

“Finding A Queer Fundamentalism”

Kathryn Lofton
2006-2007 LGBT Religious History Award
presentation at Chicago Theological Seminary
May 3, 2007

I was asked to speak briefly tonight about my journey to this project. Because I am a historian, the only place I know to begin is the past:

The story begins with four letters. The lazy days of August 1916 were almost gone when four ministers opened their Elmira, New York, mailboxes to find copies of the same unsigned handwritten missive. The content of these letters is only known through the descriptions of Reverend James A. Miller, one of the four recipients who became responsible for the narration of their aftermath. In his record of what he titled “The John Balcom Shaw Case,” Miller wrote that the letters were postmarked from Los Angeles, and questioned the moral character of John Balcom Shaw, a nationally-renowned conservative Presbyterian pastor newly installed as the president of the Elmira College for Women after stints at West End Presbyterian in New York City, Second Presbyterian in Chicago, and Immanuel Church in Los Angeles. The letter was brief, only long enough to allege that Shaw was guilty of “the crime of sodomy.” The four ministers quickly discussed these anonymous notes and decided, says Miller, “that it was the work of some malicious person too mean and cowardly to write over his own name, and, of course, utterly unworthy of attention.”

Within a year, however, the accusation would be worthy of attention. By the winter of 1917, the case against John Balcom Shaw would have sprawled a continent, including testimony from famed ministers and unknown laymen, train brakemen and wealthy businessmen. When the dust had cleared and the case was settled, a man had lost more than his job; John Balcom Shaw would be written out of the fundamentalist movement he had fostered. The essay for which I have won this award, “Queering Fundamentalism: The Case Against John Balcom Shaw (1860-1935),” is a study of this man, and, more importantly, his particular theological milieu. I have always been intrigued by religious orthodoxies, by the ways people derive commitment to enclave communities and intense interpretive worlds. Here, I had a case where that community was bruised and battered by a headlining figure, by their own shepherd. It was the discovery every historian dreams of making: a fissure in the armor of a disproportionate domination. I had found, in other words, Ted Haggard, just 100 years earlier, and completely lacking the resolute declaration of “complete heterosexuality” recently bequeathed upon Pastor Haggard. Shaw would never be declared anything; his dismissal was absolute.

I came to this project, this study of a man and his queer identity amidst a conservative Protestant world, after completing a dissertation that wasn’t about people at all. It was about ideas. I had written a fatuous dissertation about the most fatuous of ideas, Modernity. The dissertation was swell: it won me interest and eventual employments, but it hadn’t won me. Six months after I finished the dissertation I stared at it, lying in its excess on my office floor, and wondered: But who will care? Who will change? Who will think differently? Every Ph.D. dislikes their dissertation a little; I grew to resent its sheer existence.

It is old hat to say that most academics are in exile from some other ambition. I know academics who were once ballerinas and actors and poets and stockbrokers. Many of them came out of pure love of learning; others came because their first path failed; they never got that second audition and this seemed a reasonable place to huddle. As for myself, I came to history from politics. Once upon a time, I thought I would study the ways urban communities flourished and declined; I thought I would be a designer of public policy for some grand institute or some humble nonprofit. Then, 10 years ago, while an undergraduate at Chicago, I walked with a boy I was tutoring, a boy named Arnold. I walked with him from the laboratory schools to the corner of 63rd and Blackstone. There, I entered a church. And my life (though not, as Arnold had hoped, my soul) was changed. I realized that no amount of policy could change the way people experience their lives. No amount of policy could force people out of bed in the morning. No amount of policy could get people to put down the bottle, to put away the weapon, to re-frame their pain. Policy made best practices, but it didn't make a life. Religion, however, did this. It made life. Religion produced ardency, desire, change, difference, discord. Arnold went from one thing, a tottering preadolescent on the verge of following his father to prison, to another, a young man now enrolled at university, studying economics and singing hymns on the weekend. The change I studied in quadrangles at the University of Chicago seemed to fizzle and flatten in the real world; the change I saw in Arnold transformed a life.

So I became this thing: this historian of change, of American religious experience. It seemed the only way to answer the question: How do people make their lives different? And, perhaps more loudly: *Why don't they make their lives different?* Increasingly, in graduate school, I became compelled by the problem of identity. How does religious identity relate to national identity, ethnic identity, and sexual identity? The assignment of a leftover encyclopedia article first led me to Shaw, and the Presbyterian archives. When I went to Philadelphia looking for church records, I thought I'd find more tedious talk of inerrant scriptures and Presbyterian squabbles over church leadership. Instead, I found the story of a man who became the leader of a profoundly consequential strand of religious thought, a man whose movement spawned a world of so-categorized movements, a man who made fundamentalism. And then, I found that this man, so powerful in best practice, so loudly committed to a clarity I could not accede, I found that this man was brought low by the very forces his orthodoxy argued—possibly—against. Grope in the vestry. Long stares at revival meetings. Desperate kisses behind heavily-clothed curtains. The testimony of Shaw's queer tastes are the best gossip history has to offer, so good in fact that I won't share it all here: I'll keep it for the book. But what I did start to see, what I started to believe, was something embarrassing in its simplicity: there was something very important about the ways we act and the ways we believe, and that talk of ideas, talk of modernity and epistemology and the queer subject, couldn't begin to approximate. And so I tell this story. So you see, tonight, I am grateful not because I won an award, but because my passion, the telling of stories that make meaning, has won the prize. Too often in the academy we are encouraged to move away from ourselves, to estrange our ideas into monographic morsels tasteless to the masses but deeply consequential to an elite few. My hope is that this story will grab hold to more than footnotes, that it will in fact pursue just how queer we all are, even before our greatest ambitions, our best practices, our finest selves. Thank you so very much for sharing with me this prize, your enthusiasm for my ongoing research.