

QUEER THEORY 2000

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"I Am Out, Therefore I Am."
(Berlant 205)

Queer Theory tries to be a rationale and body of knowledge constructed by, for and about Queers. Steven Seidman defines Queer as anyone who feels marginalized by the dominant culture (Seidman, 1997). Queer movements fight against and try to dismantle white-patriarchy in ways that are inclusive to all minorities. I will review some her/history of the gay

liberation movement, specifically in reference to identity politics and its analysis. Finally, I will examine and present Queer theory in relation to identity politics and education.

Gay liberation theory was post-Stonewall, roughly between 1969 and 1973 (Warner, 1997). Seidman states that "[It was] a movement of human sexual liberation. It aims to institute a sexual



regime in which sexuality is not defined by a mutually exclusive gender preference" (Warner, pp.113). This was structured around legitimizing homosexuality as an identity, but perpetuated a division between society and self. Gay liberation was a movement, which contested the dualistic approach to sexuality, the homo/hetero-only system, which is a reflection rigid sex-role systems. Seidman defines sexism as, "a belief or practice that the sex or sexual orientation of human beings gives to some the right to certain privileges, power, or roles, while denying to others their full potential" (Warner, pp.114). Sexism manifests itself through heterosexual, male supremacy. Seidman goes on to announce that it is "responsible for the creation of a homosexual and heterosexual identity and a masculine and feminine identity that privilege heterosexual men" (Warner, p.115).

Another aim of this movement was to abolish the gender system that perpetuated and privileged heterosexuality and men. Gay liberation theorists supposedly spoke to experiences of sexual and gender oppression that crossed culture, class, race, etc., but speaking to these issues wasn't enough. The gay liberation movement has been criticized for constructing an identity that is essentially white and middle-class" (Slagle, pp. 87). This has often been the case in other move-

ments, such as the women's movement. When groups are fighting for social justice and not being wholly inclusive, they are not gaining anything because nobody is free unless everyone is free.

I contend liberation ideology should have also contested the myth of romantic love, the normalization of family and the dominating reflection of heterosexual sex value norms. These issues go hand in hand with challenging gender norms and dichotomies.

Seidman writes that at this point, "Liberationism gave way in the late 70s to an ethnic-minority sociopolitical agenda" (Warner, pp.110). This emphasizes cultural differences, identity-based interest-group politics and community building. I will focus on the identity-based interest groups, cultural differences and how they intertwine ideologically.

Gay liberationists and lesbian feminists began emphasizing cultural differences while analyzing the identity-based-interest model used for social change. Initially created by and for womyn, lesbian feminism was a reaction against gay liberation which was criticized because for mostly reflecting the values and interests of men; and in contrast to radical feminism which reflected the values of mostly heterosexual womyn. (Warner, pp. 111).

I contend that one of the

biggest problems with the way in which the ethnic-model is used is its lack of real analysis of cultural differences, so it still struggles to include issues of race and class in practice. This intertwines ideologically with and it's second problem, which is in reference to identity politics themselves and its her/historical struggle to include bisexuality and non-conventional sexualities.

Seidman's essay on "Identity Politics in a Postmodern Gay Culture" addressing this problem by sharing what he has heard from

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GLBT persons of color: "A discourse that abstracts a notion of gay identity from the considerations of race and class is oppressive because it invariably implies a white, middle-class standpoint" (Warner, pp.120). Assuming there is a central gay identity that regulates specific values and experiences as common to gay people, is wrong. So, although the ethnic model tries to be inclusive, it also separates in the way it uses identity-based-interests using only gay identity politics. People are simultaneously Korean, working class, female and lesbian each identity affecting one another. I would assert that most people, who consider their gay identity as core, are

white and able bodied; because whichever identity is punished by larger society becomes the main focus. That specific identity needs to be nurtured and validated, therefore it becomes primary. If gay liberation politics use an ethnic model,

it should not be centered around our "gayness" but instead, a participant with and among our many identities as a diverse people.

In *Skin*, Dorothy Allison discusses how her class identity of dirt-poor took precedence over all others and conflicted with her lesbian identity and what that

was supposed to look like. According to the lesbian community she was supposed to be most concerned with what they defined as "lesbian issues". She was also into sexual activity that was not in the "lesbian box" and consequently defined as deviant within her own lesbian community (Allison, 1994).

If gay liberation politics used the ethnic model and put it into practice using gay-identity as central identity and everything else just considered-identity, then separatism could be advocated for in order to speak to everyone's needs. Everyone who did not use gay-identity as central would then separate into their own group to fight for the

rights they are excluded from. This is problematic for several reasons. One is because lesbian feminists of color could not separate and build alliances with men of color. Where would womyn of color separate to? A place in which they still have to fight against racism with white, heterosexual-lesbian feminists?

Women and men of color share a common oppression, no matter what sexuality, so separatism for womyn of color would hurt the fight against racism (Warner, 1997 and Collins, 1991). Being forced to choose which identity is central, in order to choose which oppression to fight against does not aid in social justice. It creates the hierarchy of oppressions that Audre Lorde warns against (Samuel, 1990).

The perspective here is that race can first alter the meaning and social standpoint of being a lesbian (secondary). Separatism is not possible, in fact it is oppressive in that it doesn't consider race; therefore, gay liberation politics should not consider gay-identity central. If the gay liberation movement can exist as an ethnic model appropriately, it will be an inclusive ideology and movement.

Another problem with the gay liberation movement is that it suggests a structured and defined GLBT identity. Finding out how this identity was constructed and main-

tains itself will answer many questions for the future of the movement.

Sexual identity has mainly been based on coding sexuality by gender. For example, identifying as a lesbian was supposed to only mean a womyn who is strictly into women as their sex object choice. This is questionable and goes to the heart of the ethnic model of being gay. Sex object choice does not determine sexual identity, and when it is idealized that way it perpetuates the hetero/homo dichotomy because it is fixed into either/or. Seidman states, "the identity of an object or person is much of the time implicated in its opposite" (Warner, pp. 130).

Mutual dependency on polar terms is dualistic and patriarchal. Joyce Trebilcot says that when only the opposite is implicated, or used as a base, the opposite also defines the identity. For example, people of color defined in relation to whites and lesbians defined in relation to heterosexuals, etc. She asserts there is 'identity guilt' because the definitions that are birthed out of only implicating an opposite (Trebilcot, 1994). She says the identity guilt that comes with being a minority serves many purposes and is connected to morality, power, ranking, competition, buying and selling and violence. The aim of not basing identity on sex-object-choice is to

conceptualize gender preference as merely one aspect of sexuality and orientation.

Bisexuality challenges this notion because their sex object choice is fluid, it doesn't fit into homosexual or heterosexual completely; also a person could identify as bisexual and only have women be their sex object choice. Therefore, sex object choice does not solely determine sexual identity. Bisexuality has consequently been marginalized because it does not fit into homo/hetero fixed dichotomies, which is an example of how gay liberation has been exclusive.

The ultimate goal for a movement that uses language such as "liberation" is to legitimize desires as grounds for constructing identities, politics and communities. Legitimization is more encompassing than identification and it comes from a logic of inclusion and goes beyond tolerance. Having this kind of goal significantly changes the way in which a movement takes place over time.

Unfortunately, even lesbian feminist communities participate in defining an experience that does not legitimize all desires, but instead defines desires as male or female and

then places value judgments upon them. An example of this is the belief that sex motivated by carnal pleasure is male-identified, therefore deviant and marginalized (Donovan, 1997). One of the groups challenging these ideologies

and is the GLBT, S/M segment. Behavior is not boxed into categories of male or female and than judged, the s/m gay male segment legitimizes desires, therefore is inclusive. Many gay men define their sexual identity in terms of their s/m practices, not sex object choice. They do not fit into the old hom/hetero identity boxes. This

group is an example of a group which could be marginalized when identity politics use sex object choice as a basis for definition.

To begin to rectify the situation of identity based on sex object choice, constructionists look at the her/historical reasons for this ideology. In the late twentieth century, the experience of sex object choices in the United States became the basis for sexual and social identity. The reason for this may have been and may still be only a reaction to oppression, a way to identify one another to mobilize against it; but a reaction that today is exclusive and oppression itself.

In the late twentieth century, the experience of sex object choices in the United States became the basis for sexual and social identity.

Identity based on sex-object-choice allowed for a larger social and sexual gay identity, followed by a set of unique gay politics. This kind of identity politics has allowed for some members of groups of marginalized people to organize and gain equal rights under the law. So it seemed as if a specific "group identity" is needed (based on sex-object-choice), to begin to differentiate ourselves and identify one another for social change; but what we are finding now (with queer theory discussed later in this paper) is that we can identify each other in ways that are more inclusive.

This notion of needing the sex-object-based identity is a pre-supposed his/herstory, which seems to compartmentalize and ignore issues of race, class and sexuality within that sexual and social identity formation and movement. Therefore, gay identity and politics have a his/herstory of exclusion, because the way in which they were formulated, excluded other stigmatized groups by assuming there is a core gay identity in common; then defining it through sex-object-choice and not other ways. GLBT'S in her/history have sought and still seek to have "gay" identity be universalized or state that it is universal (Warner, 1997).

The compulsion to classify and order groups (social construc-

tionalism) serves to erase difference when its goal is to celebrate it. Poststructuralists claim this kind of ideology reinforces compartmentalization, which is constructed into a hierarchy by and for the "mainstream".

Ordering and classifying groups for identification and a unique political creation may have been and still be needed in a sense, for these groups to collectively organize for social justice; but doing this also creates boundaries, sometimes hierarchy, normalization and exclusion. "Identity is always purchased at the price [capitalistic language] of the exclusion of the Other, the repression or repudiation of non-identity. The poststructuralist critique of the logic of identity ends in a refusal to name a subject" (Warner, pp.132). (Oppressive, capitalist language used when discussing exclusion shows how much capitalism has been woven into our language).

Within that, there is a turn towards a celebration of liminality, or the spaces outside and between structure (Warner, 1997). Poststructuralists claim that GLBT people are not united by a universal identity, but instead, they are united by their opposition to social codes of sexuality and gender identity, (as well as social codes that perpetuate racism and classism I presume) because these impose a kind of uni-

tary identity. The poststructuralists struggle does not confirm that gay identity was in reaction to oppression and that identity can be strengthening, politically and personally; or that coding identity has been used to create social collectives and political action as groups. Elliott femynye bat tzedek argues that identity politics created space for lesbian identity to take shape and become a social force, as it created spaces for many minority groups to function within for social change.

I contend these groups were white, upper-class lesbians and that is really not a "collective" although it is something. The problem is that many of us, as oppressed people, messed up in the beginning by reifying identities as they were already described by the patriarchy and then explaining these identities as if they were inherent in us, instead of the colonial classification system that they are. Tzedek also explains that we should be challenging the way these categories were constructed, not building identities around them.

Queer theory and curriculum in education calls for similar action, "queer curriculum is interested more in appreciating differ-

ences among persons than in understanding differences among categories of persons (Pinar, pp. 28). Tzedek and Pinar correlate in that they challenge the categories themselves and refuse to use them as a major mode of understanding. I

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contend that Siedman would agree. He believes that "contemporary gay culture or queerness, is centered on social difference and the multiplication of identities" (Warner, pp.129). An example of this is how, "Queer Nation affirms an abstract unity of differences without wishing to name and fix these." This

seems quite utopian, as we sometimes need to clarify identity in order to not be forced into invisibility or considered just a mass of "minorities," but does seek to be inclusive. So the poststructuralists critique of identity ending in refusal to name a subject is a key concept in what has grown out of and in response to gay liberation theory.

Queer theory and queer identity politics does this act of refusing to name and fix people very well. In an essay called "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct," Joshua Gamson speaks to this aspect of queer theory by stating, "Disrupting those categories, refus-

ing rather than embracing ethnic minority status, is the key to liberation" (Gamson, pp. 396). Although best to refuse to create boxes for us to fit into neatly, we still need to name ourselves and have a identity in order to not become invisible.

William Tierney discusses this in his introduction in *Academic Outlaws*. He outs himself right away in the dedication of the book to his lover. He justifies and clarifies this as not only an act against heterosexual assumption, but also to clarify a specific political position: the stance of being visible, and like Queer Nation would advocate for, "refus[ing] closeting strategies of assimilation" (Freeman & Berlant, pp. 199). Tierney's reasons for this "outing" are the same as Queer Nations belief in occupying spaces and "mim[ing] the privileges of normality" (Freeman & Berlant, pp. 196), by dedicating the book to his lover, he is doing such.

Queer theory in education demands the same type of resistance in the form of questioning normative constructions (heterosexuality) of knowledge, dismantling them and constructing queer ways of know-

ing (like coming out) that do not use patriarchy as its base, but queer experience.

Queer education theory works from the position that ignorance is a choice, an active refusal of knowledge (Luhmann, 1998). "Teaching, so Felman concludes, is engaging with these resistance's to knowledge more so than correcting a lack of knowledge" (qtd. In Luhmann, pp. 149-150).

This approach is similar in theory to Queer Nation's in-your-face approach, by assuming students (people) choose ignorance to maintain the status quo we can also assume the quality of an in-your-face queer pedagogy (movement).

I have reviewed the her/his-tory of the gay liberation movement in reference to an analysis of identity politics. This shift in theory to a kind of non-identity politic has been coined Queer theory and assumes a position of inclusion very well.

I contend the movement is at a better place because of what queer theory emulates, and we will hopefully continue to move through and beyond the necessity for our struggle.

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