(Marital) Love is Love: Marriage Equality and Heteronormative Assimilation

Originally written for

AMS 160 Winter Qtr. 2016

By Bianca L. Salazar

blsalazar@ucdavis.edu
Last year the nationwide celebration of legal marriage equality in America was a historical marker for LGBT people nationwide however, it was also a surreptitious revelation of how assimilation is more celebrated than radical difference. Images of heterosexual couples pictured side by side with homosexual couple images were often used in the marriage equality campaign to symbolize synonymous love. Humanitarian arguments of equality prevailed and tugged at both the heartstrings of moderate conservatives and neoliberals alike. With arguments for equality structured upon how homosexuals and heterosexuals are not inherently different, that human rights are marital rights, indifference to gender in romantic partnerships, how having hospital rights and parental rights will “tame the gays” into the committed domesticity of marriage, and how the marriage equality movement is somehow the new black civil rights movement, the legality of gay marriage is not unprecedented. The institution of marriage continues to be upheld through law and continues to be socially normative through heteronormative ideologies. These ideologies construct a binary of the wed and unwed; a family and a non-family. Heteronormative culture is represented by a marriage between a cis-gender man and woman who bear biological children. the underlying face and benefactors of the marriage equality movements are nonetheless white liberals while radical queer people (especially of color) are excluded. Gay popular culture proves that the white gay cis men (who are monogamous and in committed long term relationships) are at the forefront of marriage equality movements is responsible for its success in inculcation. White middle-class gays are at the forefront of the equality movement because the only oppression they face is their sexual orientation. Although the LGBT community is a marginalized group as a whole the intersection of some identities such as this one have more power in politics than others. I want to unpack how
marriage equality succeeded because of this imbalance of power and how it benefits some LGBT identified people more than others I think the impact marriage has on what is considered normal and good sex plays a substantial role in gaining approval from society and assimilation of gay culture into heteronormativity. I will analyze the power sexualities that model heteronormativity and nuclear families have in passing legislation for gay marriage, I want to discuss the lack of recognition and legitimacy queer, polyamorous and other non-nuclear family structures have because they refuse to assimilate to the heteronormative structure of a family, and finally I also want to discuss the intersectionality of race and power in these movements for equal rights. I have chosen to use the framework from Chapter nine of Rubin Gayle’s Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality, the theoretical framework in Katherine Franke’s “WedLocked: The Perils of Marriage Equality,” a documentary called “The New Black,” modern queer anti-equality blogs, and academic discussions and theory on queers against marriage equality. The division of LGBT relationships is masqueraded by the assumption that they universally want to assimilate to normalcy and want the same privilege straight people have, the validation of their love rather than their sexual identities.

The distinction between the words gay and queer is quintessential to the discussion of LGBT issues, movements, and identities. After researching several definitions of the word queer and also using my own personal identification and experience with it I would define queer as a radical political identity against mainstream heteronormativity, a vehement rejection of the gender binary, and also a sexual orientation that is not strictly defined as having romantic and sexual attraction to the same gender but being more gender and sexually fluid on romantic or sexual partners. Queer means, as one of my friends puts it, “anything but heterosexual.” Even if
two cisgender\(^1\) opposite gender people were in a monogamous allosexual\(^2\) relationship and one of them identified as queer, it would still not be treated as a heteronormative relationship. The differences between queer and gay identity are fundamental. Historically the word gay is rooted in white cisgender male privilege. The word gay is associated with the exclusive white gay neighborhoods in The Castro that have existed since the seventies. The difference between the queer movements and the gay movements is one overlying aspect; queers don’t want to assimilate culturally they want acceptance for their differences from society whereas gays want to be seen as equals socially and politically. At the very heart of queer politics is the undermining of heterosexual privilege and the critical analysis of oppressive heteronormativity.

Acceptance of sexuality is tied to a hierarchy of “normal” sexuality and “deviant” sexuality. Gayle Rubin describes this good sexuality bad sexuality spectrum in *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*. Rubin states that good sexuality is classified as vanilla, monogamous, heterosexual, reproductive, and at home. Less acceptable sexuality is promiscuous heterosexual, masturbation, long term lesbian and gay couples, and unmarried couples. The most deviant sexuality is classified as transvestitism, fetishes, cross generational, sadomasochism, and for money (Rubin). Through this framework it is easy to identify why society is more accepting of homosexuality if it is monogamous, domestic, private, and married. Even though the institution of Western religion may be an obvious factor in what determines good versus bad sexuality non-religious perspectives on sexuality still fall victim to this prevailing sexual value system. This prevailing sexual value system creates a hierarchy of

\(^{1}\) Individuals who identify as the gender identity associated with the biological sex assigned to them at birth.

\(^{2}\) An attraction involving sexual attraction and desire/non-asexual.
power and privilege with non-normative sexuality at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Heteronormativity is dominant in the sexual value hierarchy.

Heteronormativity is profoundly connected to the idea of marriage. Marriage is one of the many romanticized life goals society aspires to because it serves as a form of lifelong companionship for humans but nonetheless it is still problematic. Despite the positive aspects of marriage we refuse to validate non-marital intimate relationships through socialization. We tend to envy our friends who have found a life partner, slut-shame our friends who would prefer the sexual variety of promiscuity (especially women), and pity our friends and family who focus on work or school instead of romance in middle adulthood. Even popular media perpetuates the fear of being “forever alone.” Stability is desirable and in our sex negative American society and furthermore the monogamous stability of marriage morally validates sexual intimacy. When same sex couples couldn’t marry there was no way to validate their sexual intimacy, and subsequently LGBT people are still often seen as more promiscuous than straight people. In one collective statement of anti-marriage equality it states “When Marriage is not the only worthy form of family or relationship, and it should not be legally and economically privileged above all others (Beyond Marriage Equality).” Religious and legal privilege are what creates discourse on legitimate sexual partnerships and non-legitimate partnerships. When the church recognizes a union of two people it morally legitimizes sexuality. When the government gives the legal and financial benefits of a marriage it morally legitimizes sexuality. When same sex relationships are validated through legal rights that are contingent on marriage gay identities only become morally legitimate through their aspiration to assimilate to a heteronormative marriage.

Marriage equality movements sprung from the belief that in order to obtain rights, it is better to blend into heterosexual society. Blending in to heterosexual society usually means
conforming to the nuclear family structure than marriage suggests by its exclusive nature. In Franke’s *Wedlocked: The Perils of Marriage Equality* she discusses the restrictive nature the institution of marriage imposes. “Marriage offers certain rights and responsibilities to those who are willing to conform their sexual lives to constrictive demands: only two adults, not married with anyone else, who pledge to be monogamous, are financially interdependent in a particular way, and will be bound by a set of default rules when one or both parties seek to terminate the marriage” (Franke). Deviant sexuality that doesn’t fit into this idea of monogamy and a nuclear family. With that being said, the gay marriage equality movement has challenged non-nuclear family structures. Family structures such as single parent households, adult children, grandparents, blended families, polyamorous family units, and care-giving relationships are just a few examples of non-normative family structures. Franke gives examples throughout the chapter on fluid families and non-normative family structures including how African-American families are typically headed by single mothers. Many queer family structures consist of a web-like community of biological donors and adoptive parents, secondary lovers (in polyamorous relationships), and close friends who help create families. Queer families are a resistance against the nuclear family, but marriage dismisses these structures and only rewards family structures closer to the nuclear family even if the couple is of the same gender.

The civil rights angle is limiting the gay rights agenda and is just a form of assimilation into dominant hegemonies of heterosexual relationships. In Cathy Cohen’s queer theory on marriage equality, explored in *Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics* she writes, “Many of us continue to search for a new political direction and agenda, one that does not focus on integration into dominant structures but instead seeks to
transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently (Cohen). The argument for gay marriage becomes more appealing when it is debated with rhetoric such as civil liberties, human rights, and is posed as a choice for some rather than an obligation of acceptance for heterosexual unions or a tarnishing of pre-existing ideas of marriage. Modern equality campaigns proclaim the need for equality have no respect for difference between heterosexual and homosexual partnerships. “Gay marriage, it seems, is all about equality. To deny lesbians and gays the right to marry is to deny them equal status, equal rights and equality before the law. The argument is won, so its proponents claim, by associating gay marriage with the e-word” (Cohen). The civil rights argument that seemingly means well is problematic because it ignores other LGBT issues. Same-sex marriage is a paltry issue in comparison to other forms of discrimination LGBT face. The feminist wire blog discusses the rationale behind the political movement, “While true there are many such “rewards” only recognized in the case of legally married couples, the belief that marriage is a coveted right that minorities have been excluded from accessing due to their status as social “others” underpins the push for gay marriage, a political agenda that emerged only fairly recently in the 1990s and notably in the “post-Civil Rights era.” (The Feminist Wire) When LGBT people are caricatured as desperate for assimilation to normalcy, same-sex marriage is ostensibly the cure to this cry of desperation. For less privileged LGBT people, same-sex marriage may be a means of obtaining rights and approval from heteronormative society but it is not the end all to discrimination. The intersections of race and socioeconomic class are ignored when same-sex marriage is seen as the ultimate victory of the shared LGBT rights struggle.
Now that I have discussed the discourses, history, and social aspects influencing same-sex marriage I want to discuss the underlying political institutions that influence its heteronormativity. First off, marriage equality movements affect white gays differently than they do black gays which can explain the complex ways in which African American people interact with the politics of marriage. Historically, African Americans since slavery times have had non-nuclear family structures with extended families and separations. Many civil rights movements for marriage equality equate the emancipation of slaves and blacks having the right to marry as similar to the marriage equality movement for gays and this is false. (The Feminist Wire) Marriage was legalized in order to “socially domesticate newly freed blacks to ensure that the white public faced minimal responsibility for former slaves’ economic security.” The government framed it as a conceding to human rights for blacks however it was just an avoidance of reparations the government has owed to blacks. The intersection of class, race, and sexuality is often erased in marriage equality movements. It is frustrating that the civil rights movement and the LGBT rights movements have been compared as a tactic of progression. To better understand this relationship between race and sexuality I watched a documentary called “The New Black”, which describes the black communities’ complex relationship with marriage equality in America. In the documentary, the black church in America is the backbone of the black community. The black church is also often a place that perpetuates a systemic homophobia. For example the National Organization for Marriage donated a lot of money in order to drive a wedge between gays and blacks, two key liberal constituents in the vote. I concluded that it is evident that the two identities of black and queer cannot exist disjointedly. Although civil rights arguments for gay marriage hinge on the idea that the gay struggle is similar to the black emancipation struggle it is severely misguided. Gay marriage will clearly
benefit white gay couples more than it will benefit black gay couples. Ghadar deconstructs how race, class, and sexuality relate to one another; “Who benefits from gay marriage? The people who are whining about gay marriage are, hello, mostly white, with some token people of color thrown in to make good publicity photos. They're mostly wealthy; at least wealthy enough to have to worry about taxes and property rights and passing on inheritances (Ghadar).” Socioeconomic status determines who cares about marriage and who it is less of a legal issue for. Historically the predominant political race (whites) have used marriage to maintain their financial autonomy. This is why white gay upper-middle class couples represent the face of the equality movement for the most part.

The romanticization of the domesticity and stability of marriage has in part driven the LGBT community towards assimilation of this lifestyle. In many pro-marriage equality arguments, the economic value of gay weddings are an argument for the economic value in society. One blog sheds light on the commodification of gay weddings in commenting, “These myths drive the diet industry, much of the entertainment industry, and certainly the gigantic wedding industry ($40 billion per year in the US), which is based on people’s terrified attempts to appear as wealthy, skinny, and normative as possible for one heavily documented day (Radical Bi).” Legalized monogamy is exploitative capitalism. Social norms of lifelong partnership while they may have many psychological benefits are encased by harmful hegemonies of heteronormative family structures. Partnerships recognized as legal have more validity and are subsequently privileged over un-wed partnerships. Throughout our lives we are conditioned to aspire to marriage and family and the legality of marriage reinforces this framework indefinitely. Those who cannot marry are therefore “others” and are not productive,
economic factors in society. The marriage equality movement propagated their agenda through
the institution of capitalism. Capitalism is a system that widens the gap between the upper class
and middle/lower class by privileging the upper class. In one online article about the relevancy
of gay marriage for low income couples it states, “So while middle-class gays and lesbians will
certainly benefit from symbolic recognition of their relationships, and from greater legal and
economic parity — that’s less true for their low-income counterparts (Star-Ledger).” Marriage
is an economic institution that goes beyond the romanticized union of two people. Marriage
contributes to class disparity by not affording the same economic privileges to lower class
couples. It is an institution that benefits the economically privileged and is in no way
radically queer even if it is homosexual, in fact its assimilationist and classist.

Most importantly marriage is also used as an instrument of control by the state and
government. Historically the American government has always valued heterosexuality more
than homosexuality. The refusal of the Reagan administration to acknowledge the AIDS crisis in
1980s revealed the the power hierarchy between government and LGBT people. AIDS is
stigmatized as a sexually transmitted disease that promiscuous gay men are likely to get. In
Rubin’s hierarchy of good versus bad sexuality, AIDS would be on the “bad sexuality” side of
the spectrum. Same-sex marriage on the other hand is closer to the “good sexuality” side of the
spectrum. Same-sex marriage is a legislative instrument of control of deviant sexuality. In
discourse on queer politics by Cohen, “Queer politics has not emerged as an encompassing
challenge to systems of domination and oppression, especially since normalizing those localized
practices and those centralized institutions which legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and
heterosexual relationships as fundamental and “natural” within society” (Cohen). Marriage
divides queer communities and families by through the homogenization of straight and gay but ignoring any sexual identity in between. Dividing its subjects into minimal units keeps people as separate from one another as possible. This goes in particular for minority world countries and white populations, where one’s family only includes the nuclear unit. Minimizing communities in this way makes it harder for people to oppose the state or government, keeping it safe from civil uprisings. Historically our government has implanted practices to regulate normalcy and outlaw anything deviant in fear of anarchy and loss of political power. Unfortunately, the passing of same-sex marriage legislation is not a heartwarming story of how America set aside their differences to allow everyone to have equal rights; it is a narrative of fearful government regulation.

Perhaps the LGBT rights advocacy community is misguided in their longing to be affirmed systematically through the institution of marriage. Marriage equality is a seemingly end all triumph for gay people that will snowball into inevitable social acceptance and assimilation to heteronormative society. Where does this leave the queers who reject heteronormative culture? Marriage equality is not a stand alone issue. There are more nuanced issues such as harassment over transgender/non-binary person restroom accessibility, a more comprehensive and inclusive sex education for our youth, and justice for the trans women who are being murdered for simply existing. Non-normative lifestyles and families should not only be tolerated in the LGBT rights movements but should diversify the existing heteronormative family structure. When the underpinnings of fear of non-procreative relationships surface in anti-marriage rhetoric, gay people only try harder to assimilate to the domesticity and responsibility of monogamous partnership and abandon their association with “otherness.” I implore you to think more critically
about the problematic institutions and discourses that not only celebrate marriage but require marriage in order to obtain civil rights. Our seemingly progressive society is not combating homophobia by allowing same-sex couples to marry. To my fellow queer people: to put it frankly, stop allowing straight people think that they’re doing us a favor by allowing us to get married! Society celebrates the seemingly closing social equality gap between homosexual and heterosexual relationships when in reality LGBT people through their assimilation are merely succeeding to alternative prevailing systems of oppression.
Works Cited


"Fuck Marriage, Fuck Equality." *Bi Radical*. Radical Bi: Love Rage and Pride, 05 Oct. 2012. Web. 27 Feb. 2016. The online post is an opinion based observation on gay culture and how it affects the queer movement in America. She describes how marriage equality movements are more about assimilation and aspiring to be "normal" than about revolution against systems of oppression. The systems of oppression she specifically addresses are western religion, the government, and the patriarchy.


ranking of sexual behaviors and identities is included which is helpful in integrating these two pieces in my argument. Discussion of marriage as anti-black, colonialist, xenophobic, a gender construct, and about protection of capital are discussed.

Nair, Yasmin. "The Same Sex Marriage Trap." *In These Times* (2014): n. pag. 3 Feb. 2014. Web. 26 Feb. 2016. This source does a great job at highlighting the basic differences between what LGBT marriage equality movements want versus what queer movements want. It discusses how exclusionary marriage in the United States is and how the issue is not unifying among the LGBT people but rather divisive. She talks about marriage equality as a conservative issue and how it is just capitalistic opportunity rather than actually about equal rights.

Nair, Yasmin. "The Secret History of Gay Marriage." *Yasminnair.net*. Yasmin Nair, 25 June 2015. Web. 26 Feb. 2016. This article is the most current with politics with marriage equality law being passed last year. Nair describes the history of gay rights movements. She talks about how it is economically based mostly (for the wealthy) and is less about love. Under the disguise of marriage equality as priority for LGBT it is an erasure of economically disadvantaged LGBT people and other queer issues.
