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Item Type	Other
Authors	Bacot, Sarah
Publisher	Memphis, Tenn. : Rhodes College
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Download date	2025-03-16 10:13:01
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/24031

How to Say Gay: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Queer Theory and the Modern
LGBT Rights Movement

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2011 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

One consistent criticism of theory is its inability to make accessible and relevant arguments that can be used practically in the political or social sphere. The ends of theory do not have to be analysis culminating in purely abstract observations about our reality. In the case of queer theory and the modern LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) rights movement, theory can reach into the political realm relatively easily. The LGBT rights movement should acknowledge points of convergence between its goals and the goals of queer theory, points that absolutely exist. In realizing and embracing common ground, there is the possibility to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between the two groups. More importantly, a deeper relationship between the two strengthens the potential for real changes in the way that queer individuals exist in our society. The LGBT rights movement can and should embrace this potential for change and for a direct relationship to the goals of queer theory. The acknowledgment and incorporation of queer theory will demand a perpetual self-evaluation, but this self-evaluation is beneficial. While it will reveal the flaws and contradictions of the movement, it also allows for self-improvement and self-awareness that can help push the movement forward in its goals and messages. Queer theory, if it truly seeks to create change with its criticisms and observations, could benefit from realizing and assessing the reasons for the practical limitations of its messages. In evaluating the tensions between marriage and

identity as they are presented in the LGBT rights movement and marriage and identity as they are presented in queer theory it becomes clear that the two groups can constantly challenge and improve each other but also that the tensions between the two groups can never and should never disappear entirely.

In order to argue for the LGBT rights movement at any level to adopt a self-criticism based in queer theory, the benefits of queer theory's interpretation of LGBT identity must be examined. While Judith Butler is by no means the singular authority within queer theory, her work will serve as a useful articulation of queer identity within queer theory. *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* will function as my primary sources for arguments related to queer power, identity politics, and the importance of self-criticism. Butler is consistently a target of criticisms regarding accessibility, but at the core of her work are terms and arguments that can undoubtedly help the LGBT rights movement in presenting its messages and understanding itself.

Butler's understanding of power roots itself largely in the work of Michel Foucault, and a basic understanding of his explanation of power is helpful in tracing Butler's logic. For Foucault, power is not a looming abstraction but is a series of relationships. As he writes in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, it cannot be traced back to a singular source but "...is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."¹ His interpretation of power denies any top-down distribution of commandments and prohibitions. Instead, he writes, "...power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributed to a complex strategical situation

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 93.

in a particular society.”² Further, power is not an obvious set of relationships and regulations. Foucault argues that if power’s execution was always obvious, it could not maintain itself. Rather, power “is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.”³ This understanding of power as a set of relationships that are omnipresent and are largely obscured in their execution is essential to Butler’s argument. Much of her work seeks to reveal and provide the potential to subvert power as it currently operates in our society.

Foucault rejects the idea of power as a top-down distribution but does acknowledge the existence of dominating power systems. These systems result from the repeated relationships that exist everywhere rather than from some “choice or decision of an individual subject” to achieve a certain aim.⁴ It is through constant participation and execution in our lives, in the “relationships of force that come into place in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions,” that power maintains itself.⁵ Foucault writes, “Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all the confrontations” of the relationships in our lives.⁶ As a result of this understanding of power, which implicates every individual, any disruption of hegemony must come from within the established framework of power. Foucault notes that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet...resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”⁷ Butler draws on this idea of resistance from within to propose possibilities for subversion in gender and sexuality.

² Ibid, 93.

³ Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*, 86.

⁴ Ibid, 95.

⁵ Ibid, 94.

⁶ Ibid, 94.

⁷ Ibid, 95.

An examination of Butler's explanations of gender performativity, the heterosexual matrix, and cultural intelligibility and their relationships to queer identity reveals a significant source of power for the LGBT rights movement. *Gender Trouble* begins with a criticism of the feminist movement and its attempts to make claims based on a universal female identity. Butler claims that any presentation of "women" as a collective "has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed."⁸ From her discussion of identity politics, Butler moves to a criticism of embracing any core identity. The feminist movement has a tendency to employ essentialism to create its collective. Essentialism sees identity or certain pieces of identity as inherent to the individual rather than as socially constructed. Butler asks, "...to what extent does the effort to locate [an essential] identity as the foundation...preclude a radical inquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself?"⁹ Ultimately, she argues that assuming any piece of identity as essential perpetuates the power dynamics that operate in the current organization of gender and sexuality.

For Butler, our assumptions about the relationships between sex, gender, and desire are fundamentally problematic. Building from her criticism of the search for essential identity, Butler rejects any presentation of sex or gender as essential. Instead, she provides an interpretation of sex and gender as constructions and executions of contemporary power dynamics. She argues that sex and gender may seem to hold essential or original foundations but that these foundations are a myth. The key to exposing the myth of the essential is the theory of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender comes not as the result of an essential or

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2008), 19.

⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxxii.

original identity. Instead, she writes, “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.”¹⁰ That is, gender’s roots exist in the attempted maintenance of a series of power dynamics, an effective hegemony.

In the reality of gender performativity, sex and gender obscure their constructed nature through a “...tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders.”¹¹ Their existence is the product of a series of repeated actions that grant the individual performing them the ability to participate in established society as an intelligible figure. Here intelligibility relates to our ability or inability to consider, process, and accept certain ideas, relationships, and manifestations of identity. Butler argues that in order for an individual to be culturally intelligible, he or she must participate in the accepted framework for gender expression. Within this system of power, sex results in the expected gender and a desire for the opposite gender. A sexed male will perform male gender and desire a woman. While these standards of intelligibility may seem to be rooted in essential pieces of identity, namely in our sex, they are actually rooted in a system of power. This system punishes any variation from the established norm with a relegation to the outskirts of cultural intelligibility. Butler uses the terms heterosexual matrix and heterosexual hegemony to describe the framework of power that relates to sex, gender, and desire.

Butler argues that this matrix continues as a result of its mythical but constantly perpetuated claim to the original or essential status and at the expense of those who exist outside of its framework of cultural intelligibility. When we accept sex and gender as expressions of our

¹⁰ Ibid, 186.

¹¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 190.

innate identity rather than creations of our identity, we perpetuate the myth of the original that supports the heterosexual matrix. One key problem for Butler is our insistence on the independent nature of the sexed body. That is, the idea that sex exists as a foundational entity, a sort of blank page preexisting the “inscriptions” of power. We relate the inscription of gender directly back to the “independent” identification of sex. Thus, to some extent, even when gender is seen as a cultural construct as feminism claims it to be, we must still be acting in relation to an essential characteristic, our sex. Butler writes:

The notion that there might be a ‘truth’ of sex...is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms...The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot exist—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender.¹²

The heterosexual matrix builds itself from an understanding of the male/female sex as essential and progresses from that point to male/female gender dynamics that produce a compulsory heterosexuality. Given this framework, those identities that defy the progression from sex to gender to desire within the binary format, specifically LGBT identities must be placed rejected for the maintenance of the myth of the original sex to continue.

This state of rejection is the constant site of LGBT identity, but by further examining that process of rejection, the “unintelligible” life of queer individuals can become a source of power. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler notes that the heterosexual matrix depends on the rejection of queer identity. This rejection, however, first requires a processing of queer identity. The irony is that

¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 23.

queer identity must first be acknowledged in order to be placed in the realm of cultural unintelligibility. Butler writes, “Homosexuality emerges as a desire which must be produced in order to remain repressed.”¹³ This production reveals the flaw in the logic that creates the heterosexual matrix. In its insistent denial of queer identity, the hegemony grants queer identity an essential place in its self-definition. It is the essential outside to the matrix’s own inside and therefore implicated in the creation of the matrix itself. Reaching back to Foucault, homosexuality is directly implicated in the power system that seeks to reject it and, therefore, has the power to disrupt that system. The exclusivity of the heterosexual matrix is its own self-destruction. The maintenance of the matrix depends on the exclusion of an identity that must be rejected from the outset. Further, the rejection of that identity requires that it first be acknowledged and processed. Logically, then, the sex and gender at the root of the matrix must not be the essential. There is *no* essential, only the myth and its related system of power.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler establishes her argument largely through a criticism of the presumption that establishes the materiality of sex and the body as precursors to enactments of power dynamics. Through this analysis, she provides a further framework for the articulation of defiance as a potential power for the queer community. This understanding of defiance can be used throughout queer theory to categorize LGBT identity in relation to the heterosexual matrix. The matrix is established and upheld as the self-sustaining original, in part, by our assumptions about the nature of the body as a given. That is, a material object that exists not as a subject of the same power relations that construct identity but as an entity on which identity is written. Butler seeks to reveal that the body is subject to the same systems of power as gender.

¹³ Ibid, 104.

Beginning with a reading of Foucault, Butler demonstrates the flaw in assuming a sexed materiality independent of power. The male and female bodies are not “primary givens” of existence and identity. In reality they are manifestations of “power in its formative or constituting effects.”¹⁴ Butler claims that power’s ability to create a “field of intelligibility as a taken-for-granted ontology”¹⁵ functions as a demonstration of its potency as an agent in both the creation and maintenance of a relationship. Butler identifies the “reality” of sexed materiality as another myth that obscures the operation of power in sex and gender relationships. With this assertion, she sets the stage for a reevaluation of materiality that opens possibilities for new subversions of gender and the heterosexual matrix. She further establishes the myth of originality related to sexed materiality with an examination of language and its relationship to power dynamics.

Butler begins with a reading of the Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray on Plato’s *Timaeus*.¹⁶ For Irigaray, the feminine is established through our language and construction of meaning as that which “cannot be said to be an intelligible form at all.”¹⁷ This unintelligibility occurs as the result of a process of creating intelligible existence that constantly privileges the masculine and excludes or denies altogether the feminine. This privilege roots itself partially in the myth of the essential status of the sexed body. The masculine can claim as its root a body that is supposedly free from power dynamics, an original existence, when in actuality, the sexed body

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2011), 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 10

¹⁶ This is a very brief mention of Irigaray’s work on *Timaeus* meant only to set the stage for Butler’s argument. For the full essay, see Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

¹⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 13.

and its place in the world are direct results of our language of sex and power.¹⁸ Through this constant privilege, the masculine is able to present itself as the self-creating original that deserves privilege and to relegate femininity to a realm of unintelligibility.

At the same time, the feminine's unintelligibility is a means by which there is a possibility to disrupt the myth of the masculine original that denies femininity's place. This disruptive role of the feminine comes from an understanding of the masculine as centrally dependent on the feminine. The exclusion of the feminine creates the masculine's boundaries. Through this same logic, the feminine is necessarily implicated in the masculine's claim to originality. It therefore reveals that claim to be not a presentation of the natural order but a norm posing as original. Butler continues from this point in Irigaray to discuss the potential power of those that exist as culturally unintelligible but are simultaneously essential to the matrix's definition and the perpetuation of the myth of the original.

Butler's criticism, or expansion, of Irigaray's argument presents itself in her demonstration of the scope of the culturally unintelligible, or "outside," to the masculine's established framework of power, manifested in the sex and gender binary functioning throughout the heterosexual matrix. She identifies the outside as occupied not only by the feminine but by numerous other entities (or non-entities as they exist in relation to the established masculine) capable of destabilizing the notion of the masculine as original.¹⁹ In establishing the heterosexual matrix as key to the masculine original, Butler implicates LGBT identity in the outside realm. She reiterates the point of exclusion in relation to this understanding of queer

¹⁸ This is not to say that biological differences in bodies do not exist. Butler acknowledges anatomical differences as a reality. She suggests not that these differences are a myth but that their independence from power dynamics is a myth. See *Bodies That Matter*, 36.

¹⁹ She lists women, slaves, children, and animals as excluded groups that can be found within Plato. See: *Bodies That Matter*, 25.

sexual identity when she notes that the “necessity to install a prohibition at the outset against rival possibilities for the organization of sexuality...can expose the masculine’s claim to originality as suspect.”²⁰ Through her expansion of Irigaray’s argument, Butler thus instills queer identity with the same potential as Irigaray grants the feminine in revealing the flaw in the logic of the self-creating original provided by the masculine and the heterosexual matrix that functions as its necessary byproduct.

This understanding of queer identity creates for the LGBT rights movement massive potential to truly challenge our conceptions of sex, gender, and desire in a way that could rework traditional power dynamics. This disruption works to the benefit not only of LGBT individuals but also of every individual in that every individual is implicated in the power structure maintained by the heterosexual matrix. When its goals include an expansion of our realm of cultural intelligibility, the LGBT rights movement can serve as the arm of queer theory. It can politically create the disruptions to the heterosexual matrix that Butler posits. Butler’s work articulates the struggles of the culturally unintelligible life as it is embodied by queer individuals. More than that, it identifies that unintelligibility as the site of the queer movement’s greatest power.²¹ Her work reveals that the heterosexual matrix must process queer identity to reject it. At the same time, it must also establish queer identity as culturally unintelligible for the maintenance of its own exclusive definition. With this interpretation of the power dynamics constantly at work in maintaining a traditional understanding of the relationship between sex,

²⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 24.

²¹ For the purpose of this paper, the term queer and the designation LGBT are being used relatively interchangeably. This is not to negate the efforts of those individuals who claim the title queer as a means of exiting the connotations sometimes placed on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender but to relate those specific identities to the arguments made within Butler’s work, where she uses both queer and gay and lesbian in identifying those identities that exist outside the heterosexual matrix.

gender, and desire, Butler establishes cultural unintelligibility not as a permanent state of being but as a site of existence that can change. Queer identity has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and defy the heterosexual matrix and its false claims to the original.

While the largest LGBT rights lobby in the United States calls itself the Human Rights Campaign, its goal is related to human rights beyond the legal realm. Arguing for human rights demands that those on behalf of whom one is arguing be conceived as humans; that is, that they exist as culturally intelligible persons. By making the advancement of LGBT individuals its focus, the HRC must work not only for the extension of legal rights to queer individuals but also justify the existence of those individuals. As Butler argues, it seeks “to create a social transformation of the very meaning of personhood...intervening into the social and political processes by which the human is articulated.”²² Queer theory instills the LGBT rights movement with the potential power to expand our definitions of cultural intelligibility and subvert traditional power dynamics. The practical application of this theoretical power is not always in line with its source of articulation.

There are numerous levels of execution in the modern LGBT rights movement, ranging from the national to state and citywide. The national movement seeks to fight federal policies, such as Don't Ask, Don't Tell, the military policy banning openly gay and lesbian individuals from serving that was recently removed, and the Defense of Marriage Act, the federal legislation which has the purpose of limiting the definition of marriage to exclude same-sex couples.²³

²² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32-33.

²³ The Defense of Marriage Act, signed under President Clinton in 1996, stands as the federal limitation on the definition of marriage that not only denies same-sex partners federal marriage benefits but also presents individual states with an exemption to the Full Faith and Credit Clause of the Constitution so that they may disregard same-sex marriages received by citizens in other states. The Obama Administration has effectively stopped its defense of DOMA in court

Whether or not all of its goals and messages are in line with queer theory, the national LGBT rights movement continues to make significant progress in reaching the goals that it sets for itself. Over the past fifteen years, public opinion polls show significant increases in the number of Americans supportive of same-sex marriage, same-sex parenting, and same-sex relationships in general. According to a Pew Research poll conducted in February and March of 2011, 45% of Americans favor same-sex marriage. With opposition to same-sex marriage at 46%, public opinion stands a full 19 points down from the 65% of Americans opposed to same-sex marriage in 1996. Considering these results, the movement toward marriage equality and LGBT equality has made significant and quantifiable progress in the United States.²⁴ Within the past several years, the federal government abolished bans against openly gay and lesbian members of the military, extended benefits to same-sex partners of federal employees, and enacted hate crime legislation protecting LGBT citizens. Washington, D.C. and several states, with New York being the most recent, recognize the validity of same-sex marriage.

The fight for same-sex marriage can be seen as one important site of tension between the LGBT rights movement and the use of its potential power as presented in queer theory. The establishment of heterosexuality as an implied legal right functions as a reflection of the power of the heterosexual matrix. Further, it uses the same methods of establishment in its dependence on exclusion. The adoption of language such as “one man and one woman” in state constitutions and in the Defense of Marriage Act signals the recognition of heterosexuality as an assumed right that establishes itself using negative terms. That is, heterosexuality becomes an implied

challenges, although the current Congress has invoked its right to choose a lawyer to continue the defense of DOMA independently of the Executive Branch.

²⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all statistics taken from Pew Research Center poll. See: “Most Say Homosexuality Should Be Accepted By Society,” 13 May 2011, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1994/poll-support-for-acceptance-of-homosexuality-gay-parenting-marriage>

legal right and the only type of legally intelligible relationship only because it is defined in opposition to those relationships that could be found outside the provided framework of “one man and one woman.” Many of those outside relationships exist in the lives of LGBT individuals. Given this, a disruption of the legal status of heterosexuality, in theory, is a disruption of the heterosexual hegemony. Further, this disruption has the potential to call into question our notions of kinship as they have been constructed in relation to heterosexual marriage and the family built through that marriage.²⁵ As Foucault notes, “The family is the interchange of sexuality and alliance: it conveys the law and the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality; and it conveys the economy of pleasure and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance.”²⁶ To redefine our notions of family could be to redefine the sexual power dynamics that the alliance of family sanctions and perpetuates. This theoretical potential for disruption, however, depends largely on the way in which the movement approaches same-sex marriage and its significance for LGBT individuals.

In recent years, marriage has become a central goal of the movement, seen as a sort of ultimate achievement and an essential proof of progress in the realm of LGBT rights. This perception of marriage as a central goal and a means of validation for the movement is potentially problematic. As Butler writes in *Undoing Gender*:

No doubt, marriage and same-sex domestic partnerships should certainly be available as options, but to instill either as a model for sexual legitimacy is precisely to constrain the sociality of the body in certain ways...it is crucial to

²⁵ Butler notes that the LGBT community is not the only group with the power to call into question our notions of kinship. Because masculine power dynamics have a number of implications that reach into race, religion, nationality, and beyond, making the possibilities for a reconsideration of kinship based in any number of sections of identity a real possibility.

²⁶ Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol 1*, 108.

expand our notions of kinship beyond the heterosexual form.²⁷

Butler sees the adoption of same-sex marriage, or “marriage equality” as it is presented from within the movement, as a central goal to the exclusion of others as a mistake. It is an abandonment, to some extent, of the potential for queer individuals and queer relationships to disrupt and potentially redefine traditionally accepted structures of gender and kinship. The adoption of marriage equality as a goal can be a radical attempt to shift our perceptions of kinship and valid sexual expression, but it can just as easily function as a buy into the established framework as a means of attempted legitimization.

Butler recognizes the tragic risk that operating within the given framework always runs. Inasmuch as subversion requires a participation in the established realm of power dynamics, the subversive participant must work to escape the possibility of reducing his or her subversion to an imitation of the established which only reinforces his or her own exclusion. Butler uses the example of drag. While it has the potential to be subversive, it may also be able to provide “a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must continually police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness, and...[rather than creating subversion], this displaced production and resolution of heterosexual panic actually fortifies the heterosexual regime in its self-perpetuating task.”²⁸ Similarly, the potential of same-sex marriage to disrupt our notions of kinship and gender is endangered when marriage becomes the focus of the movement. It has the potential to function not as a means of expanding our understanding of valid and intelligible relationships but as an attempt to qualify same-sex relationships as valid through their participation in the institution of marriage.

²⁷ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 26.

²⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 85.

As Butler acknowledges in her discussion of drag and its potential for subversion or for a reinforcement of norms:

I am obliged to add an important qualification: heterosexual privilege operates in many ways, and two ways in which it operates include naturalizing itself and rendering itself as the original and the norm. But these are not the only ways in which it works, for it is clear that there are domains in which heterosexuality can concede its lack of originality and naturalness but still hold on to its power.²⁹

The same principle applies in the “success” of the legal recognition of same-sex marriage. The movement runs the risk of a reification of marriage, an institution that is built from the heterosexual matrix and undeniably has the potential to retain negative connotations of sexual power dynamics. This reification culminates in the reduction of same-sex marriage to a tacit acknowledgment of the validity of that institution as a function of the heterosexual matrix. Same-sex marriage then becomes the tragic mime that Butler acknowledges through her discussion of subversion and the dangers that accompany an attempt to create it. It becomes that entity participating in the institution from which it was excluded only through the forced acknowledgment of the power of that institution as a means of validation. In this scenario, same-sex marriage is not so much a success as it is a farce of participation in a matrix that still maintains its boundaries through the submission of its excluded body.

Avoiding this problem, this submission to the established system of power, demands from the HRC and its counterparts an almost hyperawareness of its messages and goals. Same-sex couples undoubtedly deserve the rights and benefits withheld from them by the exclusive nature of legal marriage, but the message cannot be that marriage functions as a validation for

²⁹ Ibid, 85.

same-sex relationships. While adopting the language of the current framework may be tempting, the LGBT rights movement can and should take a stand that the validity of queer relationships does not depend on a ballot box. Queer relationships exist whether or not they receive legal sanction. The message must be that these relationships are valid in their existence independent of the institution of marriage. Their exclusion from the realm of recognized relationships on the basis of heterosexual originality is false in its premise. Further, their continued existence outside of legal validation is a means of defiance. It is a demonstration of the reality of queer existence. That heterosexual marriage needs to be “protected,” language used by opponents of same-sex marriage, from the invasion of other options indicates that the status of heterosexual marriage as the only valid relationship cannot hold. The perpetual presence of those relationships outside the realm of recognition constantly challenges heterosexual marriage’s privilege.

The modern LGBT rights movement in the United States, led in part by the HRC and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), seeks to advance the movement toward equality on behalf of all LGBT people by positing that denying LGBT people equal rights is a form of discrimination. In seeking to achieve its goals, the movement occasionally adopts language to describe the existence of homosexuality that situates queer identity as much less powerful than it has the potential to be. The HRC and GLAAD, as well as the vast majority of other organizations working on behalf of the LGBT community, claim sexuality as beyond choice.³⁰ The movement tends largely to designate sexual orientation as a piece of personal identity. Queer theory could agree with that assessment to the extent that an individual’s relationship to performative action and sexual orientation is much more complex and

³⁰ While there is no agreed upon list laying out the ideals of the modern movement, an examination of the pamphlets, public service announcements, and internet resources provided by several of the most prominent LGBT rights groups, including the HRC, reveals repetition of phrases such as “not a choice” in relation to sexual identity and gender expression.

subconscious than choosing what to wear each morning. The direct conflict arises when the underlying implication of the movement is an essential identity.

With phrases like “I was born this way,” a slogan recently popularized by Lady Gaga and played as a Pride anthem, the movement ties itself to a problematic ideological stance. In utilizing an essentialist approach, the LGBT rights movement not only creates a direct conflict with queer theory but also raises questions about the type of progress being made with the advancement of LGBT rights. The type of identity politics being employed when LGBT rights groups seeks to create a common, essential core that unites LGBT individuals may serve in creating a sense of unity. Beyond that, it denies the reality of the complexities of sex, gender, and desire laid out in queer theory. Moreover and ironically, it buys into the same logic of the myth of sexed materiality that maintains the heterosexual matrix as it posits an existence free from power. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of homosexuality as a biological or essential identity is growing. In a 2006 Gallup poll, 42% of Americans believed that lesbian and gay individuals were born with their sexual orientation.³¹ Although the presentation of common essential identity may be a forceful political tool, that tactic has numerous negative implications in the long term.

The reality is that Butler’s work supports, to an equal but different extent, the framework of gender and sexual identity as beyond choice. Her understanding of “not a choice” is more effective and provides opportunity for the movement to present a real inquiry into the power dynamics preventing LGBT intelligibility. Essentialism functions as a superficial means of positing equality based on queer identity as an unfortunate reality of existence for some people.

³¹ In the same poll, only 44% of Americans deemed homosexuality morally acceptable, while 56% believed that homosexual relationships should at the very least be legal. See: “Homosexuality,” 31 May 2006, <http://www.gallup.com/video/23161/Homosexuality.aspx>

Although the term performativity sometimes raises concerns about implications of a theatrical involvement in gender and sexual identity, Butler seeks in *Bodies That Matter* to clarify the meaning of the term:

Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance...I would suggest that performativity cannot be understood outside a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject.³²

For Butler, the subject is both constituted by and actor of the performance that is gender identity, but in neither case is the subject conscious of the performance in the sense that he or she decides to enact it.

Given this clarification on performativity, the argument that identity is “not a choice” can carry forward in a more effective way. It can maintain its inquiry into exclusion and implicate heterosexuality in the same performativity. This implication of heterosexuality reworks the terms of the argument to make both queer identity and heterosexual identity subject to the same gender power dynamics. In this way, the consideration of the message of choice in the movement does not require any radical refiguring. It demands only an avoidance of those terms that situate the individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity within the realm of the essential.³³ Further, by implicating the heterosexual in the same way that it implicates itself, the queer movement can

³² Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 59.

³³ Interestingly, a number of medical and scientific institutions, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association have issued numerous statements regarding the lack of choice LGBT individuals have in the creation of their sexual identity.

See : <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sexual-orientation.aspx>;
<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;113/6/1827>;
<http://www.socialworkers.org/diversity/lgb/reparative.asp?print=1>

avoid problems with reparative therapy and a potential “cure” for homosexuality because it resituates both identities within a framework that greatly complicates choice and the creation of gender and sexual identity.³⁴

Here, the issue of the practical and the problem of accessibility become extremely important. The biggest issue in reworking the choice/not a choice framework around ideas of performativity is that it requires individuals to rethink their own personal identity. Because much of the rhetoric that we hear regarding not only sexual identity but also gender identity carries implications of essentialism, performativity requires all individuals to reconsider the meaning of “identity.” Adopting the language of performativity requires individuals to question themselves and their personal means of expression to the core. Because gender and sexual identity are such personal pieces of how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us, questioning the root of those identities and acknowledging outside forces in the creation of those deeply personal attributes may be an extremely difficult process.

Despite this difficulty, the process can lead to an understanding of self that is ultimately much more freeing than the version of personal identity that is presented in an essentialist discourse. When considering the power and room for change that Butler presents in her work in contrast to the power and room for change that exist in an essentialist discourse, queer theory provides the opportunity for a much better future. An essentialist discourse naturally rejects the role of culture and power in the creation of identity. As a result of this, culture and power remain largely unquestioned. Power maintains its needed obscurity and no real change in the

³⁴ Several of the statements made by the APA and AAP have been prompted by the proliferation of “ex-gay” ministries such as Exodus International, which seek to “rehabilitate” homosexuals through varying forms of “therapy.” Memphis is home to a prominent ex-gay ministry known as Love in Action, a program of Exodus International, which provides counseling and a residential program for those “struggling with same-sex attraction.” See: <http://loveinaction.org/>

way that we relate to and understand each other occurs. Rather, homosexual identity becomes another version of heterosexual identity, a version whose abjection becomes a brief moment of misunderstanding instead of an inquiry into power. Within queer theory, identity may be much more complicated and much less “ours” than we would like. Nevertheless, its existence provides an opportunity for real change and self-examination.

Another issue within the realm of identity is the choice to create exclusive categories of identification at all. This issue is bound to be a constant site of tension between queer theory and the LGBT rights movement because identity politics by their very nature demand the creation of exclusive categories. The abjection of homosexuality implies an identification with and then a rejection of that homosexuality. In the same way, a homosexual identity that denies the complicated implications of heterosexual identity in itself repeats the pattern of exclusion that created its own abjection. In order to avoid this repeated pattern and a constant need for the creation of new identities as a result of a never-ending series of abjections and disidentifications, Butler suggests:

Every insistence on identity must at some point lead to a taking stock of the constitutive exclusions that reconsolidate hegemonic power differentials, exclusions that each articulation was forced to make in order to proceed. This critical reflection will be important in order not to replicate at the level of identity politics the very exclusionary moves that initiated the turn to specific identities in the first place.³⁵

Again, this is the type of self-inquiry that demands room for change in the national movement that may be difficult to disseminate at a practical and accessible level. To ask a movement and an individual within that movement to reevaluate the identity under which that coalition and

³⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 79.

person operate asks for a constant self-criticism that is difficult to maintain. This level of self-criticism is bound to reflect dissatisfaction with the term of identity at both the coalitional and the individual level. Given the logic of exclusive identity as it has been presented in relation to gender and heterosexuality, each term is necessarily constituted by some self-contradictory exclusion. Still, Butler does not deny the usefulness of identity politics. She suggests, “Perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact.”³⁶ She does not demand that the movement or individuals subject themselves to constant redefinition, only that they remain aware of the potential limitations and problems that their chosen identifications may carry.

Further, Butler posits that identity politics as a site of contestation carries the possibility of a better future. Because every identity must fail to satisfy the needs of its claimer from the site of its creation, the identity must constantly open itself to criticism and redefinition. For example, every “woman” balances multiple concerns and identities that she associates with her womanhood and with her individual existence. For her to claim the identity “woman,” it must adapt to her understanding of that term. Similarly, for her to affiliate with a movement that claims to be working on behalf of “women,” that movement must recognize and meet her needs and negotiate the needs of “women” with other experiences.

This is an impossibility that creates constant conflict with queer theory, but it is an impossibility that demands and produces constant growth from those attempting to meet it. Queer theory rejects the adoption of exclusive identities. This is one aspect of theory that does not and will not in the near future translate well into the political realm. Still, this lack of translation does not mean that the political movement must stop self-criticism or become

³⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 20.

complacent. As Butler concludes, “That the term is questionable does not mean that we ought not to use it, but neither does the necessity to use it mean that we ought not perpetually to interrogate the exclusions by which it proceeds, and to do this precisely in order to learn how to live the contingency of the political signifier in a culture of democratic contestation.”³⁷ These processes of criticism create identities that have the potential to constantly shift in the direction of a positive, more inclusive and (to the extent that it can ever be) accurate ideal. Essentially, self-criticism demands room to grow, even if that growth can never truly satisfy the demands of queer theory. Although it may be a difficult process, both for the movement and for the individuals it includes, it creates a more effective means of definition.

In contrast to the national movement, there is the movement in Tennessee, where success comes in different forms. The past legislative session has been particularly hostile to LGBT Tennesseans and has shown that setbacks can affect even those policies that have already been enacted and seem to be on solid political ground.³⁸ Specifically, the city of Nashville enacted a non-discrimination ordinance that covered LGBT individuals, an ordinance that reached beyond the coverage standard in the state of Tennessee. During the past legislative session, Governor Haslam signed a bill that demands unity in discrimination policies throughout the state, effectively prohibiting counties and cities from protecting LGBT individuals and nullifying Nashville’s policy. This is not to say that Tennessee is indefinitely more hostile to LGBT individuals than the rest of the United States. Far from being the completely oppressive and backward place that frequently emerges in caricatures of Bible Belt life, Memphis has one of the only Gay and Lesbian Community Centers for hundreds of miles and Tennessee is home to an

³⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 168.

³⁸ This is a common realization within the LGBT rights movement across the nation. The most well-known example is the recent passage of California’s Proposition 8, which effectively nullified a judicial ruling that legalized same-sex marriage in the state.

active LGBT PAC. Still, its struggles differ from those at the national level, both in terms of legislation and, to some extent, in terms of atmosphere. When considering queer theory's usefulness to the movement, the local example must also be included.

While marriage is a key issue for the national movement, those working for LGBT rights on a smaller scale, specifically those working in Memphis and throughout the state of Tennessee, have different concerns in terms of their own immediate political goals. In 2006, the state of Tennessee added a constitutional amendment that limits the legal definition of marriage to a relationship between one man and one woman. Over 80% of voters in the state approved that amendment when it was presented to them in ballot form.³⁹ Given the solidarity of the political force opposed to same-sex marriage in the state, the LGBT rights movement operating here has shifted its focus to goals that it deems more attainable at this time.

Although the HRC, GLAAD, and other national groups offer support to organizations operating at the more local level, the LGBT community in Tennessee is represented by much smaller but equally important groups. The Tennessee Equality Project (TEP) is the LGBT PAC operating throughout Tennessee, from county to county and at the statewide level. In Memphis, the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center (MGLCC) operates not as a political entity but as a means of providing social support and a community for LGBT individuals in the area. Its services range from transitional housing for homeless LGBT youth to HIV and STD testing to a basic meeting space for book clubs and potluck dinners. MGLCC is the only center of its kind for hundreds of miles.

Through interviews with Jonathan Cole, the current Chair of the TEP, and Will Batts, the Executive Director of MGLCC, the political and social concerns of queer individuals in

³⁹ See Tennessee Election Results: <http://state.tn.us/sos/election/results/2006-11/RptCon1andCon2.pdf>

Tennessee become apparent. With regard to the movement for marriage equality, while both Cole and Batts acknowledge its overall importance, both emphasized the political distance between the fight for same-sex marriage on the national level and the fight in Tennessee. Batts makes clear the struggles of same-sex couples who face the same challenges in Tennessee as they do across the nation, those couples that fight “to get all this special stuff to protect [themselves] that a heterosexual couples would get 5 seconds after marriage.”⁴⁰ Still, he notes that while “marriage is huge...the way it’s set up right now, we can’t really do anything about that.”⁴¹ Cole, more bluntly, says, “the cultural reality of Tennessee is that...we’re not quite to the point where we can think about marriage.”⁴² The focus for the movement has largely been on the introduction and passage of non-discrimination ordinances and on fighting legislation that negatively impacts queer individuals in the state of Tennessee.

This difference in political concerns as they exist in Tennessee and concerns as they exist at the national level makes the national movement toward same-sex marriage even more important. The defeat of the Defense of Marriage Act has far-reaching implications for those states where same-sex marriage at the state level seems decades away. By removing DOMA, the national movement removes the exception to the Full Faith and Credit Clause that allows individual states to refuse recognition to same-sex couples married elsewhere, effectively legalizing same-sex marriage in every state. In the meantime, however, the fight in Tennessee continues, although the focus is different. Within the past legislative session, two major pieces

⁴⁰ Will Batts (Executive Director Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center), in discussion with the author, 13 July 2011.

⁴¹ Batts Interview.

⁴² Jonathan Cole (Chair of the Tennessee Equality Project), in discussion with the author, 13 July 2011.

of legislation dealing with LGBT individuals and LGBT rights were introduced and made progress.

Introduced by Senator Stacey Campfield, Senate Bill 49, the “Don’t Say Gay” Bill, seeks to remove all materials related to homosexuality in schools from grades K-8. SB 49 explicitly states that information on heterosexuality should remain available, and the bill makes clear that it is not human sexuality but homosexuality that is the problem, or, in the language of the bill, homosexuality that is the “sensitive” subject.⁴³ By demanding that information regarding homosexuality not be included in the curriculum of public schools, proponents of the legislation attach homosexuality to deviance. They also remove any responsibility of the public to acknowledge the relevance of homosexuality, confining its discussion to the private sphere. This removal of homosexuality is potentially damaging to the case for any piece of legislation aiming to grant equal rights and protection to LGBT individuals.

SB 49 gained national attention as it progressed through the legislature, with commentators such as Rachel Maddow producing segments on the bill and publications like the Huffington Post and Salon publishing articles following the progress of the bill.⁴⁴ LGBT rights groups focus their opposition to the bill on the potential damage done not only to those students whose family members or friends may be gay but also to those students who may be gay themselves. Recently, concern for the rates of depression and suicide within the LGBT community, specifically with queer youth, has come into the spotlight. The series of nationally publicized gay suicides over the past year prompted campaigns such as the It Gets Better Project

⁴³ The bill further explains that homosexuality is one of those subjects “best explained and discussed in the home.” Full text available at: <http://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/107/Bill/SB0049.pdf>

⁴⁴ Senator Campfield has previously garnered media attention for his attempts to join the Black Caucus and for several pieces of legislation regarding “men’s rights,” specifically parental rights concerning child support.

to launch themselves as support for LGBT youth and adults struggling with depression. In fighting SB 49, the TEP, cites the protection of LGBT youth as a main goal in defeating the measure.

The other piece of legislation takes aim at LGBT adults. Introduced by Representative Glen Casada, House Bill 600 seeks to prevent any city or county in the state of Tennessee from extending protections to LGBT citizens in the workplace.⁴⁵ The bill not only prevents the creation of new ordinances of protection but also nullifies those already in place in Tennessee, specifically in Nashville. The bill presents itself as removing barriers for businesses in their hiring and firing processes, essentially as a piece of business-friendly legislation meant to protect business owners. Governor Bill Haslam endorses this message about the bill, which he signed in May, claiming in a recent interview that there is “enough regulation coming down” on businesses.⁴⁶

Despite this pro-business argument, the Tennessee Chamber Commerce did not support the bill, and a number of its members, including major corporations such as Dupont and Whirlpool, made statements against the bill.⁴⁷ In reality, rather than supporting businesses in hiring and firing choices, the bill creates protection for those who choose to discriminate based on gender expression or perceived or known sexual orientation. The bill allows any expression of gender identity or sexual identity outside of the heterosexual binary to be, essentially, a

⁴⁵ Representative Casada was also a co-sponsor on the legislation that banned same-sex marriage in Tennessee.

⁴⁶ Lucas Grindley, “Stopping Discrimination Is Bad for Business,” *The Advocate*, 14 July 2011, http://www.advocate.com/News/Daily_News/2011/07/14/Stopping_Discrimination_is_Bad_for_Business,_Governor_Says/

⁴⁷ The Tennessee Chamber of Commerce originally supported HB 600 as a measure to unify statewide regulations on discrimination, but the organization changed its stance after a number of its most influential members came out against the bill and the story received national media coverage.

punishable offense in the workplace. HB 600 seeks to forcibly control or maintain gender expression within a very specific set of standards and to allow employers to promote and maintain standards of expression within their own comfort levels.

Clearly these two pieces of legislation seek to make LGBT identity legally unprotected. To the extent that the goal of the legislation is to reinforce the heterosexual matrix, both queer theory and the LGBT rights movement would and do disagree with its enactment. The difference is that queer theory would disagree with the legislation because it bases itself in a false logic for the exclusion of queer individuals. The LGBT rights movement, to some extent, relates its disagreement to identity. By arguing the LGBT individuals should be protected in the school and in the workplace, the political movement is arguing as much for the legitimization of queerness as an *identity* as it is for the disruption of the heterosexual power matrix. This relates back to Butler's argument concerning the problems of creating and solidifying exclusive identity. When the LGBT rights movement seeks to advance its cause by rooting itself in identity politics, it must be careful to realize the potential for further exclusions and problems with the enforcement of its own identity standards. Further, just as the national movement, it must be careful in its message about the roots of identity.

Some essentialist arguments have been used as tools in the fight against SB 49 and HB 600. Implicit in many of the statements about LGBT youth in schools is that students are expressing their innate sexual identity or "discovering themselves" and that they should not be made to feel shameful about "who they are." Even when inherent sexual identity is not an explicit claim in arguments against SB 49, it remains an implication in the argument. The same stands for arguments against HB 600. In the same way that the national movement does when

arguing for federal workplace protection, local opponents claim LGBT identities as unchangeable features of the individuals against which the bill seeks to allow discrimination.

Interestingly, the presenters of the recent legislation have also rooted themselves in essentialist language. When asked why material on heterosexuality was not excluded along with information on homosexuality, Senator Stacey Campfield claimed that heterosexuality could not be removed because of its place in the biology classroom. He explained, “Why do you learn heterosexuality? When you learn science, you learn natural reproduction. If you take out heterosexuality, you take out natural reproduction. You know, x/y chromosome stuff.”⁴⁸ Senator Campfield directly related genetic makeup, the xx and xy chromosome compositions, to sexual orientation and the “natural” order of things. While this presentation of xx/xy relationships might seem to be rooted in purely scientific analysis, it actually relies on the logic that maintains heterosexual hegemony.

This argument reaches back to Butler’s presentation of sex as directly implicated in the creation of the heterosexual matrix. By assuming that sex is a material fact, free from any of the “politics” of gender and sexuality, Senator Campfield advances the myth of the heterosexual original. Bodily sex can be reduced to an xx/xy chromosome structure, and men and women are directly associated with those structures. Heterosexuality becomes a natural byproduct of scientific fact rather than a compulsory status engaged to maintain a culturally intelligible status. Despite its flaws, this logic is pervasive, and it places the movement in Tennessee in a difficult place.

When the movement on the large scale is presenting an argument for the destruction of a piece of legislation or the legalization of same-sex marriage or the inclusion of LGBT

⁴⁸ Stacey Campfield (State Senator, R-TN), in conversation with the author, 12 July 2011.

individuals in workplace protection, it creates its own message to convince those that matter, whether voters or politicians. Of course that message may shift depending on the audience, but when the movement is able to put forth its own legislation for consideration, it can craft its rhetoric in the offensive. In the case of Tennessee, where SB 49 and HB 600 present their own ideas about LGBT identity for consumption, the movement is forced into a reactionary position. In describing the strategy taken in Tennessee, Batts noted, “If we choose one, they might go the other. Let’s just stop the whole process...it’s helpful to be able to respond to every attack.”⁴⁹ Cole responded similarly to taking the stance that LGBT identity is not a choice, saying, “I think the choice issue is in some cases irrelevant...that whole argument gets beaten to death.”⁵⁰ Here again, the issue of using the framework of the oppressor raises its head. When discussing the need to “market a message,” Cole acknowledges that “If [the opposition] is socially conservative, religiously conservative, I do make [certain] arguments.”⁵¹ This strategy, while it may be effective, again raises questions about the importance of the methods used for progress.

Because the LGBT rights movement in Tennessee operates largely in the defensive, its strategies are adaptive. While this does not indicate a great state of political affairs for the LGBT community, it does allow for more flexibility in the message of the local movement, as it changes itself to meet the challenges of each battle. In the discussion of marriage, Jonathan Cole has used rhetoric that presents LGBT marriage as a “conservative institution.” Addressing the anti-LGBT rights groups, he says with regard to marriage, “This is a conservative institution [that we want to be part of]. Y’all have won. You just haven’t realized it.”⁵² This strategy provides an example of exactly the type of strategy and rhetoric that the national movement

⁴⁹ Batts Interview.

⁵⁰ Cole Interview.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Cole Interview.

should avoid if it hopes to create a relationship with queer theory and disrupt the heterosexual matrix. Still, the atmosphere in Tennessee invites an interesting conversation about the means used to reach the movement's intended ends. If an audience can be convinced of the importance or relevance of LGBT rights using a strategy, is that strategy a means to a more important end? Is any progress a reason to celebrate? The answer again lies in queer theory's presentation of LGBT identity as a tool that can be used to call into question our accepted boundaries of cultural intelligibility.

While it may be tempting to adopt the language of the opponents in fighting for a cause, ultimately, any progress made within that framework must destroy itself if a true reconsideration of traditional values is to be made. Within the feminist framework, activist Audre Lorde, in criticizing the maintenance of racial and sexual power dynamics within a feminist movement that claimed to be seeking real change, used the now famous phrase, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."⁵³ This analogy translates well into the scenario of the LGBT rights movement. Using the "master's" rhetoric and idealizing traditional understandings of relationships as a means of creating an argument for "progress" in relatable terms seems to be an effective strategy. In reality, it only creates an illusion of progress, which must eventually be abandoned if real progress is to be made. Cole's statement, "Y'all have won," makes the point perfectly. The quicker route seems to be avoiding the temptation of the language and terms provided by the given framework, even if working within that framework seems to provide the easiest solution to the political problem. If a true disruption of the norm is to be the goal, the movement everywhere must seek to build a better foundation for the discourse on LGBT rights.

⁵³ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*, ed. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 49-51.

It must refuse the opportunity to use the terms and ideals we hold for the heterosexual matrix in order to describe queer identities and relationships.

The movement in Tennessee has another interesting relationship to essentialist rhetoric. As religion tends to be a topic of consideration whenever LGBT rights are discussed, it is no surprise that both Cole and Batts repeatedly emphasized the Bible Belt atmosphere as a challenge for LGBT individuals in Tennessee. As Batts noted when asked about the differences between the goals and strategies adopted by Memphis and Tennessee and those adopted by the national movement:

It's not just the heat that's oppressive here. It's an environmental oppression that's hard to describe to people outside of the South. For us, in the South, it's so integrated it's hard to even separate religion and politics, so a lot of people experience a lot of frustration with wanting to be a part of a community, to be a part of their church, but feeling either so beaten down or ashamed that they can't...Or they keep [their identity] inside [to remain a part of the community] and it sort of eats them alive.⁵⁴

While Batts emphasized religion as a part of his discussion of Tennessee, the problem with a considerable amount of religious discourse and its relationship to LGBT identity can be translated to the national stage. Both in Tennessee and on the national level, religion sometimes operates as another form of essentialism in that it advances the argument of a god-given original identity.

The framework presented in much Christian discourse, even in some of those forms of more liberal Christianity that embrace LGBT individuals, conflicts fundamentally with a constructionist view of sex and gender. The idea of a divinely given identity precludes the

⁵⁴ Batts Interview.

advancement of an argument that implicates cultural and historical context in the creation of a heterosexual matrix. The idea found in Biblical text and embraced throughout much of Christianity presents a God that knew us before we were born.⁵⁵ Although many denominations are now opening their arms to LGBT individuals, the problem of essentialist discourse remains. In the United States, according to Pew polling, only slightly more than 16% of individuals claimed no religious affiliation and within those who did claim affiliation, less than 3% claimed affiliation outside of an Abrahamic tradition.⁵⁶ Given these breakdowns, the LGBT rights movement must learn to work with religious viewpoints and organizations. Still, it should avoid the essentialist discourse prevalent within many forms of religion. This navigation between acknowledging the influence of the religious community and avoiding the problematic discourse of pieces of that community is undoubtedly difficult but surely necessary.

There is no doubt that queer theory and the LGBT rights movement both seek to change the way that we look at the world. Their means are different but not entirely incompatible. Still, recognizing the common ground between the two groups may not be enough. It is simple to say that performativity is freeing and provides theoretical support to a political goal. Disseminating performativity as an idea through a political movement is a different story. There is a reason for widespread essentialist rhetoric. The belief that personal identity inherently belongs to each individual is much more appealing in many ways than Foucault's revelation of power dynamics. Certainly, "Baby I was born this way" is a more succinct and effective political slogan than anything to be pulled from Butler's work. Further, how many LGBT individuals actually wish to shake the heterosexual matrix? How many know or care what the heterosexual matrix is?

⁵⁵ For one commonly seen Biblical passage on God's knowledge of our identity see: Jeremiah 1:5.

⁵⁶ All statistics from Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. See: "US Religious Landscape Survey: Affiliations," <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>

Achieving same-sex marriage through the discourse of the current system of power may seem wrong in the eyes of theory, but for the LGBT individual that is now able to marry his or her partner, a clear and effective change in legal status has occurred. Is it right to put the goals of queer theory on LGBT individuals simply because they are the physical counterparts to the theory?

It may seem to be unfair to place the hopes of queer theory on the shoulders of LGBT individuals, especially when some may disagree partially or completely with its messages. Nevertheless, the exclusion of queer individuals is not a theoretical proposition; it is a reality. This piece of common ground between theory and the political movement is most important. The crossover between life in abjection as it is presented in queer theory and life in abjection as it is lived by queer individuals every day reveals an aspect of queer existence that both realms can acknowledge. Queer theory may seek more abstract and long-term goals than the LGBT rights movement, but both movements seek to make life better for queer individuals. Theory does not translate exactly into the realm of the political. Still, the political should acknowledge theory as another means of giving power to queer existence. It should at least consider employing queer theory's rhetoric. Even if the message is more difficult to disseminate, it could make a greater impact or change in the long term.

By adopting queer theory, even in parts, the modern LGBT rights movement can harness a source of fuel and support for the political goals of the queer community. Any relationship with queer theory demands an inquiry of motive and an extensive self-criticism. These processes can only be beneficial because they demand a justification of messages and goals. This is not to say that the movement should hold itself entirely accountable to every goal and message of theory. Theory seeks a different end in its inquiry into our language, bodies, and power

dynamics, and the LGBT political movement has a right to acknowledge the practical limitations of theory in the political realm. But the existence of these limitations does not preclude a simultaneous acknowledgment of the merit found in the observations of queer theory. The tension between these groups is irreconcilable, but maybe no reconciliation is necessary. The most interesting and frustrating thing about queer theory is its never-ending demand for more and better. It seeks to expand constantly our understanding of our relationships to ourselves and to each other. Through its questions into our identity, it seeks to change the way that we see the world and ourselves. If the political movement holds itself even slightly accountable to these demands and goals, it creates considerable room for improvement and growth.