate level to graduate queer studies courses for doctoral students, and several times I had guided discussions of the film in the presence of the filmmakers. I had found the film to be a suitable text for all these courses, but not because its content was easily accessible to all audiences. Rather, the film contains difficult truths about how the AIDS crisis emerged at the nexus of an unwieldy combination of powerful social dangers: homophobia, racism, sexism, an antihealthcare culture, corporate greed, institutional elitism within the medical and scientific communities, a newly identified virus, and a government that, rather than intervening in order to

save the lives of its citizens, chose to remain committed to deadly inaction. United in Anger shows the scope of these intersecting problems to be so vast as to make deep understanding of ACT UP and the HIV/AIDS crisis difficult for any audience. The film's accessibility, rather, results in large part from the directorial decisions about how to tell this many layered story. Hubbard creates a documentary film that uses archival footage and oral histories of surviving ACT UP members as its primary narrative elements so that United in Anger offers an immediacy of experience that replicates the impassioned, harrowing ordeal of being inside the AIDS crisis. In many ways, then, the documentary models an "exemplary" queerness in its quasi-experimental aesthetic and composition, in its authentic, nondominant depiction of gay and lesbian people on film, in its attention to the practices by which queer visual artists reclaimed public space as a site for dialogue on subcultural aesthetic and political values, and perhaps foremost in the complexity shown in how it captures the queer activist politics by which identity both dissolved and coalesced in ACT UP. In short, I believed in and continue to believe in the queer pedagogical value of this film, and I wanted to literalize my own attachment to it by writing the study guide.

But another dynamic, a disciplinary dynamic, was at play. For even as I sought to attach myself to the film through the study guide, the guide was institutionally already attaching itself to me. My experience of teaching the film and my desire to make a written commitment to it consolidated around my disciplinary position as assistant professor of queer studies into what might be called a professional qualification. Although I am housed within and supported by an English department, as with many professors of the "interdisciplines" my work traces lines of desire, sex, sexuality, and gender across categories, including disciplinary ones. My classes are organized variously around queer content and methodologies, encompassing LGBTQ literature

and culture, queer theory, social justice movements, progressive pedagogies, and related topics in courses taught through the College's Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program. I have taught queer courses as a graduate student at Indiana University; as a postdoctoral writing fellow at Duke University; and now at CSI, where six years ago I answered a job ad for the college's first assistant professor of queer studies. I also teach queer courses in the interdisciplinary studies program and the liberal studies program at the CUNY Graduate Center, and I serve on the board of directors for the queerly acronymous CLAGS (now the primary signifier for the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies housed at the Graduate Center). I research and publish in queer studies, and I speak at queer conferences and colloquia. Queer inter/disciplinarity encompasses my professional life. I was, in short, "the right person for the job."

It would be appropriate at this point to define some of my key terms, most notably "queer disciplinarity" and "queer pedagogy." I must ask the reader's patience as I decline to provide decontextualized definitions for these concepts. I defer that work not because "queer" has no fixed meaning (a quality heralded as fundamental to its liberatory, destabilizing potential) but because it has many meanings, both fixed and fluid. What I will say is that definitions of queer disciplinarity and queer pedagogy and other liminal institutional formations and practices must necessarily index a paradigmatic tension within queerness, an ever-shifting relationship to normative ideologies. A definition of "queer disciplinarity" would need to account for the fact that as a linguistic construction the term takes the very form of paradox that marks all queer formations. To align queer studies, queer pedagogy, and even queer theory with a radical antidisciplinarity is to mistakenly assume that the object of study is capable of transparently taking on and faithfully enacting one's political desire within the institution. As Wiegman shows, this is not the case. Likewise, queer pedagogies that privilege nonnormative knowledge-making

practices accrue shape and meaning, inescapably, as part of systems that facilitate the pedagogical reproduction of only certain forms of queerness within and beyond it.

Institutionality and, in particular, disciplinarity do not antagonize some pure mode of queerness but rather give particular shape to the more general paradoxicality of what I have elsewhere called the “queer conundrum.”⁷

The study guide, to pick up its trail once more, attached itself to me as “the right person for the job” as a function of the synchronicity of the queer scholar situated by queer disciplinarity analyzing a queer object of study. While the slipperiness of “queerness” can be used to trouble this impossibly straight alignment with institutional practices, the institutional context nevertheless stabilized it as such and, thereby, created the space for me to become its agent of disciplinarity. Another way of saying this is that if I desired the study guide, the study guide also desired me. My interest in and commitment to the project was not fully “mine” but instead was made “personal” in part by the logic of queer disciplinarity that invisibly presents us with certain desires to pursue while withholding others.

If we do not fully choose our objects of study, neither do we fully determine what can be done with them. Beyond the disciplinary shepherding of “my” desire by “my” object of study loomed the larger irony of the project: the goal was to share the study guide . . . to make it not mine. The fundamental proposition of any study guide, after all, is that it should be used by others. The United in Anger study guide does not merely argue for the importance of the film, and, in fact, only the film can make that argument. Instead, the guide announces the importance of teaching the film far and wide. If the political desire grounding my decision to teach the film in my own classes had been to offer students queer activist strategies that might be useful in the world outside the classroom, that desire would take on new contours as I wrote the guide. It

would take on the dual shape of a directive and a plea.

Transdisciplinary Desire

I thought my wish was simple. I wanted the United in Anger study guide to reach a broad spectrum of educators. To do so it could not (be perceived to) reflect a queer disciplinary narrowness, and certainly it would need to do more than replicate my own pedagogical history of queer engagement with the film. Once again, my desire was forming in complex relation to disciplinarity. I attempted to navigate that terrain by charting, in my introductory letter to the guide, a large constellation of disciplinary locations in which the film could register:

In the classroom, United in Anger will be a vital addition to American history curricula, history of science classes, sociology courses that examine social protest movements and activist traditions, and LGBTQ studies courses that seek to understand queer politics and sociality. United in Anger can help political science professors to reframe debates about power relations among individuals, subculture, and dominant culture, while art history and graphic design classes will encounter important examples of twentieth-century activist art and the questions of representation they raise. The film will enable media culture classrooms not only to analyze the documentary film genre as a medium but to examine the birth of video activism. To students planning on entering the medical fields, United in Anger will initiate discussions about professional ethics, the politics of medicine, and the state of healthcare in the U.S. For teachers of composition and rhetoric, the film offers a rich target text for understanding how meaning is shaped within culture. United in Anger is intended to resonate with and draw upon the disciplinary expertise of teachers and scholars across these many fields.<8>

This statement argues for an engagement with the film across disciplines, moving quickly through and implicitly drawing connections among them as it proceeds. But from my perspective, the real motion is outward. Through the study guide, in other words, the film radiates outward from my queer pedagogical engagement with it to the many other classrooms and the many other disciplines that I hope will bring it into the classroom setting. As we proceed, I want to keep this spatial metaphor in mind: the study guide winging its way from the institutionally constricted heart of queer studies dynamically out across the disciplines in inter-, multi-, transdisciplinary flight.

What desires, Object Lessons reminds us to ask, accompany projects such as my study guide on its flight (Wiegman 2012)? The almost poetic study guide in flight inevitably comes in for a rocky landing, for what is the relationship between the function of United in Anger in my queer studies courses and its function in any given discipline where it may land? What is the logic by which it can become transdisciplinary? As an instructor I may wish for the study guide to become a useful pedagogic tool, a wedge with which the film can pry its way into “nonqueer” classrooms. But that would require at the least another professor’s decision to adopt United in Anger as a course text. The problem is not only, or so much with, the flying text itself as with the way our self-defining social justice projects tend to align uneasily with our institutionalized projects. Indeed, Wiegman disengages political commitments from critical practices that fetishize “the right” discourses, objects of study, or analytic tools. Social justice pedagogy cannot be located in an object of study, Wiegman argues; nor can the professing subject of identity knowledge speak for or through that object as its representative. “How much goodness, after all, must one attribute to her identity objects of study to withstand what it means to both represent and be represented by them,” Wiegman asks (7). With my petit objet, not only did I risk situating

my work firmly within the field of “queer studies”; I also imagined that the film might be envisaged as a text that, in its complexity, allowed me to argue via the study guide for the necessity of a broad, transdisciplinary queer curriculum. Yet no single text, and indeed no “ideal” set of texts, can possibly make that argument. The guide, even as it attempts to persuade, cannot help but admit that even an exemplary queer text like United in Anger can never speak well enough for itself. The impossible desire of the study guide is that it can somehow take up this work and do what the film itself cannot. Suddenly, my petit objet seems to have pretty grand ambitions.

With the study guide I inevitably tried to control how the film is taught, that is, widely. It is, therefore, an act of transdisciplinary authority-building, one of the paradoxical normalizing impulses Wiegman identifies by which institutional formations respond to the liberatory political desires of practitioners of identity knowledges. “There is,” Wiegman holds, “no escape from this predicament in which the institutionalization of identity as an object and analytic of study is bound to reproducing the very hope that inspires it as the disciplinary idiom for legible, no less than legitimate, belonging to the field” (91–92). We are hemmed in by the institutional enactments of our emancipatory visions. In queer studies in particular, the disciplinary response to disciplinarity has been to seek out ever-new queernesses, ever queerer forms, acts, concepts, embodiments, and rhetoric that produce sometimes brilliantly generative instances of the queer dog chasing its potentially queerer tail.

Yes, generative. For institutionalization, as Wiegman sees it, is not the bogeyman it may appear to be. It is not strictly opposed to “the political,” even as disciplinarity never fails to regulate political desire in the academy. Something similar is true for Roderick Ferguson, who argues that interdisciplinarity contains the capacity to critique operations of institutional power:

“Instead of representing the confirmation of power’s totalizing character, interdisciplinarity connotes a site of contradiction, an instance in which minoritized differences negotiate and maneuver agreement with and estrangements from institutionalization” (2012, 37). Yes, institutionalization does something to identity, but it does not simply regulate or normalize it. Wiegman and Ferguson suggest that paradox--including the paradox of queer theoretical disciplining of social justice efforts--is more interesting than mere normalization. While queerer-than-thou one-upsmanship is tiresome, it nevertheless reflects a commitment in queer theory (if not queer studies) to internal critique, a continual “divergence” from disciplinary origins, according to Wiegman (2012, 121). The divergence of identity within identity knowledges thus marks a disciplinary inertia, the perpetual motion, reemergence, or regeneration of identity as not itself:

From women to gender, then, or from gay to queer, African American to Black Diaspora, American Studies to Transnational American Studies, American to First Nation . . . each differentiation, each distinction, each animating disidentification performs the central feature of disciplinary production: the inexhaustibility of the field’s self-perpetuating identity. Fields of study perform inexhaustibility continuously, in processes of divergence that remake objects of study, shift theoretical commitments, forge new methodologies, transform canons, elaborate archives, define new analytics, change names--all as the means of producing the not-that that legitimates its continuation and restores some kind of faith in the ability of critical practice to travel the distance from various impoverishments that reveal . . . the constraints of still being here. (122)

I am drawn to Wiegman’s sense of necessity in this paragraph, the relentlessness of disciplinary reformulation and the continuous need to differentiate identity from itself as a way of managing

the institutional failures of desire, the “constraints of still being here.” A word, then, about the failures of the study guide and my attempt here to track that productive failure or, rather, to make that inevitable failure productive.

I believe now that I intended the study guide for the film to be something it cannot be: a transdisciplinary queer teaching tool. My real object of study, mon grand objet, was not the film but the heteronormativity pervasive across academic curricula and disciplines. This is not to say that scholars across disciplines do not actively queer their respective fields; instead, an absence of a broadly queer curriculum persists in academia today. Hence, if the study guide was an attempt to materialize not just the lessons of the film and of ACT UP but also my transdisciplinary vision of a politically attuned and ethically viable queer curriculum, it was a project that was, in many ways, a fantasy.

A fantasy to be sure, yet a serious and productive one. In this way my queer pedagogical desire--my fantasy--reflects a version of the “vexed disciplinary operations” that Wiegman sees as constitutive of identity knowledges. She identifies a sustaining conundrum in queer studies, in women’s studies, and in American studies that emerges as a kind of feedback loop between wish/desire and failure/error as scholar practitioners attempt to engage in political transformation through and as critical practice. It is precisely because the “world-building agency of critical inquiry . . . is always beset by the poverty of its materialization” (302)--and because the objects of our study always fail to fully deliver on the political promises we have required (indeed invented) them to make--that disciplines reformulate, rename, and renew themselves. What new kinds of engagement does the study guide hope to enact as it materializes my desire that United in Anger have broad, transdisciplinary appeal beyond the bounds of queer studies? With the study guide could I interrupt the disciplinary loop of identity knowledges? Could I make the

guide function as a kind of off-ramp from queer disciplinarity and, simultaneously, an on-ramp to other disciplines for which identity is not the driving engine and beating heart but something else? What disciplinary bound or logic emerges in and through my queer pedagogy as that which I might actively and necessarily contravene?

In my wish to guide United in Anger across disciplines, I thus responded to the failure of queer studies, now at least thirty years old, to produce an integrated queer curriculum that centers texts like United in Anger. I responded to the disciplinary logic that normalizes the film in my classes; of course I was the one teaching the film; of course I was teaching it in an explicitly queer course; of course I would be the one to write the study guide; of course I was “the right person for the job.” And here the double bind of being the first “queer studies” hire at my college reappears: If I am, by virtue of that position, the right person for the job, my project desires you to be the right person for the job as well. And further, I want you to desire that too. When Wiegman asks, “What is it we expect our relationship to our objects of study to do?” I answer: to become yours as well. On the one hand, my desire is for you to teach United in Anger and to use the study guide to teach it well. But my deeper desire, on the other hand, is to share with you, through the osmotic conduit of the study guide, my relationship to the objects of study that have been gathered together to form queer studies. That is, I offer my little object of desire up to you as a kind of test object by which you might try to enter into a pedagogical relationship that engages the dynamism of queer political desire simultaneously turned into critical practice. And more broadly, I aim to reposition the institutional formation of “my” queer identity knowledge so that it casts its shadow on your field, because then you might begin to do the work of transforming queer studies as “our” common ground. My demand and my plea: take the responsibility for your relationship to queer disciplinarity, a relationship that literally defines

“me,” off my hands; use the study guide to reproduce in your own way a queer pedagogic relationship to the film and to the discipline. Thereby, I write with an exasperated sigh, relieving me of that unique relationship, the constraint of being here, and allowing me to turn to the queer disciplinary work of reworking the discipline in other ways.

Well. My insistent desire for your desire appears downright needy. But really, my repositioning of queer studies as yours and mine is no different from that which passes for unabashed, unquestioned, unnoticed universalism in other fields, a fact readily noticed once we disarticulate political desire from identity knowledges and see it as the shared basis for disciplinarity across the academy. It does not surprise me that identity knowledges, allowed to exist by existing at the margins of the academy, have made the perfect home for desire disavowed by disciplines at its center. If identity knowledges didn't exist, the academy would have to invent them as the dumping ground for the center's normalizing desire, not least of which is the desire to believe in the desirelessness of its own disciplinarity. It well may be that, once practitioners of identity knowledges take up the call of critics such as Robert Reid-Pharr to reverse the optic of universalism so that that queer pedagogical and scholarly engagements aren't understood as “additive but central to the ways we do humanistic studies” (2012), we too will lose touch with how desire informs our newly centralized and thus potentially normalized critical practices. A viable theory of queer transdisciplinary pedagogy must ensure that we do not.

Despite its being a petit objet, the United in Anger study guide represents a valuable, albeit difficult, negotiation in the academy. It offers help, and it asks for help. It is an invitation and a request as much as it is a guide and a plea to share a queer object of study, regardless of discipline. And behind the assertiveness that attends the offer of help lurks the humiliating risk that the project may be turned down, because our pedagogical desires are unfulfilled not only by

the insufficiency of their objects but also by the rejection of those who choose not to engage our proffered desires. Nevertheless, it is valuable to remember that the rejection of queer desire reflects not only, or even primarily, an individual decision but also an institutional arrangement or imperative. Indeed, Sara Ahmed reflects on the precarious position for many university equality workers who are used by the institution to simultaneously affirm and contain diversity commitments: “The commitment of individuals can also be a means for organizations not to distribute commitment” (2012, 135; my emphasis).

Although transdisciplinarity may be shot through with possible risk to individual queers who offer up their objects of desire, it also promises the potential for intellectual and affective reciprocity, for shared interest and academic labor. And here we see the real risk: while turf wars are the more obvious structural effects of the logic of disciplinarity, that same logic of conformity produces the more insidious and subtle relation of disinterested collegiality. A particular brand of friendly noninvolvement is sustained by the complex machinations of a heteronormative status quo that (1) marginalizes queer work by locating it squarely and exclusively within “queer studies” programs; (2) isolates queer workers from other queer workers in the other disciplines; (3) exempts nonqueer workers from engaging queer work by virtue of their “unrelated” discipline; and (4) discourages queer/nonqueer collaborations, since the perception is that no relationship exists across disciplines. In this context, no matter how much desire minority pedagogies invest in their objects of study, those objects fail to flow through the university. They will remain moored to us, here, fixed, once and for all.

In his absorbing new book, How to Be Gay, David Halperin reflects on the “scandal” of teaching a course by the same name at the University of Michigan. “The course’s goal,” he writes in the “Diary of a Scandal” that opens How to Be Gay, “was to understand how [gay]

counter-acculturation operates, the exact logic by which gay male subjects resist the summons to experience the world in heterosexual and heteronormative ways” (2012, 7). The “scandal,” of course, derived from reactions to the course title, which, Halperin admits, he might easily have shrouded in impenetrable jargon. Instead, in its apparent penetrability, penetrate the title did. It thrust straight to the heart of the homophobic fear, buttressed by the still permeating rhetoric of the culture wars in academia, that (implicitly gay) professors of gay studies pursue a simultaneous professional and personal agenda by reproducing “dangerous” knowledge in their classrooms and for their “vulnerable” students. How to Be Gay (the course) appeared blatantly to eschew all efforts to disguise this radical agenda, for it laid its pedagogical cards on the table, promising in its directive to initiate, cultivate, imbue, and (given the elite educational setting) even perfect homosexuality in its students. It promised a campy life lesson, the purposeful achievement of gay community through a necessary and productive relation to failure, a pedagogical dynamic described by Halberstam in The Queer Art of Failure as “knowledge from below” (2011, 11),

One might say of the course title, How to Be Gay, that only the straightest of straight readers could possibly have read it straight. Perhaps that reader would have better perceived the critical potential of the course were it renamed How to Be Gay . . . Darling. Then again, perhaps not. In any case, such a reader clearly mistakes Halperin’s political desire-cum-critical-practice. For that reader, the critical practice is the political desire, and the transparency of the course’s title not only reflects the academy’s acceptance of that substitution but flaunts the institution’s blatant refusal to perform the rhetorical sleight of hand by which “proper” course titles hide a professor’s improper ambitions.

Yet, as Wiegman suggests and as I think Halperin would appreciate, we cannot

completely disinvest the course of its desire through reference to its criticality, for our critical engagements cannot disengage from the political desires that mobilize fields of identity knowledges within which Halperin's course can surely be located. Nor should they pretend to. Nor, in elaborating our relationships to our unwieldy political desires, can our critical commitments ever fully articulate, let alone realize, those desires. Perhaps, then, the professor of queer studies joins the impossibly straight reader above in an unlikely coupling of subjects capable of reading the course title straight. For the queer practitioner, *How to Be Gay* might well literalize the desire to resist heteronormativity and thus begin to transform it into curricular and disciplinary practice. And it might do so precisely through the transparency of the course title, which validates the über-straight reader's fears of queer disciplinary desire in order to take even more seriously the disciplinary injunction to be gay. In his simultaneous seating and unseating of the antigay reader as the best reader of his course title, Halperin deftly fulfills several (of this reader's) desires. He resists heteronormativity. He performs gayness by at once making himself vulnerable to attack and rescripting the threat posed by *How to Be Gay* as seriously ironic. And he also, through a knowing act of self-exposure, shores up his disciplinary and institutional position. He is the one who can dare to teach the course; he knows how to teach the course; and he does not defend himself in doing so, for remarkably he writes, "No one in the [University of Michigan] administration asked me to explain the rationale behind the course or justify what I was up to . . . They seemed . . . to feel a professional responsibility to inform themselves on their own, as if even to ask me to explain or justify myself would have been to subject me to possible indignity" (2012, 31). Halperin's disciplinary position becomes both his and everyone's to understand, defend, and desire.

Perhaps Halperin's course, in the pedagogical transparency with which it lends a critical

voice to its political desire--both offering to guide and requiring others' involvement--represents a successful attempt at forging new queer disciplinary engagements that move across the academy.

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Notes

1. See Brim, "Study Guide."
2. I found many useful models of study guides for documentary film as I educated myself about this genre of educational literature. I mention as especially helpful the study guides for the films Promises (<http://www.promisesproject.org/film.html>) and Borinqueneers: A Documentary on the All-Puerto Rican 65th Infantry Regiment (<http://www.borinqueneers.com/home>).
3. Wiegman's other books, including American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender and Women's Studies on Its Own, reveal her sustained interest in interrogating structures of knowing that organize and create experience in the world, including epistemological frameworks that have made race and gender indeed knowable in the West.
4. I use the term petit objet primarily with reference to the diminutive status of the present object of analysis, the study guide, when scaled against the much larger disciplinary objects that Wiegman addresses. Unlike that far-reaching study, however, my use of petit objet also references Lacan's objet petit a, the algebraic construction for the object of desire we seek in the

Other. Insofar as my petit objet, like Lacan's less material objet petit a, becomes a screen or placeholder for my own narcissistic desire for the study guide, I find the connection productive, if necessarily unexplored here.

5. Hubbard and coproducer Sarah Schulman's many print and video interviews about the film offer perhaps the best primer for new viewers, but the film's website succinctly describes United in Anger as "an inspiring documentary about the birth and life of the AIDS activist movement from the perspective of the people in the trenches fighting the epidemic. Utilizing oral histories of members of ACT UP, as well as rare archival footage, the film depicts the efforts of ACT UP as it battles corporate greed, social indifference, and government neglect." See <http://www.unitedinanger.com/>.

6. Although I focus in this essay on the place of United in Anger in the academy, other primary audiences for the film and the study guide include activist collectives and social justice organizations.

7. See Brim, forthcoming 2014.

8. "Introductory Letter." <http://www.unitedinanger.com/studyguide/introductory-letter/>

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