

From Mardi Gras to Marriage Equality: Resisting Assimilation and Embracing Transgression

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Abstract

As public opinion around sexuality continues to evolve, social movements face the challenge of adopting those strategies most effective in dismantling heteronormativity. It is within this struggle that two dominant branches of politics arise; assimilationist politics, seeking integration within existing cultural norms, and transgressive politics, advocating a more radical platform of difference. Through an examination of foreign and domestic marriage equality campaigns, as well as the rising prominence of the Sydney Mardi Gras, this paper will show that while assimilation may be successful in gaining minority rights, only transgressive sexual politics can help achieve queer liberation.

I. Introduction

Within the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex Queer/Questioning ('LGBTIQ') community, political strategies around the issue of sexuality are frequently contested.¹ On the one hand, assimilationist strategies rely on tactics of inclusiveness to secure minority rights and advance LGBTIQ struggles. Marriage equality campaigns are emblematic of this political approach.² In contrast to assimilationist politics, transgressive political approaches adopt a more radical platform, advocating difference rather than sameness. These politics altogether reject heteronormative institutions, which promote heterosexuality as the culturally normal and idealised form of sexuality and that have traditionally promoted oppression of LGBTIQ identity.³ This essay explores both the history and effectiveness of assimilationist and transgressive politics and assesses how each have manifested in contemporary queer movements; 'queer' in this case being a relatively new, umbrella term reclaimed by those who do not fit heteronormative cultural norms surrounding sexuality. It considers events like the Sydney Mardi

¹ Edward Stein (ed), *Reprinted in Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy* (Routledge, 1992); Arlene Stein, 'Sisters and Queers: The Decentering of Lesbian Feminism' (1992) 22 *Socialist Review*; Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Free Press, 1999).

² Lisa Dettmer, 'Beyond Gay Marriage: Assimilation within the Queer Community' (Report, 2010) 4.

³ Michelle Wolkomir, 'Making Heteronormative Reconciliations: The Story of Romantic Love, Sexuality and Gender in Mixed-Orientation Marriage' (2009) 23 *Gender and Society* 494; Warner, above n 1, 123.

Gras, as well as struggles such as the campaign for marriage equality, analysing the strategies that have been used in each. Whilst this essay argues that within heteronormative institutions assimilation is more effective in gaining rights, it ultimately concludes that a politics of difference and transgression is more successful in achieving queer liberation because of its ability to embrace, rather than eliminate, difference.

II. The Politics of Sexuality: Assimilation vs Transgression

Since the state's involvement from the 19th century onwards in regulating ideas about sexuality, LGBTIQ political movements and activists have responded, advocating for both social reform and liberation. Focused on opening heteronormative institutions via reinterpreting them with a critical focus on diverse genders and sexualities, assimilationist politics, such as equal love campaigns, seek integration within existing cultural norms, rather than outright rejection of them.⁴ This integration relies on abandoning deviance and instead normalising or purifying queer identity so that it is 'homonormative'; in other words, depoliticised, demobilised and anchored in domesticity and consumption.⁵ With a hierarchy of normative sexuality operating in society, dictating heterosexuality as 'good' and homosexuality as 'bad',⁶ assimilationist approaches ultimately shift the parameters of the hierarchy so that both heterosexuality and homosexuality can be considered acceptable. In other words, assimilationist strategies do not *challenge* the fundamental arrangement of what is considered normative, but rather *expand* that arrangement.

In contrast, instead of advocating for the *normalisation* of queer identities, strategies that adopt a politics of transgression focus on freeing all sexualities from regulation.⁷ This strategy fights against merely acquiring minority civil rights within heteronormative society, instead focusing on the deconstruction, decentring and revision of the state's rule over sexuality.⁸ Examples of transgressive politics include the rejection of marriage on the basis of state regulation, and advocating for the embrace of polyamorous relationships. Unlike assimilationist strategies, these approaches do not require any process of integration, but rather embrace different identities as they stand.

Historically, queer liberation movements — after the 1969 Stonewall riots in which gay activists fought back against police raids of homosexual bars and throughout

⁴ Dettmer, above n 2, 4.

⁵ Dana D. Nelson and Russ Castronovo (ed, *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 2002) 179.

⁶ Steven Seidman, 'From Identity to Queer Politics: Shifts in Normative Heterosexuality and the Meaning of Citizenship' (2001) 5 *Citizenship Studies* 321.

⁷ *Ibid* 321–22.

⁸ Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer, 'I Can't Even Think Straight "Queer" Theory and Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology' (1994) 12 *Sociological Theory* 182.

the 1970s and 1980s — adopted a politics of difference and transgression.⁹ Instead of trying to alter or integrate into the institutions that were subordinating queers, activists protested against sexual regulation and instead for sexual freedom; a popular message of the time being ‘innovate, don’t assimilate’ as according to activist Peter Tatchell.¹⁰ As queer politics progressed into the 1990s, the growing power of neoliberalism and conservative discourse resulted in many activists abandoning these radical politics, leaving social movements such as the queer movement weakened.¹¹ With the rapidly expanding commercialisation of LGBTIQ communities, queer culture started appearing in mainstream society, leading to an increased desire for integration.¹² With this commercialisation acting in conjunction with the rise of conservative politics during the Reagan and Thatcher eras, and many activists desire to remain ‘apolitical’, assimilationist politics emerged.¹³ Leaving confrontational direct action such as the initial Sydney Mardi Gras protest march behind, these politics favoured the legalisation of marriage equality, inclusion in the military and other civil rights within the status quo.¹⁴

III. Mardi Gras: From Protest to Corporate Integration

The Sydney Mardi Gras has become a pivotal aspect of queer culture from which we can examine the politics of sexuality. Now a symbol and celebration of the queer community, Mardi Gras’ development has continued to elevate the status of diverse sexualities within the public eye and political landscape. Originating from a gay solidarity protest march in 1978, the first Mardi Gras saw revolutionaries from groups such as the Communist Party, Socialist Party and the International Socialists come together on the streets of Kings Cross, risking both job loss and public humiliation.¹⁵ Fifty-three activists were violently assaulted and arrested in what ultimately became a demonstration of police brutality and gay resistance.¹⁶ However, as human rights advocate Sienna Merope has pointed out, this history of radical and transgressive politics has been exchanged for assimilationist politics of

⁹ Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, ‘Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth’ (2006) 71 *American Sociological Review* 724; Warner, above n 1, 123.

¹⁰ Peter Tatchell, ‘Our Lost Gay Radicalism’, *The Guardian* (26 June 2009).

¹¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004) 29–30.

¹² Diane Richardson, *Rethinking Sexuality* (SAGE, 2000) 42.

¹³ Nelsen and Castronovo, above n 5, 177.

¹⁴ Jonathan Kemp, ‘Queer Past, Queer Present, Queer Future’ (2009) 6 *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 8.

¹⁵ Robert Reynolds, *What Happened to Gay Life?* (University of New South Wales Press, 2007) 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid* 31.

inclusiveness, involving corporate sponsorship and a position on Sydney's tourism calendar.¹⁷

The move away from the celebration's transgressive roots has taken many forms, including its increased focus on marriage equality. Most notably, Mardi Gras' adoption of assimilationist politics has come in the form of the celebration's 2012 rebranding. In an attempt to include and appeal to those who may not identify as specifically homosexual, Mardi Gras dropped the 'gay and lesbian' prefix, changing the event's title from 'Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras' to simply 'Sydney Mardi Gras' as detailed by columnist Kelsey Munro.¹⁸ Through this name change, Mardi Gras has moved towards assimilating with the wider heterosexual community, opening up the event to corporate sponsors such as ANZ, Facebook, Google and Qantas.

These businesses, all prominent within mainstream society, have lent their support to queer campaigns such as marriage equality through different promotions; one example being ANZ's bedazzled 'GAYTMs' celebrating diversity, inclusion and respect as reported by journalist Scott Parker.¹⁹ Similarly, organisations such as the NSW Police Force, Australian Defence Force and political parties such as the Liberal Party of Australia, Australian Labor Party and Australian Greens have all joined the event – as academic and activist Dennis Altman has said, 'that police, military and mainstream politicians march alongside Dykes on Bikes and drag queens is a sign of the victories, not the failures, of the gay movement'.²⁰ Through the attendance of these organisations, the queer community has seen increased discourse around homophobia and transphobia, as well as around public policy surrounding the regulation of sexuality. For example, in 2015, discussion of discrimination was opened up and a joint agreement to eliminate homophobia was signed as a float showcasing organisations such as the National Rugby League and Australia Football League led the parade. In this sense, assimilationist politics have proven effective in promoting inclusion of diverse sexualities within branches of the community such as Australian sport.

One must consider, however, whether the elevation of queer issues within mainstream society through businesses and organisations equates to any tangible improvements in queer life. For example, despite forces such as the police now being invited to march beside queer activists at events like Mardi Gras, members of the queer community are still subject to police brutality. As journalist Alison

¹⁷ Sienna Merope, 'Party or Protest? Mardi Gras' (1 March 2013, Right Now <<http://rightnow.org.au/opinion-3/party-or-protest-mardi-gras-forum/>>).

¹⁸ Kelsey Munro, 'Mardi Gras Festival Goes Straight and Loses the Alphabet Soup', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney, 18 November 2011).

¹⁹ Scott Parker, 'ANZ's 'GAYTMs' Wins Honours at Cannes Advertising Awards', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney, 18 June 2014).

²⁰ Dennis Altman, 'The Power of Mardi Gras: For a Few Hours, Full Equality is Real', *The Guardian* (3 March 2014).

Rourke reported in 2013, members of the NSW Police Force were found guilty of brutally assaulting a young man at Mardi Gras, despite the force's commitment to the event's celebration of diversity.²¹ Likewise, corporate sponsors of Mardi Gras such as Facebook and ANZ have been accused by journalists such as Jill Stark of exploiting the event for marketing; co-opting the rainbow flag despite holding any real commitment to the advancement of queer issues.²² Ultimately, when it comes to resisting sexual regulation, dismantling heteronormative institutions and advancing queer liberation, the transgressive politics of the original 1978 Mardi Gras prove far more effective than the Mardi Gras we see today. These transgressive politics of difference, which include critiquing police brutality and the commercialisation of queer culture, have the capacity to fight conservative ideas of sexuality with which assimilationist politics cannot grapple.

IV. Marriage Equality: Assimilating into the Moral Family Discourse

One can further examine the way in which assimilationist strategies have dominated contemporary queer politics through analysing global campaigns for marriage equality. The struggle to open up the heteronormative institution of marriage to diverse genders and sexualities has, for the greater part of the past two decades, dominated the politics of sexuality. Seen as *the* defining issue for queer communities since the mid-1990s, the battle for marriage equality, fought on assimilationist lines, has been effective in delivering more formal minority rights and privileges.²³ In adopting a 'family values discourse' and attempting to assimilate into the nuclear family model (that is, a couple with children as the fundamental economic unit,²⁴ academic Luke Gahan argues the campaign for marriage equality has had major successes in delivering queer people *legal* fairness under the state.²⁵

For example, in the lead up to the 2015 Irish Constitutional Referendum on Same-Sex Marriage, assimilationist based 'yes' campaigns adopted a platform based around the importance of marriage, as well as the importance of the nuclear family. Rather than resisting any attempt to measure queer life by these intertwined heteronormative institutions, many queer activists embraced this strategy. The *Yes Equality* campaign produced posters and materials reading 'Vote Yes because marriage matters', whilst the campaign's website had a section devoted to why 'Marriage and families matter'. Similarly, the Irish Green Party

²¹ Rourke, Alison, 'Police Brutality Alleged at Sydney Gay Mardi Gras', *The Guardian* (6 March 2013).

²² Jill Stark, 'Pinkwashing: Marketing Stunt or Corporate Revolution?', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney, 7 June 2015).

²³ Warner, above n 1, 122.

²⁴ Gill Jagger and Caroline Wright, *Changing Families Values* (Routledge, 1999) 10.

²⁵ Luke Gahan, 'Keep Family Values Out Of Marriage Equality' (20 February 2013, New Matilda) <<https://newmatilda.com/2013/02/20/keep-family-values-out-marriage-equality/>>.

adopted this messaging, with its promotional material in favour of marriage equality urging people to 'Vote yes for families'. These campaigns promised queer integration and were successful in securing a 62.1% majority in favour of marriage equality,²⁶ ultimately illustrating the effectiveness of non-threatening and inclusive assimilationist politics.

Likewise, in the Australian campaign for marriage equality which has not yet been achieved, groups like *Australian Marriage Equality* (AME) have suggested that the campaign must welcome a shift towards moral family values in order to survive. The former director of the AME, Rodney Croome, has advocated for assimilation into the nuclear family model, calling for the Australian movement to shift away from 'inequities' and rather towards 'commitment, family and abiding love'. The AME's website has defended this assimilationist stance, rejecting the abolition of marriage and instead defending it as an important institution. This discourse in favour of marriage demonstrates the way in which assimilation has favoured state reform over radical resistance. Although laws have not yet been changed, arguments of inclusiveness have appealed to both progressive and conservative sides of society, with members of the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party of Australia supporting reform on these grounds.

It is through examining both the Irish and Australian campaigns for marriage equality that the effectiveness of assimilationist politics in gaining formal, legal rights can be seen. Despite the success of these strategies in opening up the institution of marriage, however, we must question whether civil rights are worth the integration required to secure them. Assimilation requires LGBTIQ communities to abandon diverse forms of identities and relationships, and instead conform to heteronormative cultural expectations, such as raising children.²⁷ For many within the queer community, this is neither worthwhile nor effective in combating systematic oppression. Likewise, the assimilationist politics of the marriage equality campaign do very little to respect differences in sexuality. Regardless of Ireland gaining equal marriage rights through assimilationist politics, the 2016 *LGBT Ireland Report* still shows moderate rates of self-harm and suicide among queer teenagers.²⁸ Although little time has passed, no consequential shift in these rates has appeared. Ultimately, like the Sydney Mardi Gras, only transgressive politics that reject historically oppressive institutions like marriage can be effective in achieving queer liberation. Assimilationist strategies of integration only further solidify sexual normativity, failing to promote or embrace those identities that cannot easily amalgamate into cultural norms or binaries. In contrast, transgressive politics deconstruct this normativity, liberating members of the queer community from such constriction.

²⁶ 'Ireland Says Yes to Same-Sex Marriage', *RTÉ* (Ireland, 24 May 2015).

²⁷ Warner, above n 1, 122.

²⁸ Agnes Higgins et al, 'The LGBT Ireland report: National Study of the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex People in Ireland' (Report, GLEN and BeLonG To, 2016).

V. Towards Queer Liberation: Transgression over Assimilation

Through examining both the changing role of Mardi Gras and the marriage equality campaign within the politics of sexuality, one can observe the way in which assimilationist and inclusive strategies can have positive effects. In regards to gaining minority rights and regulation under the state, as well as elevating queer issues into the public eye, politics that support integration into heteronormative institutions and norms are non-threatening and offer favourable outcomes. Assimilation, however, fails to challenge the status quo. Through its resistance to systematic oppression and embrace of difference, only transgressive tactics can be said to help achieve queer liberation and prove more effective in the politics of sexuality.

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