

2009 letter from Walter Williams

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Thank you so much for inviting me to be part of the Los Angeles Regional Consortium on Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. All of us who attended the meeting on January 17 2009 are grateful to the Rockefeller Humanities Program and everyone at California State University LA who helped to organize this most successful event. I was quite impressed with the many good ideas that were suggested during the meeting.

In particular, I was pleased to see so many professors whose teaching and research interests lie in LGBTI Studies. Years ago I used to lament, with friends like Laud Humphreys, Betty Berzon, and Vern Bullough, how difficult it was to get academics to care about this subject, so this is a welcome change. I will explain below, though, why it was so thrilling to me to see such a large roomful of people at this meeting. Now, instead of too few people, the problem is the reverse. Because the group is already so large and diverse, at the upcoming March meeting at UCLA I would like to request putting on the agenda a discussion about making either a break-off or a sub-group, to be called the Los Angeles Regional Consortium on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Intersex, and Transgender Studies (LARCLGBITS). Then if we pronounce that abbreviation like "Lark-leg-bites" who would dare to deny our rightful penthouse suite in the academic ivory tower!

In any case, whether we bite the leg that feeds us or not, I hope the meeting at UCLA can be held at the Williams Institute for Sexual Orientation and the Law. Founder Charles Williams and Executive Director Brad Sears have made the Williams Institute into the world's preeminent Think Tank on issues of sexuality and the law. Because of the work of the Williams Institute, along with the Sexuality Collection at CalState Northridge, and ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at USC, Southern California is now the leading place in the globe for LGBITS research.

Furthermore, I suggest that between now and the March 8 meeting, we should each try to invite other colleagues who share these interests to attend. Though I am shortly leaving for six months of ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in Thailand, I hope others who are teaching and doing research in LGBITS can be invited to attend that meeting. One person in particular who should be invited is my former graduate student Gregory Knotts, who is now a professor of education at CSUN, as well as Editor of the INTERNATIONAL GAY & LESBIAN REVIEW. He will be happy for you to submit reviews of books you have read. See the REVIEW online at <http://gaybookreviews.info>

I also nominate my colleagues at USC:

Patricia Alford-Keating, Counseling Psychology USC
Joseph Boone, English and Gender Studies USC
David Cruz, Law USC
Alice Echols, English and Gender Studies USC
Chris Freeman, English and Gender Studies USC
Larry Gross, Annenberg School of Communications USC
Judith Halberstam, English and Gender Studies
Stanley Harris, Psychiatry USC
Richard Meyer, Art History USC
David Roman, English, American Studies and Ethnicity USC
Karen Tongson, English and Gender Studies USC

Another scholar who should be invited is my former graduate student Joseph Hawkins, who in addition to being on the faculty at USC in anthropology and gender studies, is also the president of ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. Each of you are welcome to visit ONE, at 909 W. Adams Blvd. (call 1-213-741-0094 for times of operation and directions to its USC location) and to see ONE's new museum exhibition in West Hollywood. For the meeting next fall I hope this group can arrange to meet at ONE, which is centrally located, is close to the I-10 and I-110 freeways, and has free parking.

I call for us formally to establish this consortium at ONE at the beginning of October during LGBT History Month. Many do not know that the very first classes in queer studies to be held--anywhere in the world--were begun when Jim Kepner, Dorr Legg and USC Professor Merritt Thompson founded ONE Institute of Homophile Studies in 1956. The field that people like us are paid to teach, in many universities around the world, was begun by these unpaid volunteers in Los Angeles half a century ago. Queer Studies is one of the gifts that Southern California has given to the world.

Whether we know it or not, we are all the children of ONE.

We are following in the footsteps of those brave pioneers. We owe our careers, indeed in many cases our very lives, to them. As one who knew them personally, I want to convey to you that I am sure they would be extremely happy to see what you are doing with your life. That is why I was so happy to see such bright and smiling young faces at the meeting at Cal State LA. That is why I am writing to you now, and why I do not want this moment to be lost.

It was only at that meeting on January 17 when I realized how they must have felt back in 1979 when I, a bright young assistant professor, arrived at UCLA's American Indian Studies Center. I was beginning my research on Two Spirit Native Americans, and both Dorr Legg and Jim Kepner took me under their wing to teach me the field of what they called Homophile Studies. Harry Hay and Don Slater were my other teachers, just as important in my education as any of my university professors. I could not have written my book, "The Spirit and the Flesh," or had the career that I have had, without their input and their critique.

Before I knew it, they had put me on their boards of directors. And then, in 1984, they elected me as president and June Mazer was elected vice president. We were a new generation, and the first thing June and I did was to change the name of the National Gay Archives to the

International Gay and Lesbian Archives. In a globalizing world, I still like that “international” name better.

When USC hired me in 1984 to begin teaching LGBT Studies, I brought Jim, Dorr, and Harry in as guest speakers for my classes. I remember they talked about how in the 1950s they used to call their classes “queer studies” as a joke. Then later they were so amazed to hear Queer Studies being used seriously in academia. Dorr was amazed that academia, which had been so extremely homophobic in his day, would even consent to allow people like me to teach these subjects. Even in my own time, I had to learn the hard way, programs studying transgenderism and homosexuality were not laughed at but sneered at. It was not “a respectable field of study.” I myself paid the price for moving into this field, like many of my generation.

Dorr Legg, who had been fired from his own teaching job by the University of Oregon when they found out he was homosexual, never did lose his distrust of academia. By the time I knew him his big dream was to build ONE Institute into a graduate school, and he asked me to be the Dean. I refused, and told him that academia was changing, and the best place to train people in the field of Queer Studies was within academia, in the established graduate schools themselves. Instead, I said, the future of ONE Institute should be as a postgraduate research center. Dorr was never one to lose the services of a potential volunteer, so in 1987 he asked me to establish the ONE Institute Center for Advanced Studies.

The model I used to develop this Center was the Center for American Indian History at the Newberry Library in Chicago, where I had been a postdoctoral fellow in the 1970s, and the UCLA American Indian Studies Center. The problem was that we had very little money, so I spent most of my time doing fundraising. I also helped Dorr finish the writing of his magnum opus Homophile Studies in Theory and Practice . When the book was published in 1994 he was so proud. And then he told me his life’s work was done, and right after that he died at age 89. I was with him just a day before he died, and I promised him that I would devote my life to making sure that his life’s work would not disappear, and that ONE Institute would continue and grow.

It was like Dorr’s ashes fertilized a new blossoming of ONE. Everything started to click, and after so many years of struggle my life’s dream was realized when I convinced USC to provide the building for ONE’s growing library and also to merge ONE Institute with the International Gay and Lesbian Archives. In addition, to my amazement I was able to convince USC to turn over a vacant 17 unit apartment building for ONE Institute to house its visiting scholars. For three years, as far as I was concerned, that building was heaven on earth. We had so many scholars coming from all over the world to do their research. For example, I brought in Professor Igor Kon from the Russian Academy of Sciences, who wrote the first book on the history of homosexuality to be written in Russian and published in Russia. A whole slew of dissertations were written by residents there, including Yolanda Retter’s excellent research on the history of the Los Angeles lesbian community, and James Green’s UCLA dissertation on homosexuality in Brazil that went on to develop into his prize winning book. Holly Devor came for a year and wrote the book FTM (incidentally, Holly Devor is now Aaron Devor).

I was especially pleased to offer Jim Kepner a free apartment so that he could write his book on pioneering gay journalism. After living on pennies for most of his life while he built the gay archives, Jim was able to live in comfort and without financial worries during the last years of

his life. Sometimes, when Harry Hay and other founders of our community would drop by to visit Jim, and they would be discussing dense theoretical issues and speculating about what the future might hold for queer people in upcoming centuries, I would thank my lucky stars that I was present to hear such enlightening conversations.

Jim was also a voracious reader, and he became the inspiration for me to establish the INTERNATIONAL GAY & LESBIAN REVIEW in 1996. He wrote many of the first book reviews that were included in that journal. That was another project that started on a shoestring. Gay rights pioneer Hal Call generously donated \$50,000 to ONE Institute, but all that plus the other money I had raised was going to help the visiting scholars. So I had no budget for the REVIEW. Out of necessity more than out of brilliance, I decided to publish it on the world wide web. Today there are many academic journals being published online, but at that time it was unheard of. Both the USC Dean and my department chair sneered at me for wasting my time on something that no one would respect. However, today I am extremely proud to have been the founder of the world's first academic journal to be published entirely online, in any field.

I have learned over and over again in my career that the things which I get most criticized for, often turn out to be the things that I am most proud of accomplishing [Anyone who is interested in my involvement in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and my organizing a sit-in involving Martin Luther King, who became a great inspiration for my life, can read my story at "Walter Williams' Life of Activism in Human Rights" on the left column at <http://livefully.info>]

During the 1990s ONE ran on the contributions of numerous dedicated community and USC student volunteers. No one was more dedicated than John O'Brien, but dedication was not enough when the money was not there. However, USC came up with the money from its general library fund, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art gave us many exhibit cases, and one of my students who worked at a library was able to get us free library shelving. When we finally were able to get the renovations on the building finished and could open ONE to the public, it was spring 2001. We scheduled the grand opening for early May. Only on the day of the event did ONE's librarian Yolanda Retter realize it was exactly sixty-five years to the day from the time in 1936 when Nazi bookburners destroyed the Institute for Sexual Science, that had been founded by Magnus Hirschfeld in Berlin in the early 20th century. On that day we literally felt the spirits of the founders of what was the world's first queer library descending on the grounds of ONE Institute. Almost fifty years after its founding, ONE was the location of the world's largest collection of LGBT books, papers, and archival materials. Los Angeles took the place of Berlin, and it remains today the global center for LGBT Studies.

It was a wonderful experience for all of us who were involved. I felt like I had accomplished a major goal of my entire life. But, after the opening I suffered serious burnout. Not from the work itself, which I found invigorating, but from the backbiting criticisms by a few small-minded people who focus on condemning the problems instead of searching for solutions. And who keep their eyes on the limitations instead of the possibilities.

My weakness is that, though I like to work, I do not have patience with this kind of thinking. So, after being central to ONE Institute for over two decades, I decided to leave. In 1997-98, one of the visiting scholars I had brought to ONE was Wan Yan Hai, from China. After he went back to China he invited me to help him in persuading the Chinese Psychiatric Association that homosexuality was not a mental illness. So I resigned as Director of the ONE Institute Center

for Advanced Studies, and I took off for China. You may recall it was in late 2001 when China made world headlines by removing homosexuality from its criminal code and its list of mental disorders. The main credit for that change was due to Wan Yan Hai and others in China, but I was proud to have had a part in making that change happen. I made history as the first foreign scholar to be invited to give lectures at Beijing University on the history of homosexuality.

But, sadly, in all these years since then, no one has stepped forward to head up the ONE Institute Center for Advanced Studies. Though Joseph Hawkins and others have made amazing accomplishments, they are all overwhelmed with the work of running a major research library. I am now too old to take on this position again, but at the January 17 meeting, as I saw so many good ideas and so much energy, it occurred to me that this new consortium might revive the ONE Institute Center for Advanced Studies. Maybe you can even convince the Rockefeller Foundation to fund another center for visiting scholars. The number of researchers coming to ONE in the 1990s certainly proved that the demand for such a center exists. With the additional resources now existing at CSUN and at UCLA's Williams Institute, Los Angeles is definitely the place in the world where this type of Think Tank should operate.

Well, I have gone on for far longer than I expected when I began this email. As I get older so many memories crowd my mind whenever I start writing. Hopefully some will find something of value in these words, and maybe get inspired to take on this project. That is why I was so excited by the meeting, and that is why I am writing to you now. If anyone wishes to learn more, please send me an email. I have lots of ideas for things that could be done to encourage research and teaching in this field.

As we discussed at the meeting, one of the goals of LARCLGBITS might be to develop online course syllabi that can be available to other scholars who would like to teach such courses. The more courses we can encourage in LGBITS the more of an impact we can have on society in the future. Though I have not had time to consult with Greg Knotts on this matter, I think a logical place to host such syllabi would be the INTERNATIONAL GAY & LESBIAN REVIEW, which is available online without charge on the world wide web at <http://gaybookreviews.info>

If someone will volunteer to help Greg, here is a way to accomplish this goal with no expenditure of money. Everyone publicize and submit topics in your area of expertise to design such courses. For example, I hope to submit topics on anthropological and historical topics. I have set up a website with sample lectures, visual images, and outlines for a course on American Indian history. See my website at <http://college.usc.edu/americanindian> Though this site is still in process of construction, and I have not yet attached a bibliography, there is enough to see the pattern. I did this to help others in the field of Native American Studies to design their courses. The Consortium could do the same thing for queer studies. Here is a model for each topic to be submitted. Different people can contribute information about different resources to each topic. Those who have lectures, or even short Utube talks, can videotape them and post them online for other teachers to utilize or even for community activists to see. By putting our knowledge online we can help our community as well as our students. Our goal should be a free education for as many people as possible. Knowledge, like love, is best when you give it away:

SAMPLE SYLLABUS AND RESOURCE LIST

TOPIC:

BRIEF SUMMARY OF SUBTOPICS COVERED:

LECTURE AVAILABLE ONLINE BY:

SPECIALISTS DOING RESEARCH ON THIS TOPIC:

IMPORTANT PRIMARY SOURCE REFERENCES (with locations):

RECOMMENDED SECONDARY SOURCES (books, articles):

RECOMMENDED FICTIONAL AND LITERARY PERSPECTIVES ON THIS TOPIC:

RECOMMENDED ONLINE READINGS:

RECOMMENDED ONLINE VISUAL IMAGES (pictures, videos, Utube, etc):

RECOMMENDED FILMS AND VIDEOS NOT ONLINE (with rental or purchase info):

TOPIC: Native American Two Spirit Traditions

LECTURE AVAILABLE ONLINE BY: Walter L. Williams, Professor of Anthropology,
History and Gender Studies, University of Southern California

<http://college.usc.edu/americanindian>

SPECIALISTS DOING RESEARCH ON THIS TOPIC:

IMPORTANT PRIMARY SOURCE REFERENCES:

ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives see <http://onearchives.org>

909 W. Adams Blvd. Los Angeles CA 90007 213-741-0094

SECONDARY SOURCES:

Sabine Lang, et al, TWO SPIRIT TRADITIONS

Will Roscoe, CHANGING ONES

Walter L. Williams, THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH: SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN

AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE (Beacon)

FICTIONAL AND LITERARY:

Walter L. Williams and Toby Johnson, TWO SPIRITS: A STORY OF LIFE WITH THE
NAVAJO (Lethe Press)

ONLINE READINGS: Google books. More to be posted later by others.