

Rethinking the Mainstream Gay and Lesbian Movement Beyond the Classroom Exclusionary Results from Inclusion-Based Assimilation Politics

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A HEADLINE on the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) website reads: "As the largest national lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender [LGBT] civil rights organization, HRC envisions an America where LGBT people are ensured of their basic equal rights, and can be open, honest and safe at home, at work and in the community" (HRC, 2011a). The HRC, under the banner of "equal rights," has become one of the largest mainstream organizations to mobilize gay and lesbian individuals across the nation in an effort to obtain what it deems are basic rights and access. However, "equal rights" or "basic rights" can be rather ambiguous concepts: Equal *to* whom? Basic *for* whom? Based on an examination of historical outcomes and a survey of the literature, this paper attempts to answer such questions as it dissects the mainstream gay and lesbian movement in and effort to provide an alternative analysis of "equal rights" and social justice movements.

Usually, within U.S. discourse and curriculum, equal rights are taught and communicated as being equivalent with equality in the strongest sense – conflating equal rights with the end of discrimination or injustice for the now politically/legally included group. Hence, critically investigating this mainstream equal rights movement, is to effectively deconstruct "equality" and show that typical discourse or classroom curriculum is often short-sighted, or lacking in its examination of the multidimensionality of equality and equal rights. What is often not discussed is the struggle of such movements, the compromises made, and even the exclusionary tactics used in an effort for full inclusion into dominant culture. The examples provided in this paper can serve as an analytic tool for teachers when constructing curriculum and lessons on equality – from the Civil Rights movement to the mainstream gay and lesbian movement discussed here. In other words, this examination of the current mainstream gay and lesbian movement will hopefully serve as an illustration of an unconventional, critical, and constructive way to view equality, equal rights, and future equality-based movements.

Currently, for mainstream gay and lesbian organizations, in a less convoluted sense, basic, equal rights – the ones that the HRC are referring to, at least – are those shared among larger, normative (read: heterosexual) society. Although on the surface groups such as the HRC and other mainstream organizations seeking these rights appear to be fighting for a “good cause” – equal rights are positioned as the supreme goal of most politics within the U.S. – the mainstream gay and lesbian movement is arguably fighting for equality through assimilationist discourses. Rather than a rejection of heteronormative culture and its “rights” entirely, the existing mission of mainstream gay and lesbian individuals, organizations, and movements today is to propose “we’re just like you,” in an effort to seek inclusion into dominant, heterosexual culture (see Butler 1990; Duggan, 2003; Seidman, 1993). Consequently, the current direction of the gay and lesbian mainstream movement is one leading toward a repetition of the past, whereby legal or political equality will not inevitably bring heteronormativity or heterosexism to breakdown or diminish in its incidence or prevalence. Instead, such assimilation politics will actually lead to a fragile relationship among the queer community as well as with dominant culture, contribute to the pervasive exclusion of other queer-identified individuals, and allow for further domination by the same kinds of privileged people.

Although the movement’s desire for equal rights alone is not necessarily an unworthy cause, what must be considered and included in discussions/curriculum on equal rights is the cost of such an endeavor. At what cost is inclusion into the heterosexually structured world acceptable? Is inclusion worth the cost if other identities are oppressed as a result? Are equal rights enough if the possibility of a social or political transformation rooted in the respect for unique, separate identities is diminished in the process? An examination of what happens when assimilation politics are implemented within the gay and lesbian movement (or any movements for that matter) is needed in order to determine the price of such a venture, as well as to reveal the complexity and difficulty of equality or inclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Dissolving Dichotomies and Reconstructing Language

Deconstruction, generally defined as a philosophical practice focused on language and aimed at disrupting common sense meanings or texts to demonstrate their construction and implications, is an integral part of queer theorist Eve Sedgwick’s work (Edwards, 2009). Essentially, her deconstructive application takes common binaries which appear to be opposites (e.g. speech/silence, knowledge/ignorance, essentialism/constructivism) and through a close examination of how the binary is enacted in daily life, shows that the supposed opposites are really not so antithetical, but that the imaginary separation is actually quite fragile (Sedgwick, 1990). For example, in her 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick deconstructs the binary of knowledge versus ignorance. Typically, the notion of knowledge within the U.S. is given much emphasis and privilege – the U.S. often even encourages the phrase “knowledge is power” – as its attainment is prized and often rewarded. Ignorance, on the other hand, is seen as a state not to embody or acknowledge, as to be ignorant of something is rarely ever seen as positive. However, Sedgwick (1990) shows that ignorance too is a powerful tool and can be used to oppress or deny certain entities. “Ignorance,” Sedgwick (1990) asserts, “compete[s] with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons” (p. 4). To illuminate this deconstruction, Sedgwick (1990) uses the example of rape, stating that it “privileges at the same time men and ignorance” (p. 5). The common defense of accused rapists

is often ignorance, claiming that they did not know that the sexual activity was not consensual by both parties, or that they thought “no” meant “yes” (Sedgwick, 1990). Although this defense is slowly becoming less successful, just the idea that ignorance can be claimed to avoid penalty confirms the influence that it can wield in terms of motivating action, and therefore shows that it can be just as powerful as knowledge.

This paper will attempt, in the style of Sedgwick, to deconstruct the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion – which, by extension also dissolves the dichotomy of equality/inequality. Inclusion is usually thought of, and taught, as becoming one with, or apart of, a particular group and like knowledge, is framed as the position to strive for. On the other hand, exclusion is seen as the complete opposite of inclusion and not a positive state of being or position. However, through a close dissection of contemporary gay and lesbian demands for equal rights and inclusion legally, politically, and for individuals, it can be seen that such goals consequently cause pervasive exclusion for multiple nonconforming identities – the majority of which even align with gay and/or lesbian sexual orientations. Hence, Eve Sedgwick’s (1990) method of deconstruction is used to show that the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion is not stable or completely oppositional, as inclusion – in the sense that the gay and lesbian movement is striving for – is really just another form of exclusion, and such inclusiveness will, and has already, led to the ostracism of multiple identities. Additionally, because inclusion in this instance is trying to be gained through assimilation, inclusion into the dominant, heteronormative culture is fragile and can be withdrawn (and turned into exclusion) just as quickly as it was given – if it were ever really given in the first place, that is.

In conjunction with Sedgwick’s deconstructive method, this paper also uses queer theory in an attempt to shift common uses of language and understandings of equality. Queer theory, although originally rooted in Western theorizing about sexuality, has developed and extended to become a method of critiquing assumptions of “normality.” Queer theory often lauds that which is fluid, hybrid, and questions quotidian behavior, identity, policy, and any conventions deemed normal by heteronormative society. In conjunction then, queer theory and transforming conceptions of equal rights, could perhaps engender a discussion of equality that is dependent upon, rooted even, in fluidity and instability. Because I am guided by this notion of queerness or queer theory, it should be noted that because of the exclusion resulting from pro-equal rights practices, I use “gay and lesbian” when referring to mainstream individuals or movements, rather than LGBT or queer intentionally. I wish to point to the issue that the modern movement often ignores many queer identities including transgendered and transsexual individuals, people who express a genderqueer identity, the radically queer, queers of color, queers who do not identify with these particular sexualities, and queers who are either homeless, of lower socio-economic status, old, and/or disabled. Furthermore, in regards to language, this paper uses queer theory to illuminate the problems of how discourse and especially curriculum, construct and communicate “equality.” By looking more closely at the gay and lesbian mainstream movement, the complexity of “equal rights” or “equality” can be illuminated, as well as the pervasive exclusion that comes from supposed inclusion into legal and political spheres.

Historical Examples of Assimilation in the U.S.

According to James Tully (2005), and in congruence with basic sociological definitions, assimilation occurs when subjects “gradually come to relinquish their dissonant customs and

ways and acquire the consonant forms of subjectivity” (p. 214). Essentially, the “other” sheds its apparently objectionable qualities and adopts the dominant culture’s customs, ways of expression, and ideology. However, what is so insidious about assimilation practices is that not only is it, historically and contemporarily speaking, the sole method by which U.S. culture appears to accept or include minority groups, but it is often done so by convincing those seeking inclusion into dominant culture that the equal rights which they strive for are going to have an effect in making a transformative change within the larger society (Young, 1995). This is not to say that equal rights movements are not effective in some sense, as often legal rights are achieved, but more often than not, because equal rights were acquired by adapting to the dominant culture (i.e. assimilation), no actual changes necessarily occur in obtaining respect or equality in regards to treatment or lessening discrimination. Tully (2005) observes this as he states that subjects, although included, “are constrained in a particular way, in a particular type of institution, and over a particular range of issues so their agreements and disagreements serve to reinforce rather than challenge the status quo” (p. 214). Thus, although the minoritized are included into dominant culture by assimilating, such an inclusion does not alter or work to transform the current power system.

Historically, there are numerous examples of how the abject “other” has been (either by willingness or force) assimilated into dominant culture through equal rights and under the guise of equality. Although a simplistic statement admittedly, many social justice movements in the U.S., including the Women’s Movement and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s and 70’s, although resulting in legal parity through equal rights, have yet to receive equity in regards to treatment, or in the institutions of work, education, or media, to name a few. For example, although after the Civil Rights Movement(s) African Americans were legally and politically included, such “equality” has not led to the eradication of racism or in stopping prejudices from manifesting in many institutions like the criminal justice system or the workforce (e.g. Cole, 2009; Wingfield, 2011). The same reasoning also applies to women, as women, having the same equal rights as men still experience discrimination in many forms. For instance, gender’s influence can be spotted easily as U.S. Census and national survey data show that women in academia frequently earn less than their male counterparts, have a harder time getting tenured than men, and often have to endure more service roles within academic departments (Allan, 2011).

Besides the lack of equal treatment, however, what is most problematic for this paper’s purposes, is that popular discourse, classroom curriculum, and U.S. constructions of equality have miscommunicated these movements’ effects and what equal rights allocations have actually produced. These movements are typically construed as resulting in definitive justice for all: equal rights equates to equal treatment. It can even be taught as simplistic as “African Americans did not have equal rights, the Civil Rights Movement changed that, and now everyone is presently deemed as, and treated, equal within all aspects of society regardless of skin color.” Because of this misinterpretation of what equal rights actually generate, in many college-level classes, when asked to raise their hands if they think men and women are completely regarded as equal within society, all hands are lifted high. For, looking at inclusion through equal rights and the contemporary treatment of “others” who have obtained such rights, demonstrates the destructiveness of the misrepresentation of equal rights as equality.

The historical treatment of many Native American tribes is another example of the assimilation tactics used by the U.S. government and settlers, as Native Americans have often been forced to assimilate, and like other marginalized groups, have not benefited from supposed

equal rights. At one time, Native Americans, rather than being thought of as savages or “non-White,” were understood as White-skinned individuals by colonizers, only with a tan because of heavy sun exposure (Adelman, Herbes-Sommers, Strain, & Smith, 2003). However, in the 1790s, once the need to expand West became central to the colonizer’s plans, in an effort to avoid a war, a civilization campaign began and the Native American image was reconstructed, created as racialized and barbarous (Adelman et al., 2003). White colonizers took up the task of assimilating Native Americans through religion, education, dress, and English language instruction (Adelman et al., 2003).

After obtaining what dominant, White culture desired (i.e. land, assimilation, the diminishment of any kind of threat), Native Americans – the once described as tan-White-people – were no longer included within White society, policy, or culture. Instead, many Native American tribes have endured numerous political attempts, both historically and currently, to eradicate the constructed “threatening” Native American identity. U.S. policy has caused Native American populations to decrease substantially and the majority of their land has been confiscated as a result of The Dawes Act in 1887, which divided up small amounts of land to the remaining tribes, creating reservations (Chang, 2011). Though simplified, Native Americans’ past and present relationship with U.S. policy is a telling example of the fragility that an inclusive relationship can entail.

The experiences of many Native Americans, African Americans and women are but a few examples of the assimilation or supposed inclusion that marginalized groups encounter, whereby equal rights have not provided full equality in terms of being received within dominant society and without discrimination. The U.S. government and its various policies demonstrate a history of advocating for assimilation, and manipulating groups to adhere to the standards it deems normal or acceptable. However, both historically, and as will be shown with the current gay and lesbian mainstream movement, such inclusion does not automatically secure equal treatment. Although equality/equal rights is not a zero sum game, where one is either wholly equal or not at all – as many groups do exist in a hybrid state – the idea of obtaining inclusion, equity, or parity through other means needs to be discussed in schools, other various institutions, and general discourse on the subject. It should not be taught that inclusion or equality should end with the attainment of equal rights as power relations and forms of oppression are extremely more complicated. Equality is an ongoing process and is not achieved through legislation or with political inclusion as its end goal. If such things are better communicated then perhaps movements toward inclusion would be mounted in different ways so that exclusion is not a result, nor is contentment, with only legal or political equality.

Gay and Lesbian Politics: Current Assimilation

Following historical-suit, the contemporary mainstream gay and lesbian movement’s advance toward equality is, as stated, being conducted through the demand for equal rights and inclusion into dominant culture – fixated around equal rights to marriage, military service, priesthood, and adoption. Pride parades and activist organizations such as the HRC and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) – an organization which proclaims to fight biases and stereotypes of gay and lesbian people in the media – are some of the ways gay and lesbian individuals are focusing attention on their cause (www.glaad.org).

The HRC is especially controversial within more “radical” queer circles (anything that goes against the mainstream is usually given the title “radical”) as it is the major proponent of equal rights and, like most pro-assimilation gay and lesbian individuals, proposes a we’re-just-like-you argument (Sycamore, 2004). This strategy advocates that gay and lesbian people are exactly like heterosexual people, excluding whom they are affectionally or sexually attracted to. The HRC website displays numerous pictures of what it assumes are “typical” lesbian and gay people in the U.S.: the majority of which are White, appear to be any class but lower, able-bodied, and gender normative – giving an almost parallel display of what popular media depicts as typical Americans (HRC, 2011a). Thus, the mainstream gay and lesbian movement attempts to discard any culturally specific or potentially offensive qualities about itself in order to show that gay and lesbian persons are just like straight people. Consequently, this suggests that assimilating to heterosexual norms is not only the correct way to act or behave, but that it is the only way to obtain equality and equal rights.

These particular politics, in addition to situating gay and lesbian people as “just like” heterosexual people, also do little to challenge heteronormativity and heterosexism. Anti-assimilationist, queer activist and writer Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (2004), notes that the “mainstream prioritizes the attainment of straight privilege over all else” (p. 3). Rather than a rejection of heterosexuality as the right and “normal” orientation, the assimilation politics used by the mainstream movement places heterosexuality and its institutions as correct – reinforcing its privilege and normality. Furthermore, through such assertions, the movement is inadvertently implying that the heterosexual standard, and the rights heterosexuals are afforded, are the ones to conform to and achieve.

For example, the central debate about gay and lesbian marriage posits marriage as an institution to be included in instead of questioning the foundations and necessity of it. On the HRC’s webpage, solely dedicated to marriage rights, a description reads “only marriage can provide families with true equality” (HRC, 2011b). Such a statement, as well as the HRC in general, suggests that the capitalist, heteronormative family structure is the only one that will bring equality and happiness. Ironically, this not only excludes queer-identified, unmarried people as unequal and consequently unhappy, but also situates many couples or families, even heterosexual ones, not enticed or bound to the institution of marriage, as lacking in happiness and equality. Hence, through assimilation politics, where gay and lesbian people fight for the same rights as heterosexual people, oppressive institutions like marriage go unchallenged and unquestioned. Rather than demanding equal rights to marriage, the mainstream – or all queer and even straight people – could be demanding the removal of such an institution: do not reform marriage laws, eradicate them!

As it has been discussed, historically, assimilation or the demand for equal rights has not granted marginalized groups equality free of discrimination or violence. Thus, through a repetition of past inclusion practices (i.e. assimilation) the mainstream gay and lesbian movement fails to accomplish a kind of equality where discrimination and inequitable treatment of any queer identities or sexualities is reduced. In the following sections this paper further dissects the mainstream movement and argues that assimilation-based inclusion will lead (if it has not already) to: (a) a fragile and unstable relationship between gay and lesbian identities and the heterosexual dominant culture based on capitalism and commodification; (b) a model gay or lesbian identity that excludes the majority of queer individuals; and (c) a furthering of the power of dominant culture and domination by White, able bodied, upper class men within the United States.

Capitalism and the Movement

Writer Audre Lorde (1995) asserts that in capitalism, “good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need” (p. 191). In the capitalistic society of the U.S., money is placed on a pedestal and profit becomes the ultimate goal and driving force of the culture. It could be argued that inclusion into U.S. culture, or even how much one matters, is dependent upon how much one is worth financially. Hip hop is an illuminating example that demonstrates capitalism’s commodification and consumption of something that was once anti-mainstream but then inevitably absorbed by dominant culture in an attempt to procure a profit. Hip hop music originated in opposition to mainstream music; when it first started popular radio stations would not play the genre (Rose, 2008). However, once hip hop music began to rise in popularity in the underground circles, big businesses (run mainly by White men) began to buy hip hop record labels and constructed the musical genre into the money-making industry it is today, with artists such as 50 Cent, Lil’ Wayne, and T.I. (Rose, 2008). This example shows that once something becomes of value, regardless of its roots, dominant culture will do its best to take control and turn a profit. Inclusion is thus a business deal – hinting at the fragility of the matter since once all the worth, profit, or money is gone, so is the deal (refer back to many Native American’s experience).

Currently, businesses and marketing strategists have recognized the untapped gay and lesbian consumers that they can target to increase revenues. Noticing this, Sycamore states, it is “the happy gay consumer that lies beneath all of those glamorous, sweatshop-produced rainbow flags, Tiffany wedding bands, Grey Goose Cosmo-tinis, and all of the rabid consumption” (Ruiz, 2008, p. 241). What’s more, the mainstream gay and lesbian individuals are proudly adopting their new consumerist role (Sycamore, 2004). The gay stereotype of the fashionista as displayed in shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* or *Project Runway* with Tim Gunn, reinforces the ideal that gay men must adhere to a strict appearance regime involving designer labels, manicured nails, and a stylish haircut. Sycamore in an interview comments on this saying that gay consumerist-assimilation “tells us that we all should be building this ‘Gaylandia’ where everyone can shop in comfort and buy the right cocktails and the right accessories and the right Hummer and the right kind of dog” (Ruiz, 2008, p. 238).

Besides big businesses tapping into the gay and lesbian market, within the media, gay and lesbian characters themselves are used for profit because “gay” is the new favorite token identity to hit television. Many note the rise in gay and lesbian characters as a positive thing within the media, appearing in such shows as *Will and Grace*, *Glee*, *The L Word*, *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Modern Family*. However, upon closer inspection, these characters are mostly male, upper-middle class, able-bodied, gender normative, attractive, and although not heterosexual, are not fluid – wavering or engaging in multiplicity and unconfined to any particular category (e.g. not fitting into the label of heterosexual, homosexual, and/or bisexual but belonging somewhere in the middle or beyond the divisions entirely) – in their sexuality. Furthermore, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD), the organization set on patrolling media to make sure no stereotyping occurs does not seem to mind these shows, which only furthers many queers’ suspicions that the mainstream gay and lesbians are only concerned with representing a certain kind of queer. The media has packaged queerness and wrapped it up to look just like straight people, only more fashionable and sassy. Left out of this image are people of color, transgender or transsexual individuals, elderly queers, butch lesbians, or any person that is fluid in their sexuality or gender expression. The media’s representation sticks to a rigid blueprint of

White, male, and masculine enough to be tolerated, but feminine enough not to challenge the stereotype of the effeminate gay man.

The relationship between dominant society and gay and lesbian people is unstable. It teeters upon a relationship of profit and comfort. As long as gay and lesbian people stay trendy, and as long as they do not get *too* queer, they can remain included into mainstream representations. However, if gay and lesbian people – characters or viewers – stopped being a vehicle for big business income, it is possible that such an inclusion would quickly reveal its fragility and turn to exclusion.

A Model Identity: Constructing Boundaries on the Quest for Parity

By the mainstream gay and lesbian movement presenting a *particular* kind of politics and the media displaying a *particular* kind of gay or lesbian person, a *particular* kind of identity and representation has also spread and created an idyllic gay or lesbian identity (see Seidman, 1993; Sycamore, 2004, Warner 1993). It has produced a model queer identity by which all other queer individuals are forced to measure up (i.e. White, able-bodied, upper class, and gender normative). Jasbir Puar (2007) discusses a gay model identity in her work on nationalism, queerness, and U.S. politics and provides a definition of the model homosexual as tied to nationalism and the U.S. War on Terror, which is applicable for this paper's purpose. She states that the U.S. has constructed a particular kind of homosexuality and "this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects" (Puar, 2007, p. 2). Thus, the model identity is not only a particular sexuality (gay/lesbian) but also a specific race (White) and nationality (American). Sycamore calls it the "monolithic gay identity" and it is thought of by the mainstream movement as the identity most likely to persuade approval and acceptance of gay and lesbian people by heterosexual, dominant culture (Ruiz, 2008, p.238).

Arguably, one of the most influential in creating this model queer identity, besides organizations like the HRC and GLAAD, is the Media. Popular shows like *Will and Grace*, *Glee*, *Modern Family* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* show gay men and women packaged in a particular way. All of the characters in these shows communicate that "queers must either fit into acceptable stereotypes of gay appearance and behavior, or be visibly indistinguishable from heterosexuals" and thus "mainstream [TV] characters can only exhibit limited amounts of 'gayness'" (Chess, Kafer, Quizar, & Richardson, 2004, p. 193). Variations in these kinds of images are rare and as a result, not only do heterosexual viewers develop a sense of what queerness should look like, but also within the queer community there is pressure to conform and adhere to stereotypical media representations. Sycamore (2004) asserts the "gay mainstream presents a sanitized, straight-friendly version of gay identity" and ignores all those who do not adapt to such an identity (p. 3). As a result, a divide is created and certain queer individuals are excluded since they do not fit into the constructed mold. Sycamore (2004) confirms this, stating "against the nightmare backdrop of assimilation, queers striving to live outside conventional norms become increasingly marginalized . . . Assimilation means erasure; any queers that call attention to this tyranny risk ostracism, imprisonment, or worse" (p. 3). Exclusion resulting from supposed inclusion into dominant culture and assimilation politics can be seen most explicitly through the creation and production of this model queer identity because if one does not fit the

mold, then one is not welcomed within dominant culture or the mainstream gay and lesbian movement. Not welcomed by dominant culture, as it does not fit the ideal seen as tolerable, and not welcomed by mainstream gay and lesbian movement or people, since non-adhering queers are a threat to the progress toward inclusion.

This model queer identity and mainstream politics are probably most problematic for those queer individuals that are of color, transgender, fluid in their sexual expression or gender, or a combination of such. Queer people of color are especially left out of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement and are not included in the model queer identity representation. It could be argued that the mainstream gay and lesbian movement engages in this particular exclusion of non-White individuals in an attempt to blend in with dominant culture's racist and discriminatory practices, hoping mimicry might progress toward acceptance. Similarly, activist Priyank Jindal (2004) argues that through racism, the mainstream gay and lesbian movement has propelled its cause by making clear their alignment with the rejuvenated nationalism and patriotism seen post-9/11. Jindal says, "the gay community's emphasis on the similarities in experience between (White) heterosexuality and lesbian and gay homosexuality, through a shared racism of brown folk, has helped White gays and lesbians to assimilate and become part of the White heterosexual nation" (p. 24). Moreover, because the movement declares a race-blind approach, arguing for equal rights for *all* queer people, the rampant racism is never discussed. As a result, "Caucasian queers can easily slip into the comforts of the lgbt [*sic*] 'community,' ignorant of the White supremacy that dictates who belongs" (Maltzman, 2004, p. 127). The mainstream gay and lesbian movement and the model identity are thus more venues where White-skin privilege can provide a comforting place for ignorance and within such ignorance continue to oppress people of color and furthermore erase such bodies from queer culture.

Besides queer people of color, to even have some sort of sexuality that steps out of the boundaries of mainstream ideals of "gay" or "lesbian" means to be excluded or ignored by the mainstream movement. Fluid sexualities are often treated as shameful within the community for its lack of adherence to the model queer identity. Mainstream gay and lesbians look at radical, fluid or flamboyant sexualities as detrimental to the cause. For example, queer advocate and publisher of *Other* magazine Charlie Anders (2004) discusses how she chooses to be queer and that her *choice* is extremely scary for both mainstream gays and lesbian individuals as well as heterosexuals. She asserts that "the involuntary queerness story is the linchpin of many queer people's strategies to claim normality. 'We didn't choose this' becomes part of 'we're just like you in every other way'" (Anders, 2004, p. 60). To choose one's sexuality is dangerous to the mainstream gay and lesbian movement because the majority of organizations and mainstream participants rest on a biological-non-choice argument, asserting that gay and lesbian individuals were born with their sexual orientations – that it is an innate feature like eye or hair color (Anders, 2004). Anders suggests this argument is a timid attempt at equality because "built-in differences only call for tolerance (as long as you don't differ too much, or in too many ways)" (p. 63). The born-this-way-argument also inadvertently suggests, "that if queer people could choose, of course they would choose to be straight," says Anders (2004, p. 61). Not allowing for recognition of fluid sexualities or sexualities by choice, within mainstream politics or within the model identity, performs the same exclusionary practices that heterosexism does to gay and lesbian people: it denies identities that exist, are prevalent, and are important.

In addition to not allowing for fluid sexual identities, fluid gender expression is also not allowed according to the model identity, excluding those who identify as genderqueer – people whose appearance does not conform to a particular gender or the "proper" gender for their

biological sex – or are transgender (Chess et al., 2004; Maltzman, 2004). Some radical queers argue that the queer community has “internalized the larger culture’s homophobia and transphobia, which has made us ashamed of our visible queerness, especially any signs of genderqueerness” (Chess et al., 2004, p. 194). This is especially evident in mainstream representations of gay and lesbian people. The model queer identity is not too flamboyant in its femininity or masculinity, but rather unthreatening as it fits into the mainstream images of queers seen in the media, and reinforces gender roles and expression. Rarely is an image similar to that of a drag queen shown as the model queer or on the cover of a mainstream magazine.

The HRC website is particularly interesting in this matter as it displays images of lesbian couples, although in appearance somewhat masculine, adhering to the particular gender roles of heterosexual couples. For example, images communicating proper gender role expressions are on several of their webpages, displaying masculine females with short hair, wearing men’s clothing paired with another female who is obviously the feminine partner, displaying long hair and feminine dress. These images are almost identical to ones that grace the covers of popular magazine’s images exhibiting heterosexual celebrity couples. Writer Clint Catalyst (2004) succinctly says “the message smacks all the same: Be a fag, but don’t emulate one” (p. 121). Only certain gender expressions are accepted within the mainstream, and the more they emulate the images and ideals that the heterosexual world espouses, the more welcomed they become. All those who do not conform to such gendered representations are thus excluded.

The mainstream gay and lesbian movement, media representations, and the model identity create a community of policing and exclusion, as well as internalized shame for those who may not fit with the current mainstream model. Having standards based on assimilation to dominant, heterosexual culture is “divisive” says Victoria Brownworth (1995) in that “those who can pass for straight are ‘better’ than those – butch, dyke, nelly queens – who can’t” (p. 15). Moreover, Sycamore (2006) notes that passing is multidimensional and involved heavily with mainstream politics as it becomes “a means through which the violence of assimilation takes place” (p. 8). Those who do not adapt or adhere to the model identity risk encountering that violence, or if one wishes to enact such a representation then the violence is still inflicted, as the person must live out their days pretending to be someone they are not.

Interconnectedness and Further Domination

This lack of consideration for various races, genders, and classes within the mainstream movement has also appeared in the particular scope of politics chosen by the mainstream gay and lesbian movement. Attorney and activist Dean Spade (2004) asserts that the mainstream movement:

Choose to fight for homos to be able to pass our apartments on to each other, rather than for tenants rights or low-income housing. They fight for people who are employed to be able to get their partners on their private health coverage, but take no stand on Medicaid and do nothing to promote universal health care (p. 35).

The mainstream movement focuses on isolated matters and as a result leaves certain identities or larger issues out. For example, Priyank Jindal (2004) discusses how the contemporary gay and lesbian movement with its focus on marriage, adoption, and fighting the Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell

policy ignores the most pertinent topics facing queer people of color, transgender individuals, or transgender people of color. Jindal asserts, “these are not the most pressing issues amongst working-class, poor . . . whose race, documentation, class status, or gender identity often prevent them from receiving the wide array of social benefits afforded to White, middle-class gays and lesbians” (Jindal, 2004, p. 24). Although the HRC does state that the rights of transgender individuals are important under its umbrella noted bodies, it is certainly not a primary focus of the organization, or of any mainstream gay and lesbian movement currently. Spade (2004) comments on this as he notes that although the passing of the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination act in New York in 2002 was a success for some as it prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation, it completely left out any discrimination based on gender identity. Identifying as transgender, Spade (2004) asks, “where do we fit in,” in what he calls the “LGBfakeT movement” (p. 35). Transgender individuals, like gay and lesbian persons face very similar and violent discrimination and lack many of the same rights, yet the population is extremely excluded from the mainstream movement’s political concerns.

Non-mainstream queer individuals also criticize the mainstream movement’s lack of attention to sex education in schools, bathroom facilities (another transgender issue), and how schools’ approach to hate crimes is particularly limited. Sycamore (2004) notes that with regard to “anti-queer violence,” the mainstream “agenda fights for tougher hate crime laws, instead of fighting racism, classism, transphobia (and homophobia) intrinsic to the criminal ‘justice’ system” (p. 3). Instead of examining the root cause of the many obstacles and injustices queer people face, the gay and lesbian movement focuses mostly on surface-level rights or heterosexual privileges. Additionally, with regard to hate crimes, Sycamore notes that the mainstream movement ignores the interconnectedness of certain issues – that race is intricately interconnected with class, and that class is connected with gender, and so on (Ruiz, 2008). Sycamore claims that she would love to hear the mainstream discuss how gay and lesbian issues are heavily interwoven with inequalities based on race, class and gender, so instead of saying “‘My *real* issue is that I’m queer, but I’m also interested in fighting racism and classism,’” she would like to see the mainstream assert “‘I’m queer *and that means* fighting racism, fighting classism, fighting homophobia; you can’t take them apart” (Ruiz, 2008, p. 239). In failing to see the connections of all issues, the mainstream movement does not challenge foundational injustices – including how such oppressive forces are interconnected – that could perhaps actually produce a shift toward substantial change – no longer should the divide and conquer mantra apply to social justice movements.

A particular consequence of not seeing the interconnectedness of social inequities and discrimination is that White, dominant culture is allowed to continue without question or transformation. Audre Lorde (1995) states that with assimilation politics a “common humanity” approach is usually taken,” where “the ideal of a universal humanity without social group differences allows privileged groups to ignore their own group specificity” (p. 203). Thus, assimilation politics, in this case proposed by the mainstream gay and lesbian movement, choose to take a gender-blind, race-blind, and class-blind approach to equal rights. Since a gender, race, and class-blind approach is taken by the movement, mainstream White, able-bodied, middle to upper-class gay and lesbian individuals get to enjoy such privileges while claiming a neutral and all-inclusive approach to politics. Essentially, through assimilation politics, which ignore power and privilege, dominant culture gets to retain its status quo keeping White, heterosexual, upper-class males in their positions of power.

Conclusion: What Queerness and Teachers Can Do

The kind of political inclusion sought by the mainstream gay and lesbian movement ultimately creates a problem for what I have been calling “radical” queers: those who do not want inclusion into the dominant culture in any way – they are not looking to fit in, but instead stand out and work towards a progressive, even fluid, and transformative society. Queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004) is a part of this “radical” camp as he rejects any form of assimilation into dominant culture. He asserts, “rather than rejecting, with the liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it” (Edelman, 2004, p. 4). Rather than mainstream politics fighting for inclusion, which inevitably causes further and more damaging exclusion, queer identified people could be battling for a reconfiguration of the whole heteronormative system. If, historically, equal rights have not granted other marginalized groups a form of equality that puts an end to discrimination and prejudice, then a rejection of equality could be the answer to a more transformative change that dissolves dichotomous constructions of difference as well as unjust treatment emotionally and physically. Edelman (2004) provides an understanding of this new queer identity– a radical one which seeks to disrupt and destroy the entire heterosexist, heteronormative, heterodominant system – as he states “the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such – on disturbing, therefore, and on queering *ourselves* and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (p. 17).

The mainstream gay and lesbian movement is a current political undertaking – a sort of living curriculum – that should be addressed in classroom discussions, as it is ripe for critical analysis. Discourse or lessons on equality should reflect the multidimensionality involved with political inclusion, and the necessary assimilation that often accompanies it within the U.S. Teaching about equal rights movements throughout history or in contemporary society should be expanded to include the sacrifices that may have been incurred and the state or aftermath of the movement(s) currently. William F. Pinar (2011) declares that at its foundation, curriculum should be a “complicated conversation” (p. 1). The process of learning about historical events and equal rights movements should not be a simple one-dimensional lecture, but an interaction between students and teachers that breaths life into past and present events. Pinar (2011) communicates the importance of curriculum when he states that, “[t]hrough the study of school subjects, individual human subjects come to form, in society, at particular historic moments, with specific and changing cultural significance” (2011). By engaging in conversations and making curriculum a many-sided, and for Pinar, a complicated affair, perhaps certain identities, sacrifices, and even the dark-side of social justice movements can be shown and new ways of seeking equity and equality could be imagined. Thus, an immediate assertion that equality is not only the sole, but also the best means for change needs to be questioned, and as hopefully demonstrated in this paper, questioned for good reason: so that further exclusion of identities (most of which have been historically oppressed and rejected) can no longer occur.

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