

## **‘Our little enterprise’: Giovanni’s Room, Gay’s the Word, and transnational bookselling as resistance**

*Freitag, 12. September 2025 11:30 (20 Minuten)*

From the early 1980s, feminist and gay bookstore Giovanni’s Room in Philadelphia, PA, sold books to London’s Gay’s The Word bookshop, enabling eagerly awaited US-published LGBTQ+ titles to enter the UK market. Ed Hermance, owner of Giovanni’s Room, notes in a letter to Gay’s The Word’s managers on 12 September 1983, ‘how important GTW is in our little enterprise’. But importing LGBTQ+ literature was not without risk. When Gay’s The Word was raided by officers from Her Majesty’s Customs and Excise in April 1984, in what became known as ‘Operation Tiger’, its directors were charged with conspiracy to import ‘indecent or obscene’ material and Hermance named on the charge sheet. The scale of the assault came as a shock, but not entirely a surprise. For some years, both shops’ staff had been wary of Customs’ interference, and had developed strategies to mitigate the sporadic and seemingly inevitable loss of incoming stock. With a court case pending, both shops continued to resist this state-sponsored censorship. Despite receiving multiple ‘seizure notices’ from Customs, Gay’s The Word re-ordered several confiscated titles from Giovanni’s Room – among them *The Joy of Gay Sex* by Dr Charles Silverstein and Edmund White (1979) – leading to additional charges against two of Gay’s The Word’s directors.

Noting Laura J. Miller’s observations on the politics of book consumption, this paper reads the relationship between Giovanni’s Room and Gay’s The Word as commercial and personal, but always political: an investment by both parties in a mutually beneficial business venture and in the building of transnational queer community and solidarity. I draw on archival material held at Bishopsgate Institute as well as research into the seized books carried out at Senate House Library to trace the connections between the two shops, before, during and after ‘Operation Tiger’ and the subsequent Defend Gay’s The Word campaign. Attention to the professional and personal relationships established between Giovanni’s Room and Gay’s the Word positions queer bookselling as a form of resistance: a series of transgressive transactions which counter and challenge not only the policing of borders and of books, but state intervention into, and oppression of, queer bodies, cultures and lives.

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**Sitzung Einordnung:** Panel