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Queer Assimilation

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Abstract

The issue of assimilation has long been a source of disagreement within the LGBTQ+ community. At the core of the issue are the competing needs for safety/acceptance and full recognition of a distinct identity from the normative mainstream. Queer politics seeks to create a space and a community with the intention of challenging heteronormative and patriarchal institutions, in order to gain acceptance for the LGBTQ+ community as a community with distinct, equally valid values and priorities as the heteronormative/patriarchal mainstream. Queer politics emerges as a non-assimilationist school of thought, which allows for critique of the hegemonic qualities of mainstream cultural values, and various ways in which they can be damaging to LGBTQ+ individuals. The phenomenon of 'passing' is one of the most visible signs of this hegemony, in that it functions both as a form of protection, and as a means to accrue social capital on an individual basis, but ends up creating harmful dichotomies between individuals who can pass and those who do not that become extrapolated and generalized into stereotypes. The phenomenon of 'passing' is also similar to the idea of homonormativity, which entails the recreation of oppressive dynamics and structures of power in queer spaces, thus furthering the oppression of already marginalized people.

Almost from the time that homosexuality became an identity around which people could form a community, there has been disagreement

within that community about any number of issues. Given the demographic diversity of the broader queer community in the United States in terms of educational background, race, gender, religion, geographical location, political/social priorities and proximity to urban centers, there is an extraordinary diversity of thought. Perhaps the most fundamental disagreement that has existed almost from the earliest beginnings of the LGBTQ+ community, is that concerning the question of assimilation. Given that homosexuality has historically been held in contempt by political, religious and social forces in the United States, the history of the LGBTQ+ community, and that of the Queer community, has always been that of the struggle between invisibility, safety and oppression and visibility, vulnerability and the quest to be recognized as full citizens of the United States. Due to the hegemonic qualities of the dominant social narratives, non-traditional life objectives and narratives are subsumed and erased by mainstream culture.

In any conversation about the values of a community, it is necessary to define said community so that the values in discussion are properly contextualized. LGBTQ+ typically refers to the spectrum of sexualities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual and others covered under the Q(ueer)+ designation), and gender identities (transgender and others covered under the Q+ designation) which are contrary to the heteronormative mainstream that only recognizes gender as a binary. The term "queer" as used in the LGBTQ+ acronym tends to have a connotation of fluidity, or of a rejection of super specific identity labels both in terms of

gender identity (as in “genderqueer”) and of sexual desire (as an alternative to “gay”, “lesbian”, “bisexual” and so forth). As it pertains to this paper, “queer” refers to a political identity that seeks to create a community whose primary mission is to challenge the heteronormative patriarchy that dominates society (Phelan 56). Queer politics is fundamentally in opposition to any form of assimilation in that it aims for a “disruption of the dominant social text,” not through separatism, but by demanding political representation and protection while reserving the right to express an altogether separate and non-conforming identity (58). Many scholars are adamant in noting that merely identifying as gay/lesbian/bisexual does not make an individual queer—after all, these are identity categories that are essentially constructed and reified by “contemporary systems of gender and sexuality” the same way that heteronormative identity categories are (59). These categories are all informed and determined by the same religious and political discourses, only these discourses affect the different categories differently, which is the root for the social construction of these categories in the first place. In short, queer/queer politics is concerned with deconstructing and destabilizing “the definition and demarcation of homosexual/heterosexual binary” with the intent of “challenging the boundary lines as well as the content” of the identities that are rooted in the binary, and challenging the idea of a monolithic identity (59-60).

Some of the starkest differences between queer and non-queer thought within the LGBTQ+ community can be observed in the tension that existed (exists?) between lesbian-feminists and “lesbian ‘sex radicals’” (61). Lesbian-feminism is an off-shoot of liberal feminism, in which lesbian identity is built around the experience of *loving* women rather than the experience of sexual *desire* for women. Lesbian-feminism was characterized by its outright separation from straight and gay men (61). This kind of thinking was critiqued in a particularly pointed way by Gayle Rubin in an

essay that acknowledged the lesbian “sex radicals” that lesbian-feminism ignored in its “sexually sanitized” formulation, and grouped them with other sexual transgressors whose activities were seen as presenting active challenges to oppressive institutions such as heterosexuality and monogamy (61). Rubin criticized lesbian-feminism for creating a dichotomy between “good girls”—who were ostensibly immune to sexual desire—and “bad girls” who were sexually ‘deviant’; this kind of dichotomy, she argued, was an extension of the dichotomies that are essential to upholding patriarchal and heterosexist systems of oppression (61).

These kinds of binary oppositions are extremely useful tools when it comes to asserting a particular narrative’s or an idea’s dominance over another by imbuing one side of the binary with certain values, and then assigning “opposing” values to the same categories on the other side of the binary. In terms of heteronormativity and heterosexism, this dichotomy plays out with heterosexuality as the dominant and expected identity, and homosexuality (and, in a similar but not altogether different way, bisexuality) as the devalued, deviant identity category. In practice, this means that heterosexuality is widely privileged in the ways that it is intrinsically linked with citizenship. In “Heteronormative Citizenship and the Politics of Passing,” Carol Johnson argues that although certain sociocultural discourses have been indubitably extended to include LGBTQ+ people, their standing as *citizens* with rights and protections is still up for debate not only in the United States but in Australia, Europe, South America, Asia, and Africa as well (318). At its most basic, the construction of citizenship in liberal societies involves contracts: the social contract between a citizen and the government, and then the marriage contract, which has historically been between a man/citizen and a woman/subordinate (319). Citizenship, then, has traditionally been inextricably linked with heterosexuality and patriarchy; to this day, despite the very visible and obvious accomplishments in regards to women’s and LGBTQ+ rights, women

and queer people still are less than full citizens.

In this kind of system, heterosexuality becomes both a standard and a hegemonic force. Individuals who do not conform to the heteronormative ideal can be excluded from activities of citizenship that are open to heterosexual people: they can be banned from serving in the military, or from working in the government, as was the case in the Eisenhower era (Frank, 18). Although this kind *de jure* discrimination has decreased with the legalization of same-sex marriage and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and other legal protections, it does not mean that homophobia and anti-gay prejudice have by any means been resolved. Johnson argues that in order to avoid discrimination and especially in order to avoid drawing attention to their non-conformity, LGBTQ+ people are compelled—or, more truthfully, coerced—into passing (320). Passing is an act of coercion because, often, it is a reaction that is borne out of the fear or shame that is instilled in people by the heteronormative sociocultural mainstream. Being visible and “out” with a non-heterosexual identity can have extremely tangible and weighty consequences—again, despite the progress that has been made in obtaining legal rights and protections against discrimination at various levels of government. The entertainment industry, for instance, has an extremely long history of forcing artists and entertainers into the closet by arranging visible heterosexual relationships. Often, the main motivator is the fear of potentially alienating heterosexual audiences, and with them, valuable profits.

Johnson observes that the power dynamics involved in passing play out in a couple of different ways: either as a form of protection against discrimination, or as a way to assert what Johnson refers to as “heterosexual privilege” (320). There are different implications for both of these dynamics, but one that they have in common is that they embody the good gay/bad gay dichotomy. She quotes Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's 1973 speech, in which he seems to support

reforms to laws governing gay men:

“We are concerned with one question and one question only Should homosexual individuals who are adults, who both wish a homosexual relationship with each other, *who do not flaunt it but who act in private, withdrawn from the public gaze, be dubbed criminals and be subject to punishment by the criminal law?* I suggest to the House that they should not be treated in that way...” (Johnson 320, emphasis added).

This type of discourse encourages people to police even the most personal and intimate aspects of their behavior, and then “rewards” them with social acceptance. They become the “good gays”. Conversely, those individuals who flaunt their nonconformity, or who are unable to pass for any given reason, become the “bad gays”. It also puts a premium on privacy that has no equivalent for heterosexuals. After all, they do not need to appear differently than they are for their own ‘benefit’ and that of the majority around them.

Johnson's idea of LGBTQ+ performing heterosexuality in order to claim heterosexual privilege closely parallels the idea of *homonormativity*, which the queer writer and activist Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore claims allows for the examination of the “potential to see the violence that occurs when gays show unquestioning loyalty to many of the things that...are routinely challenged within mainstream straight cultures” (Ruiz). There is a quality to homonormativity that is ironic: people who are oppressed *willingly* recreate and perfect the tools of oppression, which only further reinforces that oppression. In recreating and perfecting heteronormative dynamics of power and privilege, a myth of “gay affluence” develops. Sycamore laments this as a result of a kind of mindset wherein people fail to examine their participation in different normative institutions and systems of power that perpetuate oppression along

different axes. He points out the very consumerist and materialistic kind of thinking that simultaneously fuels and is fueled by this myth of affluence. This is a clearly observable phenomenon in the 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning*, although affluence is less of a reality and more of an aspiration.

The consumerism and materialism depicted in *Paris Is Burning* comes as a very uncomfortable realization because of the gritty and raw quality of the documentary itself. At various points throughout the film, members of the drag ball community refer to the Balls as likely their only opportunities to experience fame, or what reality would be like for them had their lives played out differently (00:04:36-04:55). More than one subject of the documentary expressed a desire for fame and recognition, and of course, money. One of the house mothers, Pepper LaBeija, talked about the economically precarious situations of the “children” that attend the Balls; she said something to the effect of how some of those individuals were facing such a lack of resources that often, they had to make choice between eating or saving up for a costume for the Balls, and they chose to not eat because it was imperative to have a good costume (00:6:30-6:40). There is a brief discussion about the importance of passing, in certain categories where participants were scored on “realness”. In order to present as convincingly as possible in certain categories of wealth and luxury, people who lived lives of financial insecurity and a lack of basic resources either sacrificed meals, or shoplifted couture boutiques. Those who could seemingly afford to spend any kind of money at these designer stores, did so because they believed that poverty was not a condition they were meant for (00:05-5:30). Their models of affluence, power, etc. were television programs such as *Dallas* *Dynasty*, both of which showcased ostentatious wealth. In this context, the willing subjugation to consumerism becomes an axis of oppression that goes unexamined because it is believed to lead to liberation from the constraints of the heteronorma-

tivity, cis-sexism, and racism that are plainly observable in the film. By extension, their submission to the hegemonic need to pass—to perform in the categories of “realness” and to perform well enough to win trophies—reduces the possibilities for dialogues about expanding/queering the expectations of gender performance rather than continuing to perpetuate limited avenues of expression.

Amber Hollibaugh and Margot Weiss examine the negative consequences that this myth of gay affluence has on the ability of the LGBTQ+ community and labor organizations to effectively organize themselves for the protection of these economically vulnerable individuals. They argue that LGBTQ+ people who are gender non-conforming, immigrants, or non-white tend to be at greater risk of economic vulnerability than their traditionally gendered and/or white counterparts (20). The community depicted in *Paris Is Burning* was made up mostly of gender non-conforming/trans people of color; several mentioned that their families were not accepting of their particular identities. For the most part, none of the people interviewed throughout the film talked about the jobs they held outside of the Ball scene, but a young woman named Venus Xtravaganza was a known sex worker who is believed to have been murdered because of her transness.

Different aspects of a person’s identity have the ability to significantly affect their overall experience of daily life. Because of the relatively high rates at which transgender women enter sex work, they also face higher rates of criminalization—and within that category, trans women of color tend to face higher rates than their white counterparts (Hollibaugh and Weiss 20). Because sex work is not protected by labor-laws, sex workers are unable to organize or form unions, and again, face higher rates of criminalization. Transgender women sex workers, typically face the highest rates of violence, which makes stories like Venus’s far too common (22). Hollibaugh and Weiss contend that the only way that economic injustice and

homophobia can be effectively managed in terms of their effects on the lives of LGBTQ+ people is if community organizing takes place with both sexuality *and* economic inequality in mind (24). Only then, when efforts are truly queer, and not just about fitting groups of people with complex needs that require nuanced solutions into existing and inadequate structures, will the possibility for change and progress exist.

In the United States, the argument that extending marriage to LGBTQ+ people would confer on them the same economic benefits that married heterosexual couples enjoy was used to gain support within the LGBTQ+ community, to ameliorate queer criticism, and to appeal to the heteronormative mainstream, by focusing on the material benefits of marriage, rather than on its religious connotations (Green 22). Hollibaugh and Weiss argue that marriage was (and continues to be) an insufficient means of ensuring the economic well-being or stability of LGBTQ+ people, because for so many of them—particularly those who are marginalized in terms of race or gender, and who thus face more difficulties in finding meaningful work—marriage tends to be of relatively low priority (23). However, the broader implication of this first argument that same-sex couples should be entitled to the same rights and benefits that married heterosexual couples are entitled to is that by allowing LGBTQ+ people to take part in the same acts of citizenship that “normal” heterosexual couples take part in affirms queer people’s citizenship (Green 408). Although extending this contract to same-sex couples *does* acknowledge their citizenship, it does so under the condition that they adhere to heteronormative institutions for the sake of security and legitimacy.

Adam Isaiah Green explains the feminist/queer critique of assimilation—and the unexpected commonalities that it has with socially conservative politics that seek to marginalize LGBTQ+ individuals. A notable point of departure between the two perspectives is the queer/feminist belief that while LGBTQ+ indi-

viduals gain visibility and sociopolitical recognition, doing so by way of an assimilationist approach only bolsters and solidifies “a social order organized around sexism and gender inequality, and the disciplining of a new, assimilated queer subject” (Green 405). The idea that assimilation would discipline the queer subject refers to the importance of passing. Even if, legally speaking, LGBTQ+ people are given the same rights and protections as their heterosexual counterparts, they will be nonetheless expected to police their desires and behaviors that will permanently relegate them to a position of second-class citizenship.

In contrast to marriage are queer relationships, which Ellen Lamont characterizes as those that “challenge the notion of distinct gendered behaviors in romantic relationships, and...conventional relationship practices” (625). Such gendered behavior would constitute the expectation that men act as aggressors and initiate courtship rituals, while “women are expected to simply react”, or the idea that as the relationship becomes established, men’s demonstrativeness decreases, and women take up the expectation of performing “labors of love” (626). It is worth noting that not all relationships between LGBTQ+ people are intrinsically queer, the way that Lamont intends. She notes that while, generally speaking, same-sex partnerships tend to be more egalitarian than heterosexual partnerships, gendered inequalities exist in the division of care and emotional labor that one partner performs as opposed to another. Once again, a definition of queerness persists wherein the identity centers on “resisting normalization and radically transforming society” (627). This allows for the formation of identities premised on “radical individualism,” and which (ironically?) is premised on an idea of “alternative respectability” which “dictates the ‘right’ way to be queer” (628). In terms of relationship practices, this alternative respectability entails a rejection of monogamy, and a focus on building expectations and sharing responsibilities based on the particular parties’ needs and strengths (628).

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore describes her personal approach to queer politics as centered on “challenging racism, classism, colonialism and imperialism, misogyny and homophobia...It’s a feminist politics of challenging power that’s behind everything I do” (Ruiz 238). This is an understanding of queerness that is widely shared and held in the literature reviewed for the purposes of this paper. There are very compelling arguments in favor of both assimilation and the rejection of mainstream heteronormativity, and both have radically different theoretical underpinnings. However, assimilation seems to sentence the queer community to a lasting existence as second class citizens.

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