

Homophobia without Homophobes: Deconstructing the Public Discourses of 21st Century Queer Sexualities in the United States

Janae Teal, *Humboldt State University*
Meredith Conover-Williams, *Humboldt State University*

Abstract: In contrast to even a decade ago, there are more queer people in the public eye, and an increasing number people embracing a diverse range of sexual identities in the United States. To be overtly homophobic in public discourse is now risky, with public figures facing increased backlash. At the same time, even after marriage equality has been achieved, queer people in the United States still face systemic barriers to lived equality. We theorize that homophobia, while no longer as overt as it once was, has been rearticulated into covert forms of homophobia and heteronormativity, paralleling the covert racism seen in today's social structures. While not an empirical study, we provide several examples from public discourse, including television, film, popular music, games, politics and social media to support our theory. Similar to the way Bonilla-Silva (2014) examines "racism without racists," we contend that heterosexism is maintained through modern forms of homophobia: naturalization, cultural homophobia and the minimization of homophobia.

Keywords: Homophobia, homonormativity, public discourse, popular culture, social media, LGBTQ

It appears that we have turned a rhetorical corner in the discourses around queer sexualities in the early twenty-first century of the United States. While in recent history one could make overt homophobic remarks in the public sphere, without fear of reprisal, we have reached a point where this is no longer always the case. For example, in April 2011, professional basketball player Kobe Bryant was fined \$100,000 for calling a referee a "fucking faggot" in a moment of anger during a game. This is in steep contrast to the November 2002 incident of professional football player Garrison Hearst, saying that he would not want "any faggots" in his locker room. He received no fines or formal punishments (Lynch 2002). Rapper Travis Scott was recently considered to be a breakout star, performing with Justin Bieber and receiving

national notoriety. At a March 2015 show he was recorded saying "I ain't cool with none of you faggots who just sitting here looking like a bunch of queers." After backlash on social media, Scott apologized in a way that is now becoming commonplace in these scenarios: he said that he did not mean to use homophobic language, and insisted that he is not homophobic (TMZ Staff 2015).

Take also the example of "coming out," or proclaiming that one is not heterosexual (as heterosexuality is the default sexuality). For years, people inside and outside of the public eye lived in fear of being "outed" and what it could do to their careers and families. Rock Hudson, iconic actor of the 1960's, took his queer identity to the grave, when he died of AIDS-related causes in 1985. In the 1990's and 2000's, more people were open about their sexuality, though the coming out process was

often emotional and tumultuous. Ellen DeGeneres famously came out on her namesake television show in 1997. The public “outing” came after negotiations with the ABC Network, and after the “coming out” episode (watched by

with much less risk of being ostracized from Hollywood, though is still a concern for non-celebrities, and queer individuals in other public institutions, like politics, sports and some genres of music. Because people in some aspects of the



Figure 1. Tweets generated between January 2 and January 8, 2016 using ‘faggot’, ‘no homo’, ‘so gay’ or ‘dyke’ compiled by nohomophobes.com

42 million viewers (Adams et al. 2013)), the show’s ratings quickly declined, and the show was cancelled one year later. Nearly twenty years later, Ellen has a popular daytime talk show, is the celebrity with the most watched YouTube channel (James 2013), and currently has nearly 52 million Twitter followers.

One signal in the evolution of the public “coming out” process came from the recent “outing” of actor Reid Ewing, recurring cast member of the popular ABC television program *Modern Family*. After he tweeted a comment about another man being “hot,” one of his Twitter followers asked if he was coming out. Ewing tweeted “I was never in.” When actor Johnny Depp’s 16-year-old daughter Lily-Rose came out as sexually fluid in November 2015, Depp said he was proud of her (Guglielmi 2015). The coming out process, for people with enough privilege to safely do so, now comes

public eye are more able to come out without major risks to their careers or personal safety, it gives the appearance that the culture is more accepting of LGB individuals, generally.

This does not seem to be the case for people outside of celebrity life, when over a quarter of the LGB community has experienced discrimination in the workplace (Williams Institute 2011) and are, on average, twice as likely as their straight peers to be victims of domestic violence (National Coalition on Anti-Violence Program 2014). Over half (56%) of LGB people have deliberately self-harmed, compared to 1 in 15 of the general population, and, thus, are twice more likely than heterosexual people to consider or attempt suicide (McGlashan 2014). As seen in Figure 1, “casually homophobic” (University of Alberta 2016) language like “faggot” and “no homo” are still used regularly in social media. Though this

captures tweets from the world, not just the United States, it is apparent that there is still a level of socially acceptable homophobia, despite changes in visibility, and pressure for individuals in the public spotlight to claim ally status.

If Travis Scott is not homophobic, despite using what is commonly considered a homophobic slur, and Ellen has one of the most popular television shows in the U.S., is homophobia over? Does marriage equality mean we have become a post-heterosexist or post-closet society? Have we entered a new era of acceptance for queer sexuality and identities? How do we reconcile the structural barriers faced by LGB individuals in the workforce, political system, and other social institutions, with the discourse of a post-homophobic society? While it appears that anti-LGB sentiment has decreased in much of popular culture, we argue that homophobia has not diminished, but has become rearticulated in more covert forms, much like “color-blind racism” has been recognized as a new form of racism, couched in the language of liberalism (Bonilla-Silva 2014). As with the rearticulated version of racism, this new form of homophobia fails to dismantle any of the heteronormative structures that privilege heterosexuality and oppress members of queer communities. Despite what appear to be advances in LGB equality, such as marriage equality, we join those arguing that homophobia is alive and well in the mainstream culture, but is potentially even more powerful in this more subtle form. In this article, we will discuss the framework of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014), and outline our framework for understanding homophobia without homophobes, or covert homophobia, in various arenas of public discourse¹. While not

¹ Transphobia, or the fear or disdain directed to people who are perceived to be transgender or gender non-conforming, may be following a similar path, but the “coming out” of Caitlyn Jenner as transgender, and the backlash she has faced, points to a level of overt transphobia that is still present in the culture, and beyond

an empirical or systematic study of current media, we offer several examples as further explanation and support for our theory.

Theoretical Foundations

Several scholars have explored what they have called modern forms of racism: symbolic racism (Kinder and Sears 1981), Laissez-Faire Racism (Bobo, Kluegel and Smith 1996), and colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014). All of these have explained the changing nature of whites’ attitudes toward African-Americans, or toward people of color, generally. Symbolic racism theorized a new form of prejudice that coupled social values (e.g. the Protestant work ethic) with anti-black fears (Kinder and Sears 1981). Laissez-Faire Racism built on this, adding a historical analysis of both the political and economic structures of race. It also contributed sociological theorizations of prejudice, incorporating institutionalized structures of racism with human interaction and interpretation. This form of racism explains behavior as derived from both structures and interactions, emerging to defend white privilege, and explain black disadvantage through changing economic and political realities (Bobo, Kluegel and Smith 1996).

In his elaboration on Laissez-Faire Racism, Bonilla-Silva (2014) presented four frames to explain the rearticulation of racism: *Abstract Liberalism* is the use of liberal ideas (e.g. “equal opportunity” or nonviolent protest methods) and economic liberalism (such as choice and individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial issues. *Naturalization* allows whites to neutralize racial issues by suggesting they are natural occurrences, such as stating people of color just like to hang out together, or that differences are biologically driven. *Cultural*

the scope of this article. Therefore, the focus of this study is on homophobia, and the fear and disdain directed to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer communities, specifically.

Racism relies on arguments based on culture, rather than race, to explain racial inequality. For example, using a “culture of poverty” to explain inner city issues of crime and inequality. Last, with *Minimization of Racism*, Bonilla-Silva (2014) describes how whites suggest discrimination is no longer impacting life chances for people of color (e.g. “things are better now...”).

Some scholars have built on these theories of modern racism to understand what may be changing with discourses and attitudes toward members of the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities (Aberson, Swan and Emerson 1999; Walls 2008; Cowan, Heiple, Marquez, Khatchadourian and McNevin 2005). Walls (2008), for example, posits that there are four types of modern heterosexism espoused by individuals in a heteronormative society: aversive, amnestic, paternalistic and positive stereotypic. *Aversive heterosexism* refers to perceptions of gays and lesbians as “too militant” or receiving of too much attention. *Amnestic heterosexism* is the denial that anti-gay discrimination still exists, similar to Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) concept of *Minimization of Racism*. *Paternalistic heterosexism* is the expression of concern for the well-being of gays and lesbians, such as justifying one’s desire to not have a gay or lesbian child, because his or her life would be difficult. *Positive stereotypic heterosexism* is appreciating stereotypical notions of gays and lesbians, still othering queer identities.

While Wall’s (2008) typology for heterosexism has been used to theorize and measure individual attitudes toward gays and lesbians, with this study we aim to analyze the public discourse around queer sexualities and individuals. We borrow from the language of color-blind racism to posit a “homophobia-free” version of modern heterosexism, or covert homophobia. We use the language of homophobia, rather than heterosexism. We do not do this to exclude the understanding that heteronormativity is both institutional and

individual, but to use language that is more often utilized in public discourse, as the focus of this study.

Homophobia Without Homophobes

Bonilla-Silva (2014) contends modern racism has taken a new form, moving from an overt style of Jim Crow racism to a more subtle, or covert form of color-blind racism. According to Bonilla-Silva (2014:7), core aspects of liberalism have been “rearticulated” to rationalize situations that are unfair to people of color. We borrow some aspects of this framework, and contribute our own taxonomy, to explain covert homophobia. While some aspects of the rearticulation of overt to covert homophobia may mirror the experience of racism, we theorize that there are also unique ways the mainstream culture has relied on semantic moves to neutralize their homophobia. As we explain below, some of the rhetoric has come from within the queer communities themselves, as queer individuals have used covert homophobia to try to earn privilege for themselves, or distance themselves from more controversial aspects of the queer community. We explain each frame briefly, then elaborate on each, below.

Naturalization

Just as Bonilla-Silva (2014) points out how whites use biological explanations to explain away racism, so do essentialist arguments maintain a heteronormative hierarchy of sexuality. These nature versus nurture arguments reproduce queer sexualities as deviant or abnormal, and are used in the broader society, as well as, within some LGB communities.

Cultural Homophobia

Similar to Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) explanation of Cultural Racism, we theorize that within and

outside of the queer community exists rhetoric of a good/bad dichotomy in queer culture. To be accepted by mainstream culture, some members of the LGB communities use this rhetoric to separate themselves from other, less socially acceptable, aspects of the community, trapping them in the politics of respectability (Higginbotham 1994).

Minimization of Homophobia

Also building on Bonilla-Silva (2014), and connecting to amnesic heterosexism (Walls 2008), we theorize that the reality of homophobia is often neutralized by heterosexual rhetoric. As we will explain below, this discourse is used in what we call the entitlement of allies, when they use their ally status to neutralize their homophobia, or with the rise of “ironic homophobia.” It also takes the form of tokenization of members of the LGB communities, and the re-centering of male heterosexuality in female bisexuality. We also argue that it is creeping into public discourse by way of major grant funders.

Deconstructing Public Discourse

“Born This Way”: Naturalization of Homophobia and Reliance on Essentialist Discourse

The LGBT community has been backed into a corner, forced into only two explanations (birth and choice) for explaining the origins of sexuality. In order to get public opinion on their side, they must rely on essentialist arguments about the origin of same-sex behaviors and identities. A 2004 poll, widely cited among mainstream LGB activists, found that when asked about support for civil unions or gay marriage, a belief in one’s orientation being either a choice or inborn led to a significant variance in support. Those who believed sexual orientation was a choice showed only 22% support for civil unions or marriage, where 79%

of those who thought that humans were born with their sexual orientation were supportive (Besen 2011). This difference has been held up by many mainstream LGB groups as the reason to champion a “born this way” slogan (and mirrored in popular culture with the 1975 Valentino and 2011 Lady Gaga hit songs with the same name). These essentialist arguments, embraced by the queer community, ignore any social explanations for sexuality. This has also set up a scenario where the LGB community feels they must keep ratcheting up the amount of empirical evidence to support essentialist theories, while those against queer rights know that as long as there is doubt, they can justify inequality. While those against queer rights are no longer able to overtly discriminate against queers, they can keep asking for more evidence, without questioning any heteronormative structures. Because there is no call for comparable research on, for example, the outcomes for children of heterosexual parents, the hierarchy based on the heteronormative nuclear family remains unquestioned.

An example of essentialist rhetoric can be seen in the October 2011 interview of then presidential hopeful Herman Cain and Piers Morgan from CNN. As they were arguing about queer rights, Cain stated that if there were enough evidence to support sexual orientation being inborn, he would eventually consider his support. Morgan countered, “You genuinely believe that millions of Americans wake up in their early teens and go, ‘You know what? I quite fancy being a homosexual’? You don’t believe that” (CNN 2011). Morgan treads in familiar territory, explaining that queer sexuality could not possibly be a valid or desirable choice because it is so obviously problematic. In this case, even Morgan, positioning himself as an ally in this debate, is using covert homophobia in referring to homosexuality as a choice no rational individual would make. Similarly, in a 2015 *Newsweek* editorial, Eichenwald (2015) used satire to point out the absurdity of

believing queerness is a choice, by joking that queers are “frauds”:

Hundreds of thousands of them say they didn't choose to be gay. Didn't choose to risk being beaten by some passing yahoo. Didn't choose to risk being cut off from their families. Didn't choose to be in a society where strangers decide what rights they have, what jobs they can keep, where they can live, whether they can marry, whether they can adopt the children they raise or be at the bedside of a dying loved one.

Again, the author frames himself as an ally, and uses covert homophobia to diminish queerness as an actual valid choice, as it is rife with marginalization. Simplifying sexuality into a genetic versus choice argument ignores that sexuality is a social construction (Foucault 1978), and it devalues queer sexualities by framing them as inherently bad or negative. It also reproduces the societal need to label and categorize sexuality as simply a gender-based attraction, and in limited categories (lesbian, gay, bisexual/pansexual and heterosexual).

The essentialist rhetoric is also used within the mainstream LGB community, with little room for other discourse. In 2012, *Sex in the City* star Cynthia Nixon proclaimed that her bisexuality was a choice. After an uproar from the LGB community, and major organizations, she clarified her statement, saying that bisexuality was not a choice, but she was choosing to be in a gay relationship. She also stated that she was speaking about herself, but not on behalf of the broader gay and lesbian communities (Larkin and Charles 2012). Lady Gaga's song “Born This Way” has been heralded as a modern LGB anthem, as has Macklemore's 2012 hit song “Same Love,” written as an homage to gay rights (Matheson 2013). Macklemore's hit followed the same rhetoric, with the chorus (performed by lesbian artist Mary Lambert) claiming “I can't change

even if I tried, even if I wanted to.” It seems the “party line” is to claim that same-sex attractions and identities are inborn, again ignoring social constructions, and a variety of pathways to often fluid queer identities. These essentialist claims are embraced by the LGB (and T) communities and their allies, as it meets the gut-level needs of a palatable discourse; unfortunately, it also contains valuation, deeming the choice of a queer identity as invalid and inferior. In this way, queers and their allies, as well as those fighting against queer rights, are using covert homophobia.

“When Will You Have Kids?”: Cultural Homophobia and the Politics of Respectability

In the movement for marriage equality, there was a common discourse of “we're just like you” by mainstream gay and lesbian organizations, to convince heterosexuals to allow queer people into the social institution of marriage. This rhetoric divided the community into an idealized version of the queer family, as a two-person, conjugal relationship with two middle-class white queers and children. This picture, based in privacy, domesticity, and consumerism (Duggan 2003) was created in opposition to other images of “those gays” such as leather daddies, working class queers, and transgender communities (Serano 2013). It also keeps mainstream gay and lesbian movements from recognizing other types of kinship systems represented in queer communities, including non-conjugal, and polyandrous relationships, giving purchase to conservative “slippery slope” arguments about evolving definitions of marriage.

This separation into a good/bad queer dichotomy can be understood by analyzing this rhetoric through the lens of the *politics of respectability*, where members of marginalized groups police their own membership, to keep them aligned with mainstream values (Higginbotham 1994). This allows some amount of recognition by the mainstream, but only when

the marginalized group participates in their own oppression, demonizing non-mainstream aspects of their own community. As Ward (2008) has argued, lesbian and gay activists have embraced difference (racial, gender, socioeconomic and sexual) only when those differences are predictable, profitable, rational and respectable. This, Ward (2008) explains, privileges forms of difference that align with neoliberal goals. This reproduces homophobia by further othering forms of difference that are not sufficiently respectable or able to be commodified. For example, some members of the LGB communities have tried to distance themselves from the transgender community. As Serano (2013) outlines in her book *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*, “mainstream gays” (P. 1) have a long history of excluding leather daddies and drag queens from pride celebrations, and dismissing asexual, bisexual and transgender identities. In late 2015, more than 2,000 people identifying as “gay/bisexual men and women” signed a change.org petition to ask major LGBT activist organizations to formally drop the transgender communities from their missions. According to the petition’s author, “we feel their ideology is not only completely different from that promoted by the LGB community (LGB is about sexual orientation, trans is about gender identity), but is ultimately regressive and, actually, hostile to the goals of women and gay men” (LGBVoice 2015). In the 2015 film *Stonewall*, based on the 1969 riots (widely attributed to starting the modern LGBTQ rights movement) started by African-American drag queens (Duberman 2010), the main character was written as a cisgender white man. As queer activists have noted, this provides another example of “whitewashing” queer history (Owens 2015).

This exclusion has contributed to a “new homonormativity” (Duggan 2003), where mainstream gay and lesbian organizations have promoted a neoliberal interpretation of equality, with a focus on privacy, domesticity and

consumption. This concept builds on Warner’s (1993) term heteronormativity, which is the treatment of heterosexuality as normal in the culture, and in institutions. Homonormativity, then, is a new normalizing force, where queer people learn what it means to be queer through those mainstream neoliberal messages. This maintains the good/bad queer dichotomy, giving legitimacy to queerness only when it intersects with heteronormativity, which, in turn, maintains a heterosexist power structure.

Does “It Get Better”?: Minimization of Homophobia

Despite relatively high levels of marginalization in the everyday lives of many LGB individuals, the increased visibility of queer people in the public eye gives a false impression that homophobia no longer exists, or has been minimized. In this section, we address how the effects of homophobia are minimized in public discourse, organizing the ways this happens into themes: Entitlement of Allies, Ironic Homophobia, Tokenization, Recentring of Male Heterosexuality and Changing Grant Priorities. We explain each below.

“Some of my best friends are gay”: The Entitlement of Allies

In September 2015, singer Azalea Banks called a flight attendant a “fucking faggot” and dropped her cell phone as she ran off of an airplane. After a backlash over the use of a homophobic slur, Banks tweeted evidence that she could not possibly be homophobic: “I am bisexual. My brother is trans. My employees are all gay men. Nothing else to say” (McDermott 2015). While she positions herself as a member of the LGB communities, rather than merely an ally, she does point out that she has a transgender sibling, and that “all” of her employees are gay men; she claims that nothing else needs to be said, because she has demonstrated that a bisexual individual, with

queer employees and transgender family members, could not possibly harbor homophobic notions. Yet, her claim that all of her employees are gay men, and mentioning her trans brother, could be also be read as tokenizing, as discussed later. When she was pushed further, Banks tweeted “Cause yall KNOW, that they would’ve politely handed a white woman her bags and a spritzer. #whatever” (Chiu 2015). While it could be that the interaction between Banks and the flight attendant was complicated by Banks’ status as a woman of color, she is using her queer/ally status, and race, to neutralize her use of a homophobic slur.

Another example of ally entitlement happened just over a year before, when actor Jonah Hill yelled “suck my dick, you faggot!” at a photographer. When called out for using this homophobic slur, Hill went on TV’s *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* to apologize. In his appearance, he claimed ally status, as a lifelong supporter of the LGBTQ community. He apologized, saying “I complete let members of that community down” (Almasy 2014). In explaining the use of the term, Hill said, “I wanted to hurt him back and I said the most hurtful word I could think of that moment, and you know I didn’t mean this in the sense of the word, you know I didn’t mean it in a homophobic way” (Almasy 2014). His use of the slur, and the subsequent apology, both maintain heterosexist power structures by his belief that claiming an ally status would neutralize the effect of his language choice, yet proclaiming it was the “most hurtful word” he could imagine using in a moment of stress.

As Pascoe (2011) and others have discussed at length, the word “faggot” is often used to police masculinity, rather than an expression of anti-queer sentiments. However, when it is used in popular discourse, such as these two examples, it is addressed (in backlash, and in apologies) as a homophobic comment, rather than in reference to masculinity. In both the case of Banks and Hill, the public figure used the

language, then proclaimed an ally status to neutralize the effect of the comment. This maintains heterosexism, but assuming this neutralization is valid, and sufficient, for using anti-queer sentiments. Similarly, some public figures have used their pro-gay and lesbian reputation to use stereotypes. For example, in 2011, gay icon Joan Rivers joked that gay men would not get involved in Occupy Wall Street because “They care more about what they look like...there’s no place to change, and no closets” (Huffington Post 2011a). Heterosexual allies such as Rivers use stereotypes as evidence of their ally status while perpetuating stereotypes for humor, and as evidence of their familiarity with a narrow version of queer culture. This minimizes belief in the effects of homophobia, yet relies on a heterosexist power structure, where members of the gay and lesbian communities will appreciate the recognition and familiarity, and that use of stereotypes shows an intimate knowledge that will give the ally a type of “queer credibility.” This is distinct from the use of satiric, or ironic homophobia, which assumes a post-closet culture, where it is okay to anyone to use queer stereotypes, as homophobia no longer exists.

“I’m not Homophobic, but...”: Ironic Homophobia

Another way homophobia is minimized is the use of a type of discourse that assumes everyone is in on the joke, because there is no longer heterosexist structures in the broader culture--ironic homophobia. Two recent examples include the popular card game *Cards Against Humanity*, and the work of filmmakers and comedians. *Cards Against Humanity* was created in 2011 by Max Temkin, Josh Dillon, Daniel Dranove, Eli Halpern, Ben Hantoot, David Munk, David Pinsof, and Eliot Weinstein, in the style of the game *Apples to Apples*. Their game, originally funded by a Kickstarter Campaign, quickly became a popular party game around the United States,

selling nearly 500,000 copies since its creation. In the game, players match up various raunchy and distinctly non-politically correct phrases in competition with other players for the best combination. *Cards Against Humanity* contains several LGB-related cards, such as ‘the gays’, ‘the homosexual agenda’, ‘the homosexual lifestyle’, and ‘praying the gay away’. As creator Temkin has expressed, “The game is a framework that lets you say things out loud you might not otherwise say to people” (Thurston 2014). The creators, therefore, ask the players to move between covert and overt systems of oppressions for humor. The creators anticipate the cards may be matched with others, such as these sample sequences, where one player presents a two-part fill in the blank, and the other player presents two cards that complete the sequence:

That’s right, I killed	If you can’t handle
<u>The gays</u>	<u>The gays</u>
How you ask?	You’d better stay away from
<u>Praying away the gay</u>	<u>The homosexual lifestyle</u>

These example card combinations both contribute to queer stereotypes or allow the players to use the cards in anti-queer ways. The creators have positioned themselves as progressive (Hall 2013), and include the cards as evidence of a post-homophobic culture, where stereotypes are funny, as a relic of the past. Use of the outdated word “homosexual,” with those particular phrases, could signal a nod to that sentiment. They include such cards rather than acknowledge the way the cards perpetuate anti-queer beliefs, and reproduce heterosexual power structures, minimizing the current role of homophobia in the culture.

Cultural homophobia is also minimized by the use of ironic homophobia in pop culture. For example, in the 2015 film *Get Hard*, popular actor Will Ferrell (White)’s actor hires Kevin Hart’s (African-American) character to help him prepare for an upcoming stint in prison, where he is being sent for fraud. Ferrell wrongfully

assumes Hart has been to prison; such overtly racist jokes in the film earned it the label “racist as fuck” when it was screened at the SXSW film festival in February 2015 (Ge and Bennett 2015). The film also relied on homophobia and the stereotype that everyone who goes to prison will eventually be sexually assaulted. To prepare for this possibility, Hart has Ferrell’s character “practice” with a gay stranger, while Ferrell is visibly uncomfortable with the interaction. Ferrell defended the film, saying their humor was holding the mirror up to the culture, to expose stereotypes and beliefs that already exist (Ge and Bennett 2015). Similarly, the popular *Pitch Perfect* and *Pitch Perfect II* films feature an African-American lesbian who is often sexually aggressive, and sometimes predatory. Filled with ironic racism, the film also relies on stereotypes of queer women, relying on a masculine lesbian to deliver easy jokes, as an attempt to show how enlightened or progressive they are (Barnes 2015). This both minimizes homophobia (as well as, racism), and reproduces stereotypes of queer (and African-American) people as aggressive and predatory.

To use this humor, the creators of both films assume that they will be understood as allies, or at least as post-homophobic. They assume their audience will find these jokes humorous, because homophobia no longer exists, and, therefore, as a culture we can laugh at what people *used* to think about queer people. This minimizes the homophobia that still exists in the daily lives of queer communities, ignoring high levels of violence, and institutional and structural barriers faced by nonheterosexual individuals, even as visibility increases.

GBF: Tokenization

The increase of LGB characters on television has been called the “new mainstream” by Nielsen Ratings (Huffington Post 2011b), suggesting inclusion of the LGB community is now considered the norm for television. GLAAD (Gays & Lesbian Alliance Against

Defamation) reported in August 2015 that 4% of recurring characters (35 of approximately 881 roles) on network television were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Nearly 35% of LGB characters were nonwhite (GLAAD 2015). Still there is a dearth in the variety of character types. While the tragic gay character would now be seen as overtly problematic by much of the general population, dehumanizing tropes still exist, keeping covert homophobia as a part of pop culture.

One example of this dehumanization and covert homophobia is the “gay best friend” trope. This is the recurring theme in television where heterosexual women have an all-knowing, at-the-ready, and sympathetic best friend who can change their wardrobe, decorate their apartment, and solve their relationship woes. This character is always seen as an overly flamboyant, asexual gay man. This can be seen in the way popular comedian and outspoken queer ally, Kathy Griffin, calls her gay male followers “my gays” (see the entitlement section, above). It is core to the plot of *GBF*, a 2013 romantic comedy in which three high school women compete for the newly out gay man in their high school to be their Gay Best Friend (IMDB 2015). This trope reduces gay men to a set of predictable stereotypes, ignoring any individuality or the needs of the “friends” themselves. This trope was first popularized by the film *My Best Friend's Wedding*, in which Julia Roberts relied on her funny, handsome, and infinitely patient gay best friend through emotional turmoil. In a 2014 episode of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, character NeNe proclaims “I wouldn't do anything without having a gay on my team...I believe that gays are very special people, and I have one.” (Thompson 2015). Again, gay men are portrayed as dehumanized stereotypes with no need for their own time or sexuality, minimizing homophobia, and heterosexist power structures.

The lesbian best friend may be the next part of this trend. In the popular 2015 Netflix series *Master of None*, comedian Aziz Ansari stars as

Dev, a 30-year-old actor navigating the social and professional landscape of 2015 New York City. In the show, Dev's entourage includes his cool and confident friend Denise (played by actress Lena Waithe), a lesbian. Business Insider called the show the #1 hit of the season (McAlone 2015), though Netflix does not share actual viewer numbers (Dockterman 2015). An August 2015 blog post called “5 reasons Why Having Lesbian Best Friend Totally Rocks” on the website PuckerMob catalogs a host of stereotypes about queer people and queer women, under the premise of being progressive. The author Donnelly (2015) explains lesbians make good friends because they will give their heterosexual friends great sex advice, and unsolicited compliments, will not steal boyfriends, and will support bisexual curiosity. The article relies on stereotypes of lesbians as flirtatious with straight women, and the belief that lesbians will be so grateful for straight women attention that they will act as life coaches, wardrobe help, and tour guides through bisexuality, forsaking their own lives and sexuality, similar to the gay best friend.

“I Kissed a Girl and I Liked it”: Recentering Male Heterosexuality

As other scholars have noted (Wirthlin 2009), it seems to be a fad for heterosexual-identified women to flirt with the perception of being bisexual. Currently, about 5.5 percent of women and two percent of men in the United States identify as bisexual (Copen, Chandra and Febo-Vasquez 2016). Still, it is the flirtation with the behavior, not the identity, most often seen in public discourse. Experimentation is the theme of the song “I Kissed a Girl” by Katy Perry, the 10th biggest selling single of 2000's (Robert of the Radish 2009). Having two women kiss has also been a reliable ratings ploy on television (Rubenstein 2005). This phenomenon only maintains public appeal when the two women involved are both feminine and stereotypically attractive, and it must also be for

the benefit and pleasure of the heterosexual male gaze. The same widespread acceptance would not be in place for the inclusion of any female masculinity, any markers of a lesbian identity, or exclusively for the pleasure of the women themselves.

As other scholars have explored in more depth than we will here (see, for example, Rupp and Taylor 2010), two women kissing on television, or at parties, does not necessarily signify less heterosexism in the culture. It does not translate into a greater understanding of queer issues or greater support for queer rights, but it further endorses stereotypes of bisexuality as an invalid or transient identity. Bisexuality, between two women, is perceived as a “walk on the wild side” for the dominant heterosexual crowd to flirt with an exotic sexuality before retreating back to their acceptable sexual identities. It also reframes a crucial component of queer sexualities, the same-sex behavior between women, as the prelude of male heterosexuality, keeping men’s pleasure in the center of sexuality discourse. An example of this recentring of male heterosexuality, and the flirtation with bisexuality (for girls and women only), can be seen in popular television shows, and in social media. In the 2008 season of ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy*, Latina character Callie Torres finds herself questioning her sexuality as she develops a crush on white, blonde, feminine, Erica Hahn. She is simultaneously dating Mark Sloan, who finds great pleasure and titillation in asking Callie about her sexual experiences with Erica. The program shows the sexuality between the two women as emotional and connected, then, the details of the encounters are used as foreplay for the heterosexual pairings that will happen after. In this way, Mark gets the benefit of having the exotic sexuality of a Latina woman, with the added benefit of her same-sex experiences. This gets to be the ultimate notch in the bedpost of the infamously womanizing central character. By using women and queer sexuality as props for the ultimate male pleasure, the program is recentring male

heterosexuality, and using covert homophobia in its plot lines.

This visibility of a straight male-centered bisexuality also does not translate into greater acceptance of male bisexuality, which is less often shown or discussed in popular discourse. One exception is HBO’s *Game of Thrones*, with bisexual male character Oberyn Martell. Pop star Nick Jonas plays a bisexual character on DirecTV’s *Kingdom*, and has made allusions to his own bisexuality in interviews (Szymanski 2015). R&B star Frank Ocean has expressed on Tumblr that he has been in love with a man (Berman 2012), but does not identify with a queer identity (Juzwiak 2012). The disproportionate pressure on men to maintain a heterosexual identity points to the lingering levels of heterosexism, and focus on heterosexual male pleasure, in the culture.

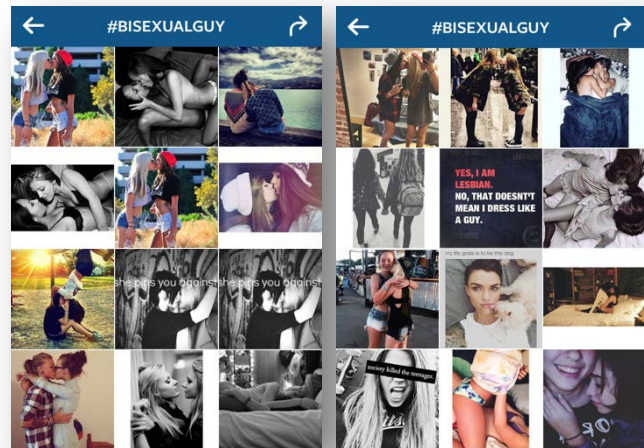


Figure 2. Instagram #bisexualguy Screenshots Captured November 25, 2015

Instagram, a social media site and app used by roughly 78 million individuals in the United States, and over 400 million individuals in the world (largely under the age of 35) (Smith 2015) may also paint a picture of how bisexuality is perceived. In our November 2015 observations of the site, we examined the hashtags #bisexual (2.2 million posts), #bisexualgirl (over 32,000 posts) and #bisexualboy (under 17,000 posts). The hashtag #bisexual was attached to many images of activist memes (slogans from “NOH8” and

“FCKH8”), selfies, pictures of two people kissing, and many pictures of genitalia. The hashtag #bisexualgirl brought up almost exclusively normatively gendered young women with long hair; often two women kissing each other. The hashtag #bisexualboy (as seen in Figure 2), while much less popular than the other hashtags, brought up several of the same images as #bisexualgirl. In all three hashtags, photos were often of hypersexualized, feminine women, and men posing in stereotypical feminine ways. Young women seem to be performing bisexuality, reproducing beliefs about what bisexuality is, and how it appears, dictated by the male gaze. In many cases, the hashtags were used by men in search of bisexual women. This overall picture paints bisexuality as a hypersexualized, exotic form of sexuality, with heterosexual male pleasure at the center.

“Recalibrating our Focus”: Changing Grant Priorities in the Wake of Marriage Equality

Major grant funders, such as the Ford Foundation, are also minimizing homophobia, by changing grant priorities away from queer issues, post-marriage equality. In November 2015, the Ford Foundation announced they were changing some of their major grant priorities to combat inequality. They cited the growing mainstream support, and increased number of funders for, LGBT issues in their deprioritization of domestic U.S. queer issues. In the formal priority announcement, Ford Foundation President Darren Walker (2015) wrote,

...organizations working on LGBT issues in the United States have experienced impressive gains in recent years. As a gay man, I am acutely aware that there is much more work to do on LGBT rights in the United States—and I hope that changes at Ford do not send the signal that victory can be declared in this country. That being said, outside the US, the LGBT community

desperately needs resources and allies, and so, as a global foundation, we’re adapting and recalibrating our focus where the greatest need exists.

While there are substantial issues faced by members of queer communities around the world, this announcement, made so close to the achievement of marriage equality in June 2015, seems to use marriage as a sign of “impressive gains” enough to shift funding priorities. This aligns with queer activist predictions that funding connected to marriage issues would dry up after achieving equality, ignoring other aspects of the movement. This also minimizes homophobia, ignoring ongoing and pervasive structural and institutional inequality.

Conclusion

According to some popular discourse, the United States is a post-closet society, where overt homophobia is no longer socially acceptable. This exists in stark contrast to the daily lives of many queer people, especially those with intersecting marginalizations, who face cultural homophobia, and heterosexist structures and systems, along with institutionalized racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, xenophobia and more. While it appears that overt homophobia is no longer allowed without some level of reproach, in public discourse, covert homophobia remains, reproducing those heterosexist structures and stereotypical beliefs about queer individuals. This happens in the broader community, but also within queer communities, through the use of rhetoric that contributes to naturalization, cultural homophobia and minimization of homophobia.

This study faces several important limitations. As a sample of various and disparate aspects of public discourse, there is no methodical exploration of discourse from any particular type of institution, or genre of media. Therefore, there are no comparison cases

presented. We provide these examples as illustrations of cultural phenomena, to provide support for our theorization, and to open opportunities for additional studies. Future research should explore the effects of covert homophobia on the culture, especially how these rearticulations of homophobia contribute to systems of oppression, including homophobia. Studies could include exploration of how various covert -isms interact, such as covert racism with covert homophobia. These could also be explored in intersection with ability, immigration status, and other systems of oppression that may be somewhere between overt and covert in their own evolutions. Future research may also explore changes in homophobic discourse over time, locating where in time various social institutions (e.g. sports, politics, media) begin to switch from overt to covert forms of homophobia. This could be tracked longitudinally over time. Additionally, future research could track funding priorities, to see if other funders follow the Ford Foundation. On the flip side, future research could follow the trend of including transgender and bisexual characters on television and in film—including male bisexual characters—to see if more nuanced explorations of gender and sexuality emerge. It will be interesting to watch how those representations reflect and reproduce images of and discourse around gender and sexuality across media platforms, including social media.

Janae Teal is an applied sociologist currently working as an analyst for Humboldt County. She holds a Master's Degree in Public Sociology from Humboldt State University. Her Master's research examined the violence faced by transgender communities of color. At large, her research interests are centered around how gender and sexuality impact one's interactions with various social institutions. Her most current research focuses on media depictions of

violence against transgender and gender non-conforming individuals.

After years of LGBTQ activism, Meredith Conover-Williams returned to school to study gender and sexuality. She is currently an Assistant Professor at Humboldt State University in the Department of Sociology. Her research is on gender, sexuality and crime; currently, she is exploring how LGBTQ people experience pushes and pulls toward and away from crime. Her study of juvenile delinquency among queer youth was published in the groundbreaking Handbook of LGBT Communities, Crime, and Justice, edited by Dana Peterson and Vanessa R. Panfil.

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