Resisting normativity: Queer musings on politics, identity, and the performance of therapy

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What are some of the hazards of the modern gay rights movement? The authors propose that in attempting to secure 'equal' rights in various aspects of public and private life – for example, marriage, military service, and health insurance – modern gay rights engages in 'homonormativity' which seeks to limit the options for queer people, by having them replicate aspects of mainstream, neoliberal, heterosexual lifestyles. Instead of this approach, the authors propose a 'queer utopia' based on ideas of sexual freedom and honouring diversity.

Keywords: queer, heteronormativity, homonormativity, LGBT, homosexuality

David Denborough asked us to write up the closing keynote speech we gave at the Therapeutic Conversations 9 (TC9) conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada in May 2010. We have done our best to capture in writing the heart of the speech, which, for us, was as much performance as it was text. We relied extensively on images to help illustrate on multiple levels the ideas we were interested in communicating, ideas that are reified through repeated discursive and visual performances in the mass media culture that permeates the North American world we live in.

We'd like to acknowledge the hipness and enlightenment that the participants of this conference hang out with. You attend TC9. You practice reflexively, you have an analysis of the prevailing cultural discourses, you consider the social location of problems. As for the idea of queer? We suspect you're pretty much down with that. For the Canadians present today, we're sure many of you can proudly recite Trudeau's words uttered in 1969 about the state having no business in peoples' bedrooms and many of you likely have attended a same-sex wedding – whether it was your own big day or that of someone you care about.

As for my fellow Americans, we've opposed Prop 8[1] and reconsidered the possible charms of Iowa[2]. We know that, many if not most of you here, are the choir. You support, fight for, and speak out on behalf of, LGBT rights.

Yet, today we'd like to pause to consider the complexity inherent in throwing our individual and collective support behind the contemporary gay rights agenda. For example, with the legalisation of gay marriage, *has* the state gotten out of peoples' bedrooms? Just what kind of progress *is* having gays serving openly in *any* military?

These are some of many questions we are interested in exploring. We will consider the discursive climate that not only gives gay rights social and political meaning, but that also continues to leave many on the margins, uninvited to the revolution. We'll offer our imagined vision for an inclusive agenda of sexual and gender justice for all, a kind of 'queertopia'. We'll begin with a review of some queer theory terms and concepts and provide a fast and dirty history lesson.

At the conference we showed a clip from the popular TV show,* Glee*. For those of you unfamiliar with* Glee*, actress Jane Lynch plays Sue Sylvester, a high school cheerleading coach who also has a weekly 'editorial' spot on the local TV news. The clip we showed was of Sue giving one of her weekly rants.

Briefly, the clip parodies homophobic bigotry through its excessive use of stereotypes of gay men and contemporary North American middle class gay life. Sylvester is upset that gay people have integrated into the world in such a way that she can no longer determine who is and isn't gay. These 'sneaky gays' turn up at church, picking up their 'meticulously dressed children from day care' or could even be sitting next to you – wherever you may be.

The clip is full of stereotypes that rely on the feminisation of gay men, as Sylvester reminisces about 'the simpler days of yesteryear' when there was less confusion about who is gay. In order for her to re-live those bygone days, she beseeches gays to 'swish it up' because, she asks, 'if I can't tell who's gay, how will I know who to judge?'

***Here is the link to the clip – any readers that have internet access can take a look for themselves:* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ETSAIVSQhs**

Jane Lynche's send-up of over-the-top, egregious homophobia manages to condense in two minutes a compendium of constructions of absurdly stereotyped gay male behaviour from a heterosexual frustrated with some of the successes of the gay rights movement. These successes include integration and assimilation into the larger culture as well as access to a normative middle class lifestyle. We'd like to consider some of the consequences of these successes – not on heterosexuals who believe the value of their goods is compromised by gay rights, but rather the impact on queer folks who don't meet specifications of an

increasingly normative lesbian and gay community. We consider this a kind of *sneaky gaze of homonormativity*. To understand what 'homonormativity' is, let's first consider *heteronormativity*.

Heteronormativity (Warner, 1991) is the institutionalisation of what we've come to call heterosexuality. It includes not only the sexual relationships between born male-bodied/male-identified people and born female-bodied/female-identified people, but also all the practices and values that have come to represent those relationships. Central to this privileged structure is the gender binary, the arbiter of all gendered relationships.

Homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) is the same thing but involves either two born male-bodied people or two born female-bodied people. It accepts as preferred and desirable the same relational structures and cultural institutions of heteronormativity, and as Lisa Duggan notes, is anchored in – just as is heteronormativity – domesticity and practices of consumerism . Homonormativity is straight-acting gay folk.

Heteronormativity and homonormativity are terms that have emerged from the body of scholarship that makes up queer theory. Queer theory is a set of critical practices that seeks to complicate hegemonic assumptions about the continuities between anatomical sex, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual object choice, and sexual practice. Queer theory rejects biological theories of sexual identity and calls into question so-called 'natural' sexuality. Central to these ideas is the challenge to the gender binary system that produces and maintains binary constructions such as male/female and hetero/homo.

Queer theory asks questions such as: *Who do these categories serve? Who do these categories include and whom do they exclude? Who has the power to define the categories? How are the categories policed? How do these categories change over time and across cultures?* (Doty, 1993). It is important to underscore how we are not using the term 'queer.' We are not using 'queer' as an umbrella term for LGBT. For us it is used as a point of resistance to fixed identities and normativity. Also, it is critical to recognise that the term 'queer' does not resonate with everyone, and in fact, may be quite offensive. For many people, the identities of bisexual, lesbian, and gay have significant, situated meaning. It would be very un-queer of us to impose the specification that everyone must adopt 'queer'.

Both heteronormativity and homonormativity require fixed, naturalised heterosexual and homosexual identities in order to maintain and regulate the norms of these discursive institutions. As queer theorists, we question fixity and essentialism of identities. For example, in the clip from *Glee*, Sue Sylvester talks about homosexuality being a 'pre-existing condition'. This has been *the* central argument of the contemporary gays right movement. Leveraging modernist notions of a naturalised, essential identity is central to the 'we're just like you' argument as well as the search for the gay gene. Claims that 'we're born this way, it's who we are' are positions reliant on – and reifying of – a fixed identity, be it genetic, biological, or existential.

Yet, we must recognise that these arguments have been politically necessary and strategic. They demonstrate that the binary, 'essentialist/constructionist' can be problematic, and that, at times, we need to engage in strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1987): the strategic use of essentialist group identities in order to leverage political resistance in the face of institutional power.

And still, importantly, taking up the position that homosexuality is a 'pre-existing condition' does not account for all identity constructions. People who perform fluid identities that are relationally constituted – identities that some people would call queer – are not accounted for by modernist notions of the essential self. In this way, the contemporary gay rights movement has, at times, privileged sameness over differences.

It should come as no surprise that the notion of an essential gay/lesbian identity, fraught with multiple specifications is historically and culturally contingent. Foucault asserts that homosexuality as an identity is a recent invention of the modern era. While individuals across time and place have engaged in all kinds of sexual activities including same-sex activities, classifying people based on those activities, thus rendering an identity category, had never before occurred. Foucault dates the invention of homosexuality to an 1870 article by

psychiatrist Carl Westphal. Foucault describes the discursive production of the homosexual in this oft-quoted passage:

We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized … Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of *interior* androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul; the homosexual was now a species. (1978, p. 43)

This discursive production of identity based on sexual practices occurred during the ascendancy of the medical profession and served the explicit – and oppressive – purpose of categorising, medicalising, and regulating people.

Foucault (1978) also says that where there's oppression there's resistance. One form of resistance is *reverse* discourse. As a medium for the flow of power, discourse can be reversed by changing the direction of power without changing the foundational ideas on which the discourse relies. In this example, the very notion that one's sexual practices and desires are constitutive of one's identity was not challenged but embraced. A liberatory pedagogy was forged not to overturn the discourse, but rather to change the meaning and value placed on it.

The reverse discourse emerged in Germany in the late 19th century in a near immediate response to the invention of homosexuality. In the 1950's, the United States saw organisations such as the Mattachine Society (an officially mixed-gender but overwhelmingly male group) and the Daughters of Bilitis (an exclusively female group). These groups started with an agenda of social change rooted in a Marxist analysis of oppression. Over time, a more cautious, assimilationist approach took hold, and included the disavowal of cruising, the sex-trade, drag queens, butch dykes, and other transgressors of gender specifications. The homophile movement adjusted its focus from a need to change society to the more normative and normalising emphasis that homosexuals are 'just like everyone else'.

Having discarded efforts for social change by embracing the rhetoric of the medical and psychiatric establishment, the homophile movement gave way to the promise of the gay liberation movement. The 1969 Stonewall riots in New York serve as the iconic moment of gay liberation. While Stonewall is typically appreciated as a emblem of gay and lesbian resistance to heterosexist oppression, it is critical to queer politics to understand what Stonewall meant to the resistance of the increasingly assimilationist position of the homophile movement. As these earlier movements became more normative, those gender and sexual outlaws that were pushed to the margins pushed back. Among those often placed at the epicentre of the riots are African-Americans and Latinos, drag queens, and various gender transgressors. Central to the broad platform of social and economic justice was a focus on the liberation of sexual pleasure, what we would now call 'sex positivity' (Rubin, 1993).

But as history does, this history repeated itself. Over time, the movement became less inclusive and radical, more accommodationist and sexually apologist. In a word, more normative. The reverse discourse has been exceedingly successful.

Thus, thinking back to the video clip, we argue that 'Sneaky Gays' are under the sneaky *gaze* of homonormativity. An inclusive agenda of social and sexual justice, including a sex positive liberation of sexuality and rejection of specifying discourses of gender and sexuality, have given way to identity politics and middle class lifestyles – the privileging of sameness rather than difference.

Central to the success of the reverse discourse is the compulsory performance of the coming out narrative. This serves as the repetitive discursive performance of a naturalised identity category – and it provides political traction and viability. Coming out has afforded some LGBT people a place at the mainstream table, while others are left out all together. While we do not advocate for the oppressive silence of closets, we encourage critical thinking about the institution of coming out as it is currently constituted.

'Coming out' is the declaration and embrace of a fixed and unified lesbian/bi/gay or trans identity, an 'authentic self,' which sets up the binary, 'authentic/inauthentic'. Foucault noted that while claiming a stable lesbian or gay identity may be personally liberating, it also serves to reify the centrality of heterosexuality. For some, *it is not* liberating, as it can be another specification to meet, a litmus test of one's gay creed. As Sarah, a

queer youth recently said to me, 'identifying as gay or lesbian feels like a prediction that I don't want to make'.

Notions of 'being honest' perpetuate the injustice of privatising social problems, in this case, homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. Individual narratives are dislocated from the cultural narratives of heteronormativity and homonormativity that create meaningful context, perpetuating the 'burden of individualism' that Stephen Madigan (2010) has written about.

Coming out or being out is not an equal opportunity endeavour, as people that inhabit various ethnic, racial, religious, class, and other social locations may chance their own safety or that of their family's – and risk losing meaningful, culturally-located relationships when coming out is seen not only as compulsory, but also as 'all or nothing'. As able-bodied, white-skinned, professional Americans, being out is entirely different for us than it may be for an African immigrant living in subsidised housing in the north end of Winnipeg.

As an alternative to the end point of the developmental trajectory, Halberstam (2005) proposes that coming out may be a *starting* point rather than an ending point, a suggestion that disrupts conventional notions of homosexual identity development that contend that 'successful' development is completed at coming out. Halberstam suggests that once 'out', one can continue to disrupt norms and participate in a proliferation of identities, thus challenging the notion that there is a specified way of showing up the 'right amount of gay'.

To reiterate, we think it is crucial to not trivialise the profound progress made in lesbian/gay rights since the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Because of the hard-won fight, struggle, and sacrifice of many gays and lesbians in the 1970s, 'coming out' is an option for some. Other advances, post-Stonewall, include domestic partnership laws and in some locations, legal same-sex marriage. There is much more visibility in popular culture. And while many of these gay/lesbian representations are stereotypical, there are some that are rich and complex. Due to this visibility and awareness, many states/provinces and nations have passed legislations addressing hates crimes.

Yet, let us pause and look critically at this progress for equal rights. The main focus has been on the rights for lesbian/gay marriage, gay adoption, and the ending of discrimination in the military (in the USA). Our concern is that the exclusive focus on the above issues mimics heteronormative standards of gender identity. In what ways is this exclusive focus on acceptance into these contemporary systems – monogamy, procreation, binary gender roles for example – erasing the historical alliance between radical politics and gay politics, with one of the core concerns being sexual freedom? Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, author of That's revolting: *Queer strategies to resist assimilation* (2008) writes:

> *A gay elite has hijacked queer struggle, and positioned their desires as everyone's needs – the dominant signs of straight conformity have become the ultimate signs of gay success. Sure, for white gays with beach condos, country club memberships, and nice stock portfolios with a couple hedge funds that need trimming every now and then (think of Rosie O'Donnell or David Geffen), marriage might just be the last thing standing in the way of full citizenship, but what about for everyone else?* (p. 2)

She goes on to say:

> *Even when the 'gay rights' agenda does include real issues, it does it in a way that consistently prioritises the most privileged while fucking over everyone else. I'm using the term 'gay rights,' instead of the more popular term of the moment, 'LGBT rights,' because 'LGBT' usually means gay, with lesbian in parentheses, throw out the bisexuals, and put trans on for a little window-dressing. A gay rights agenda fights for an end to discrimination in housing and employment, but not for the provision of housing or jobs; domestic partner health coverage but not universal health coverage. Or, more recently, hospital visitation and inheritance rights for married couples, but not for anyone else. Even with the most obviously 'gay' issue, that of anti-queer violence, a gay rights agenda fights for tougher hate crimes legislation, instead of fighting the racism, classism, transphobia*

> *(and homophobia) intrinsic to the criminal 'justice' system.* (p. 2)

We believe that the contemporary LGBT movement is primarily focused on the goal of 'naturalising' the faulty and deleterious ideological structure known as marriage. The mimicking of traditional straight relationality, above all marriage, for gays and lesbians announces itself as pragmatic strategy when it is in fact a deeply homonormative ideological project that is hardly sensible. Queer scholar José Esteban Munoz states, 'in this way gay marriage detractors are absolutely right, gay marriage is not natural, but then again, neither is marriage for any individual' (2008, p. 453).

Homonormativity fragments LGBT communities into hierarchies of worthiness. LGBT people who come out of the closest and mimic heteronormative standards of gender identity are deemed most worthy of receiving rights. LGBT individuals at the bottom of the hierarchy – transgender persons, intersex, bisexuals, and non-gender identified persons – are seen as an impediment to this elite class of homonormative individuals receiving their rights.

Another concern we have is the cultural phenomenon of gays and lesbians becoming another group of individuals to be capitalised upon by the media, capitalists, and consumption, a new demographic that can be generalised and targeted for consumption. The gay and lesbian movement has embraced this economic trend and, hence, come to align itself with neoliberalism in the cultural sphere. Supporting neoliberalism includes promoting militarisation through its campaigns against discrimination in the armed forces, promoting the privatisation of welfare and healthcare guarantees through its focus on marriage as a social cure-all, and promoting the excesses of capitalism over development through its general infatuation with the free market and consumer society as the best way to ensure gay 'visibility' and equal participation in North American society. And although the assimilationist rhetoric of neoliberalism promises equality for 'all', in reality, only gays and lesbians with enough access to capital can imagine a life integrated within North American capitalist culture. It goes without saying that 'all' actually refers to normative citizen-subjects with a host of rights only afforded to some (and not all) queers.

This neoliberal drift even commodifies the word queer – such as in *Queer eye for the straight guy* and *Queer as folk*. Queer is emptied of its radical political history of such movements as Queer Nation. Moreover, Michel Foucault (1978), whose ideas are in part seen as the precursor to queer theory, might be rolling in his grave if he knew of this current historical trajectory of normativity. It contradicts his academic and activist mission of destabilising discourses of normality.

In addition, with the appropriation of queer by neoliberalism, queer has come to be narrowly defined as an umbrella term for GLBT undermining what queer meant for so many scholars and activists – what Kathy Rudy (2000) stated when she wrote:

> *Being queer is not a matter of being gay, then, but rather of being committed to challenging that which is perceived as normal. There is no fool-proof membership criterion for queerness other than the willingness to seek out sites of resistance to normalcy in any possible location.* (p. 197)

Having laid out our critique, we want to imagine a queer utopian world. With only the futurity of a queer utopia, rather than assimilationist pragmatic strategies, can genuine, long-lasting change occur, offsetting the tyranny of the homonormative. As Munoz says, 'queerness is utopian and there is something queer about the utopian' (2008, p. 457). Indeed to ask for and imagine another time and place is to embody and make possible a desire that is both utopian and queer. To participate in such a 'queertopian' enterprise is not to imagine an isolated future for the individual but to instead partake in a collective futurity, a notion of futurity informed by hope and possibility. The present is not enough. It is bankrupt and toxic for queers who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative practices, and 'rational' expectations.

Hence, this is our version of a queertopia; a future that can be brought to the present:

- Marriage would be banned; all citizens would get the benefits that are currently afforded to married people.
- Gender would be eradicated or multiplied exponentially.

- Gender Identity would be taken out of the DSM; transgender people would no longer be pathologised. In fact, there would be no DSM. Period.
- Bathrooms/washrooms would not be gendered; people could 'pee in peace'.
- Cisgender privilege[3] would be unmasked and undermined.
- Much needed medical services (hormones, surgery, for example) for gender transition would be affordable.
- There would be a sex-positive society. All sex, if consensual, would be good sex free from the institutions and discourses of medicine/psychology, religion, and law (see Rubin, 1993)[4].

These queertopian imaginings may seem naïve in face of the extremely pragmatic agenda that currently organises LGBT activism in North America. Many, including some in queer communities, would dismiss our queertopia world as impractical. Yet we contend that these queer ideals, along with a critique of the present LGBT movement, are of significant and essential value if real justice is to occur. We are not content to just describe these ethical principles. More important, we advocate that queer utopian possibilities of freedom, liberation, and collectivity are more than what could be, but what should be. Can you think of your own 'queertopian' ideas to add to our list? Please join us in escaping the straightjacket of homonormativity and embracing this queertopia. Thank you.

NOTES

1. Proposition 8 (or the California Marriage Protection Act) was a ballot proposition and constitutional amendment passed in the November 2008, California state elections (US). The measure added a new provision to the California Constitution, which provides that only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California.
2. Iowa, a modest agricultural state in the Midwest not generally known for progressive politics, legalized same-sex marriage in 2009.
3. Cisgender is a neologism meaning 'not transgender', that is, having a gender identity or performing in a gender role that society considers appropriate for one's sex. The prefix cis- is pronounced like 'sis.' The term was created by Carl Buijs, a transsexual man from the Netherlands, in 1995. It originated as a way to shift the focus off of a marginalized group, by defining not only the minority group (transgender) but also the majority (not transgender). Cisgender can be used in place of less accurate terms such as 'biological' male or female since transgender people are also 'biological' (and not made from some non-biological material).
4. Rubin interrogated the value system that social groups – whether left- or right-wing, feminist or patriarchal – attribute to sexuality which defines some behaviors as good/natural and others (such as sadomasochism) as bad/unnatural. In this essay, she introduced the idea of the 'Charmed Circle' of sexuality; that sexuality that was privileged by society was inside of it, while all other sexually was outside of, and in opposition to it.

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