

CAMPUS NEWS

“Bigshot outsiders”:



BTL photo: Tim Retzlaff

by TIM RETZLOFF

KALAMAZOO - Any Michigan college might be lucky to have one celebrated lesbian as a guest instructor. For the winter and spring terms, Kalamazoo College has two. Beginning in January, the private liberal arts college, with an enrollment of 1,200 but no openly gay or lesbian faculty, is hosting Holly Hughes and Esther Newton.

Hughes, 40, is a famed performance artist and author of such innovative works as “The Well of Horniness” and “Clit Notes.” Newton, 58, is a distinguished anthropologist, historian, and pioneer of gay and lesbian scholarship, perhaps best known for her books *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* and *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town*.

It is a sort of homecoming for both. Hughes grew up in Saginaw and spent her college years in Kalamazoo. Newton earned her bachelor’s degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Having broken the silence in art and scholarship, they are now breaking the silence in Kalamazoo. Hughes concedes that their fame somewhat legitimizes them, allowing them to present subjects that might otherwise remain unspoken in K-College classrooms. “Definitely without that we wouldn’t be here,” she said.

On a Sunday afternoon, taking refuge from an onslaught of Michigan snow, the two reflected on their return. Hughes finds it an affirmation to have been invited back,

but confessed to weighing “acceptable levels of risk.” It is a concern she suggested that “white, straight people” don’t have to think about.

Hughes will teach beginning acting and play writing this term. In the spring, she will teach a senior seminar on performance art which will focus specifically on sexuality and gender. As part of the course, she will create a performance piece with her students, perhaps about family car trips. “Putting the auto back in autobiography,” she quipped.

Newton is currently teaching a course on sexuality in western culture. Next term she will offer the school’s first ever introductory course on gay and lesbian studies. Concerns have already been raised about how the course can discretely be listed on student transcripts.

Hughes will be teaching full-time. Newton, who has a temporary post as part-time lecturer, will also do some writing during her stay in Kalamazoo.

This is not the first time back for Hughes. She returned in 1990 to perform and conduct several workshops. In 1995, the college honored her with a Distinguished Achievement Award, a decision Hughes called “amazing.”

“For a year solid in the alumni quarterly there were letters about nothing else and they were the most rabid, vitriolic letters that you can imagine.” Despite the hysteria, the school went ahead and gave her the award.

“But it was also scary to come back here,” Hughes continued, explaining that

the controversy infected her with a level of paranoia. “They don’t actually have to beat you up to terrify you,” she said.

They have received no caution or restrictions from the administration. Esther was concerned about a couple books she wanted to use in her class, but was assured by other faculty that instructors had academic freedom at K-College. Newton wondered if they truly understood what could happen.

Hughes is aware of her potency as a “bigshot outsider” and tries to be sensitive to the conditions of life in Kalamazoo. “How do you challenge and open up possibilities but with respecting where people are from?” She sees her students being much like she was, shielded from difference by a protective family, with a “somewhat narrow” world of experience, but “very smart, very motivated.”

In some ways Hughes considers Kalamazoo her hometown. “Compared to Saginaw this felt like Paris,” she said of her college days in the mid-1970s. It was at “K” that she fueled herself on a “non-toxic mentoring, parenting kind of energy.”

“I tried to come out,” she said of her time at K-College. “It was sort of the sound of one hand clapping.” She then recounted her first crush on a woman. “I didn’t know if I wanted to be her or fuck her,” Hughes said.

Back in 1977, according to Hughes, there was no organized gay life in town. There had been a gay group at Western Michigan University in the early 1970s, but it quickly disbanded. “There was just a bar

Holly Hughes and Esther Newton bring an out lesbian perspective to K-College

Esther Newton and Holly Hughes at K-College

that burned down every three months,” Hughes deadpanned. “You had to suit up in ‘70s polyester asbestos and take your chances.”

Her own internal class conflict kept her away from the one gay bar. Her experience at a lesbian potluck left her feeling she had nothing in common with the local women. “I felt as out of it as I did as a heterosexual.”

She ended up in New York, where her path as a painter got sidestepped by the WOW Cafe, where she found prospective dates and discovered performance art. Through bold, autobiographical comedy, she explored issues about the body and lesbian desire, making a national name for herself.

The notoriety imploded in 1990, when she became one of the infamous “NEA Four,” a foursome of artists whose grants were revoked by the National Endowment for the Arts. Jesse Helms verbally attacked Hughes on the Senate floor. It was a controversy Hughes called “disturbing and ongoing.”

“It was also difficult because it was clear that what happened with myself and two of the other performance artists was that it was simply homophobia. They never looked at our work. It was just the idea that we were out gay artists asking for federal money invalidated our claims to get money.” It unnerves her that she may be more famous for being denied an art grant than for her art.

A New York native, Newton attended U of M because her father thought it would be too parochial to go to an east coast

“Just about everything good that’s come to me has come to me through the gay community. And that’s why I’m so loyal to them.”

Esther Newton



The New York Times wouldn't publish the name of Holly Hughes book.

school. Like Hughes, Newton spent her college years grappling with her sexuality.

“I had a very miserable time of it because I was very well aware of being attracted to women,” she said. Shortly after arriving in Ann Arbor in 1958, she was seduced by a woman painter who later exposed her to gay bars in Manhattan. Because her access to gay life was working class and she wanted to be a professional, she resisted the pull. In the summer she would go out with girls. During the school year she would lie to her therapist and pretend to be heterosexual.

Nonetheless she became acquainted with many gay men, including novelist Edmund White. She also witnessed frightening police entrapment campaigns against male-male sex in U of M campus rest rooms during the early 1960s, when scores of men were arrested and one man committed suicide. “It made a huge impression on me, believe me. Not for one moment did I think this was only about gay men.” Although never participating in such public sex, “I still knew this was directed toward me.”

“I had to be away from Michigan to be liberated,” she confessed. While in graduate school at the University of Chicago, she befriended a gay man who introduced her into the world of female impersonators. It became her thesis topic, and eventually led to Mother Camp.

Although researching the drag scene might seem daring for the 1960s, Newton confessed that “I was more afraid of going to the Third World.” Her own life experience propelled her to the risky topic. “I had

fought so hard to have a sexuality that was authentic that the more I experienced authentic sexuality and emotion, I just became fanatically attached to that world.”

In some ways the early gay research stunted her career. Although she secured tenure at the State University of New York at Purchase, her advancement in academia was stymied. She stopped doing gay work in the 1970s, and spent much of the decade in France. In the early 1980s she returned to gay subjects, studying butch-femme roles in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and beginning the research that would lead to Cherry Grove, Fire Island.

Finally in the 1990s, she is seeing delayed recognition of her work, primarily within the gay community. She was recently honored by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, presenting its esteemed Cassle lecture. “Just about everything good that’s come to me has come to me through the gay community. And that’s why I’m so loyal to them.”

Both Newton and Hughes are survivors and role models. Perhaps their most important lesson to their mostly-straight students at K-College will be as symbols of survival and progress.

The progress is slow, but evident. The Kalamazoo Gazette in 1990 would not run an interview with Hughes because she insisted on calling herself a lesbian. “I guess it wasn’t in their style sheet.” In recent years, however, the paper has clamored to give her attention. “If for no other reason that hometown girl makes bad,” Hughes joked..