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Afterword: Complicating Homophobia

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Complicating Homophobia

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My own thinking on the necessity of retheorizing and complicating the concept of homophobia began to coalesce when I undertook a research project on active Christians who also self-identified as 'out' lesbians and gay men. I was quite curious about who these people were and what stories they were using to make sense of the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions of being openly queer and openly Christian. Initially, before knowing much about the subject, I was inclined to think that these individuals remained ensnared by a form of internalized homophobia that kept them beholden to religious traditions and enshrouded them in a cloak of shame. I was only five interviews into the research when I realized how misguided my initial impressions were. I had been viewing these people through a very particular lens of homosexuality, including the process of coming out and the stories we tell around it. In this view, homophobia is used to explain the 'failure' of self-recognizing lesbians and gay men to 'break free' of, and preferably eventually denounce, institutions that are deemed to be homophobic. Although this lens may have reflected my personal experience, it is situated in a very specific cultural context that, despite its cultural specificity, has become uncritically normalized and taken-for-granted in lesbian and gay movement discourses. This particular discourse certainly did not reflect the stories of the individuals I was privileged to get to know through this research and I credit these people with complicating my thinking on the subject (O'Brien, 2004). The queer Christian project drove home to me the importance of complexity as an analytical lens in general and the necessity of problematizing existing discourses of homophobia in particular.

Together, the articles in this special issue of *Sexualities* prompt us to interrogate and complicate the idea of homophobia. In order to do so, we must first engage with the ways in which both a contemporary

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literature and the identity practices on the subject of homosexuality have allowed 'gayness' to masquerade as a master status that presumably transcends other forms of difference.¹ In this failure to intersect homosexual behaviors and identities with other positions of difference and to situate these expressions contextually, homophobia functions as a kind of 'one-size-fits-all' form of discrimination that is too often applied universally and uncritically. For instance, in looking at the intersection of race and sexuality, Guzman notes that in the USA

gay homosexuality may be fancied a master status only in the context of white existence . . . [f]or those who are not white, homosexuality is often one of those things that are not more important than race. This is not because they do not care about their sexuality, but because in social situations where you are first and foremost a racial subject you are exactly that – first and foremost a racial subject. (Guzman, 2006: 94)

Yet, as Guzman also points out, this failure to always 'be out' is one of the reasons used for making claims that various ethno-racial groups (e.g. Latinos) are more homophobic than others. Clearly the story is more complicated than this.

A common thread that ties the articles in this issue together comes in the form of a question: How useful is the idea of 'homophobia'? More specifically, we might ask, how useful is homophobia (1) as an analytical concept (cf. Adam, 1998; Herek, 2004), and (2) as a strategic discourse of resistance against oppression. This discourse, when deployed uncritically, may inadvertently reaffirm hegemonic hierarchies of class, gender and race (cf. Duggan, 2002; Guzman, 2006; Seidman, 2002). A related question is the extent to which current scholarship highlights the complexities of homophobia by intersecting it with informed, critical analyses of institutions such as religion, family, and migration status. The (very few) studies that do so reveal a complicated terrain marked by tensions and contradictions, none of which can be reduced to a monolithic concept of homophobia operating outside the parameters of cultural and historical context (e.g. González-López, 2006; O'Brien, 2004).

What is homophobia?

According to Gregory Herek, one of the leading psychological scholars on the subject, homophobia is a colloquial expression that refers to negative, fearful or hateful attitudes and behavior toward gay men and lesbians. Homophobia differs from the common definition of 'phobia' in that the fear is not rooted in individual experience, but rather in culturally learned prejudices. Accordingly, many scholars prefer the term 'heterosexism'. Herek defines heterosexism as 'an ideological system

that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community' (Herek, 2004). Heterosexism and homophobia are mutually constitutive in that individuals feel that their anti-gay attitudes and behaviors are legitimate to the extent that these prejudices are entrenched in social institutions. Individuals are more likely to act out their prejudices when they consider them to be culturally legitimate and shared by others. Expressions of antigay prejudice reinforce ideologies and practices of intolerance and hostility and reinscribe homosexuality as something that should be despised and feared and should remain hidden.

Intriguingly, while much of modern history has been about pushing back the frontiers of ignorance so as to better understand the things that frighten and dismay us, the history of homophobia is a story of consistent attempts to reify and legitimate this fear and the oppression that accompanies it. Recently homophobia has appeared once again on center stage in many political and religious dramas as a basis for the most extreme forms of divisive partisan political action. There are also countless daily examples from across the planet of the various forms of psychological, physical, and political brutality that are inflicted on self-identified homosexuals. Although homophobia may serve as a rallying cry in response to these injustices, the more complicated question is to ask if there are additional features (e.g. economic class, ethnicity, gender non-conformity, religion) that make certain groups and individuals more or less likely to be the targets of so-called homophobic violence and discrimination.

Although these injustices are being increasingly reported and catalogued, the accompanying questions regarding these intersecting features are rarely asked. Instead much of the scholarship on homosexuality and culture is coalescing around the observation that many contemporary (that is, visible) queer cultures appear more and more similar in values and lifestyle choices to those whose lives reflect the values and resources of a western heterosexual middle-class. This trend is reflected sloganistically in the shift away from the historically recent call to action, 'we're here, we're queer, get used to it', toward the more banal and assimilationist, 'we're here, we're queer, let's go to Ikea'.

The tension between (or question of) radical versus assimilationist politics has been the subject of scholarly discussion for the past decade or more. Several authors, including myself, have engaged in much brow-furrowing and hand-wringing about the potentially mainstreaming implications of political action focused on seemingly normative political agendas such as 'gay marriage' (e.g. Duggan, 2002; O'Brien, 2007; Smith 2001). These conversations, as critically informed and necessary as they are, may also have eclipsed equally relevant and compelling conversations about the overall *complexities* of homophobia and its widely varying

manifestations across different cultures, races and ethnicities, social and economic classes, religions, kinship structures and statuses of nationality, just to name a few. In our rush to map the cultural and political implications of lesbian and gay movements that may be overly focused on assimilation, we may have run the risk of perpetuating the notion of a 'one-movement-fits-all' line of analysis. The paradox of studying so-called LGBTQ² movements is that, to a great extent, these movements do reflect the specific socio-economic interests of white, middle-class gay men and lesbians who are predominantly US citizens. Yet, in our failure to critically and overtly identify the relative hegemony of the people represented in these movements on dimensions of difference other than sexuality, we reify and perpetuate a monolithic form of 'being queer'.

The articles in this volume are a significant step toward addressing this imbalance in contemporary studies of homosexuality and homophobia. Collectively, these studies highlight the multiple factors associated with varying forms of homophobia and also demonstrate the complex ways in which these factors function in intersection with other forms of difference, inequality and cultural status. To return to Herek as cited earlier, homophobia is a culturally learned prejudice. It stands to reason, therefore, that the manifestations and experiences of homophobia will differ across cultural contexts and situational circumstances.

Problematizing homophobia

Recently I found myself in a conversation in which a friend was lamenting the potential break-up of her long-term relationship. My friend, who identifies as a lesbian, is from Spain. Her background is traditionally Catholic and she is the youngest of a large, closely-knit family who recently lost their father to cancer. For many years she has been in a relationship with a woman who is a US citizen and the daughter of a black father and a white mother. The father is a Mennonite minister and both parents are peace activists whose personal history has been deeply inscribed by their experiences in the US Civil Rights movement. Once a year this lesbian couple travels together to Seville to visit the family of my Spanish friend. A few years ago, at the insistence of her girlfriend, my friend 'came out' to her family in Spain. Some of her siblings have been accepting. Some have not. All have been critical of her 'need' to 'upset' her family during her father's illness. The mother has been especially unhappy about the news. Accordingly, when her daughter visits with her girlfriend, the mother shows her displeasure by ignoring the girlfriend (who does not speak any Spanish and is therefore already linguistically separated from the family). As my friend recounted the events from the most recent visit to Spain I learned that the mother is not overtly rude or

mean, she simply exercises what she sees as the cultural privilege to not engage with a form of 'deviance' that she finds unpleasant. The girlfriend, however, is not content with this situation and had recently declared an ultimatum: her partner must make a choice, the family or the relationship.

In the conversation we were having, my friend was describing to a small group of us both her attempts to get her mother to be more warm toward her partner (which her mother steadfastly refuses to do) and her attempts to get her partner to understand her particular family culture. Neither mother nor partner has been willing to budge on what each sees as a claim to her specific cultural values (social avoidance and discretion when faced with sexual deviance versus being 'out' at all costs as a matter of cultural pride). As we listened to my friend trying to navigate her way through this thicket of cultural difference, I was also struck with the composition of our own group, which consisted of myself, a white lesbian feminist sociologist; a white theologian and former nun who is living with her female 'life-partner' but who does not identify as a lesbian; and a Chicana who is married, the mother of two sons, and strongly identified as a cultural 'hippie' and a 'queer'. Despite these differences, our advice to our friend tended to converge. Our position, which may seem harsh when considered out of context, was that the girlfriend was engaging in a form of 'queer terrorism' whereby she was using the discourse of homophobia (buttressed with a politics rooted in her personal understanding of the Civil Rights movement) as a justification for her refusal to acknowledge the cultural context of her partner's family life. In other words, for her, being a lesbian carried with it the mandate of 'being out' all the time and regardless of circumstances. Anything short of this is an unacceptable self-compromise in the face of social oppression. For her, the only explanation for those who do not embrace this form of 'outness' is that they are homophobic. Salvador Vidal-Ortiz offers a succinct critique of this militant stance when he writes, '[t]he discourses on homophobia that require an unflinching repetition of a "homo self" at every possible iteration are as problematic as the closet was three decades ago' (Vidal-Ortiz, this issue).

The tyranny of solidarity

One theme echoed throughout each of the articles in this issue is the manner in which a specific form of cultural homosexuality is being used as the 'gold standard' for 'acceptable' expressions of queer behavior. Ironically, one of the consequences of relatively successful lesbian and gay movements and queer movements is that the normative features characterized by those seeking 'equal rights' (e.g., white, middle-class, US identified) have been adopted as the basis for distinguishing acceptable from deviant expressions of homosexuality. In other words, a movement

for inclusion – that is, inclusion of the heretofore sexual deviant – has resulted in the reinforcement of other forms of exclusion including exclusions based on failure to conform to norms of gender performance, class, kinship, and monogamy. Further, and in a way that is unique to queer social movements, contemporary movements often employ exclusionary (coercive) discourses and tactics about being ‘out’ as a marker of being ‘acceptably’ homosexual. One of the consequences of the proliferation of ‘culturally acceptable’ forms of homosexuality is that agencies and institutions (such as medicine, social work, employers, and churches) derive cues and rules about which sexual deviants are deserving of services and which are not, based on the ability and/or willingness to conform to these standards. Here again, a matrix of hegemony is re-created and re-legitimated. These standards serve as a basis for determining not only which forms of cultural deviance are acceptable, but also, by omission, serve to legitimate forms of ‘permissible prejudice’ against those who are not conforming.

Homophobia and homonormativity

As Bryant and Vidal-Otiz comment in the introduction to this issue, homophobia ‘becomes a shorthand to demand a set of rights without necessarily studying the full impact of those demands’. Thus, their intent in this special issue is to explore the ways in which ‘homophobia as a conceptual tool and discursive resource itself engenders sets of effects’. One of the most notable effects has been the rise of what Lisa Duggan has termed ‘homonormativity’ or the proliferation of a culturally specific way of being queer that is enough in ‘sync’ with existing gender, class, racial and cultural norms as to be considered ‘acceptable’. Analytically and politically, expressions of homonormativity can be considered as the flip side of uncritically deployed homophobia. Together, both function to reinscribe culturally acceptable forms of gayness that render its associations with whiteness, gender appropriate behavior and (US influenced) middle-class status invisible and unproblematic. In other words, and as we see repeatedly in the articles in this issue, homophobia as a discursive strategy is seen as operative and noteworthy when institutional practices fail to support the claims of those who are behaving in accordance with homonormativity (for example, in claims for inclusion in institutions such as marriage) and/or when statuses such as race and class do not intersect so as to reaffirm the (uncritical) master status of ‘gayness’ (i.e. cultural-level accusations of homophobia based on ethno-racial and/or national status).

Karl Bryant focuses specifically on the implications of homonormativity in his excavation of the medicalization of gender nonconformity diagnoses

and treatment in young children. Bryant illustrates the complexities and tensions that underlie what many critics of 'Gender Identity Disorder' have been inclined to simplify as blatant homophobia. He exposes the paradoxical manner in which both clinicians and researchers, in an attempt not to be homophobic, may in fact be perpetuating a very particular, culturally-constituted form of homosexuality that is rooted in existing norms of acceptability, especially acceptable gender performance. Thus, one of the consequences of attempts to disentangle Gender Identity Disorder diagnoses from accusations of homophobic therapies is that it perpetuates gender performance stereotypes (a 'normal' homosexual is still reasonably masculine or feminine) and further singles out deviant gender performance as pathological. In this case history, Bryant demonstrates some of the consequences of the uncritical use of homophobia both as an analytical concept used by those critiquing GID, and as a discursive tool used by family members and clinicians to formulate and justify therapeutic interventions. One of the things that I learn from Bryant is that, when analyzed within the context of particular institutional practices, such as medicine, we see that a single concept can be deployed in a variety of ways and with somewhat ironic, but traceable, effects.

A related thread that is useful to ponder at this juncture concerns the sources of these homonormative ideas and expectations. There is a relevant literature on the effects of contemporary media and consumer marketing as sources of influence in shaping and perpetuating a culturally specific image of the 'urban queer'. Future work on the complexities of homophobia, especially viewed within the context of the increasing expectations for homonormative expression as a standard for 'gay citizenry' could benefit by incorporating this literature. Just as homophobia is a culturally learned prejudice, people learn to recognize the 'acceptable mainstream' homosexual based on cultural information – specifically portrayals in popular culture. What many people in western countries, especially the USA, think of when they consider homosexuality is the way in which it is portrayed in popular television shows and movies. The current era might be referred to as the post 'Will and Grace' or post 'L Word' or post 'Queer as Folk' era. In-depth analyses of these programs reveal an underlying set of rules about who and what is acceptable and these rules look very much like the rules for heteronormativity. Hence the term, homonormativity.

Not only is this homonormativity reinforced in popular culture, it also has strong roots in consumer marketing. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (1997) have written persuasively about the 'gay media marketing moment' as a period in the early 1990s in the USA during which advertisers recognized that a certain class of people, namely urban gay white men, were likely to have more discretionary income than the

average married man. This recognition ushered in an era of direct marketing to gay men and lesbians and included imagery intended to reflect the interests and lifestyles of these potential consumers. According to Gluckman and Reed this marketing focus probably did more for securing cultural citizenship for lesbians and gay men than any other form of political movement. In consumer-based capitalism, purchasing power is one of the hallmarks of citizenship. Representation in marketing campaigns is a manifestation of this 'cultural belonging'. One obvious implication of this form of 'cultural belonging' is that it is limited to those who have the purchasing power.

Contemporary manifestations of 'gay chic' and related cultural expressions of acceptability regarding homosexuality (included in phrases such as 'queer in the streets, straight in the sheets', and 'metrosexual' and so on) reflect an increasing tolerance for homosexuality in certain regions of the world. Nonetheless, and again ironically, although overt homophobia may be less allowable in some mainstream cultural venues, this so-called tolerance may come at a price. The price may be the increased exclusion and oppression of those who cannot or choose not to participate in homonormative expressions. Furthermore, the ways in which this exclusion operates may be even more intractable and insidious than the forms of homophobia with which we are generally familiar.

With this in mind, the articles in this special issue are especially instructive not only for what they reveal about the complexities of homophobia, but for what they indicate regarding processes whereby deeper, more intractable cultural rules for belonging are reinforced. In other words, they provide useful examples of the ways in which the discourses used by individuals and social institutions to determine 'acceptable deviance' intersects significantly with positions of power and privilege.

Sexual deviance as a luxury of social position

In addition to the proliferation of culturally specific gender expectations, another manifestation of homophobia cum homonormativity revolves around expectations of relational monogamy (including acceptable rules for who can deviate from this expectation and under what circumstances). Again, situating the analysis in the institutional practices of medicine, Carlos Decena provides a compelling illustration of the ways in which discourses of sexuality and public health intersect to create publicly objectified sexual villains. Decena's focus is on the so-called 'down low', which refers to men who have sex with men but who do not identify as gay. The villain in this story is the self-identified heterosexual 'man of color' (i.e. black men and Latinos) who has sexual encounters with other men and (allegedly) doesn't tell his (female) partner. These men are

considered sexual villains not only because of their non-disclosure, but because, as ‘men of color’ it is assumed a priori that they are hyper-sexed and are failing to meet social expectations of family responsibility. Decena draws his analysis from an article in the *Weekly Report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. He deconstructs this article to reveal the ways in which normative expectations for both heterosexual monogamy and homosexual disclosure, intersected with racist ideas of sexual behavior, function to perpetuate the stereotype of black men and Latinos as sexual villains whose behavior threatens public health. In Decena’s reading, the data presented in this article (which he takes as emblematic of many similar articles used in health policy) uncritically reaffirm these stereotypes with the intent of justifying additional public scrutiny of the private sexual lives of black men and Latinos. We learn from Decena that the twin expectations of sexual monogamy (among white heterosexuals) and disclosure (among out homosexuals) serve as foundational points whereby it is *assumed* that (1) black and Latino men are (comparatively more) homophobic and (2) this homophobia results in ‘down low’ sexual encounters that (3) increase the possibility of transmitting the HIV virus to unsuspecting, female spouses. The policy implication of this widely held set of assumptions among administrators of public health is compulsory disclosure of homosexual activity.

Decena notes that a close and possibly more accurate reading of the data suggests that white men who are having sex outside of monogamous relationships may be more likely not to disclose extra-relational sexual encounters and/or HIV status to their partners. This possibility is overlooked however because of the racist assumptions about family irresponsibility among black men and sexual promiscuity among both black men and Latinos. In yet another ironic twist, black male and Latino sexuality is once again the subject of culture panic, but this time situated against the backdrop of the ‘model’ homosexual who is presumed to be white, fully disclosing and completely ‘out’.

In an intriguing variation on the same topic Jane Ward focuses on white men who have sex with men but who do not identify as gay. She illustrates how a similar set of racist assumptions enable these white men to frame their behavior as a normal extension of a heterosexual identity. In a study of the content of online personal ads soliciting sexual encounters with other men, Ward explores the discursive strategies that these men use to present themselves and their activities as perfectly heterosexual. Ward finds that the most common strategy is for these men to continually reference whiteness, straightness and patriarchal privilege as hegemonic positions that legitimate their desire ‘just to have some fun jerking off with another guy’. By repeatedly alluding to their whiteness and contrasting themselves with ‘fags’, the men reinforce an image of themselves as above

and beyond conventional (and public) reproach for activities that may be seen as unconventional but are deservedly private.

Ward's rendering of the ways in which these men decouple sexual behaviors from sexual identities is reminiscent of Laud Humphreys' 'tearoom' chronicles and, more recently, writings on the experiences of young women who engage in sexual encounters with other women while in college but who do not identify as permanently lesbian (a phenomenon sometimes referred to as LUG or 'lesbian until graduation'). In both instances, upper-middle class socialization grants the sense of entitlement to this 'sexual variation' as something that is acceptable, as well as the material and cultural resources for indulging one's desires in private and with discretion. Accordingly, these expressions of sexual behavior and their justification as something known to be deviant but acceptable for certain kinds of (privileged) people is perhaps more analytically similar to the extra-marital heterosexual affairs among men who are also 'good providers' (and therefore assumed to deserve some fun) than it is to overt expressions of homosexuality. Accordingly, Ward has another agenda in her article: to problematize the more common interpretation that straight-identified men who have sex with other men are exhibiting signs of internalized homophobia. Whether one agrees with her or not she provides a useful jumping-off point for exploring ways in which same-gender sexual behavior and its justification can simultaneously reflect and reinforce cultural homophobia while not necessarily being rooted in internalized homophobia. Additionally, her analysis is a reminder of the ways in which claims to other forms of cultural and social privilege circumvent, or at least complicate, questions of homophobia for participants claiming this privilege.

Katherine Frank's article is similarly suggestive of incidences in which sexual behavior may be decoupled from sexual identity thereby raising questions as to whether homophobia is the most useful analytical tool for evaluating same-gender sexual behavior, or in this case, the lack of it. This analysis focuses on the 'lifestyle' or 'swinging' among heterosexual couples that, together as a couple, seek sexual experiences in group settings. Frank's point of departure for this inquiry is the observation that, while it is not uncommon for women to engage in sexual activities with other women at these events, men rarely, if ever, engage in sexual behavior with other men. She notes that some scholars view this lack of same-gender sexual engagement among men in the 'lifestyle' as indicative of homophobia. Frank invites us to complicate this conclusion. She focuses her attention on the ways in which the participants themselves define their activities and emphasizes the distinctiveness of 'the lifestyle' as organized around principles that 'are at odds with heteronormative ideals, especially with regard to traditional gender roles, sexuality and marriage'. Accordingly, Frank finds

that 'lifestyle' participants tend to be generally progressive with regard to attitudes about sexuality, including homosexuality. Further, she notes that many of the men subscribe to what might be called a 'metrosexual' look and manner. She takes this as indicative of a relative comfort with the stereotypical associations of homosexuality, or at least a non-defensive stance regarding being read as 'queer'. She also makes the point that, among 'swingers', desire between men, while not necessarily acted on, is at least an ongoing topic of conversation. She concludes that 'swinging' is, in itself, a highly deviant social activity that involves a very experimental attitude toward sexuality. For Frank, homophobia is not a particularly useful tool for analyzing the empirical observation that sex between men is rare in these settings. Rather, in her estimation, it may be that male with male sex is an extension of risk-taking that is yet to occur and will perhaps happen more frequently as 'swingers' gain more confidence in their deviant lifestyle.

The information contained in the articles by Decena, Ward and Frank problematizes the concept and discourse of homophobia in several ways, including decoupling behavior and identity and complicating the connections between queer expressions and traditional notions of homosexuality. For me, one of the most noteworthy aspects of this work is that it underscores the age-old notion that *permissible* sexual deviance is a luxury available only to those who enjoy certain social positions and cultural privileges. Problematizing homophobia enables us to revisit this idea and be reminded that sexual desire and behavior of any sort is, first and foremost, always situated within social conditions that shape its expression. It is analytically inaccurate as well as foolish simply to assume that traditional renderings of homophobia can provide an adequate explanation for the complexity reflected in these conditions.

The final article in this issue ties together many of these themes. Salvador Vidal-Ortiz examines perceptions of homophobia within groups practicing *Santería*. As Vidal-Ortiz notes, the vast number of practitioners are people of color and many identify as queer. Thus, it is not uncommon for accusations of homophobia to be a part of the discourse among practitioners. This particular focus provides a lens for critiquing the more general and widespread practice of assigning labels of 'less' or 'more' homophobic to different cultural, ethnic and religious groups (for instance it is commonly and uncritically assumed that Mormons are more homophobic than Jews; Mexicans more homophobic than the French, and so forth). Contrasting groups of Puerto Rican and Cuban practitioners, Vidal-Ortiz makes the interesting and analytically useful choice to focus on spaces within these communities, rather than on expressions and attitudes, per se. In doing so, he is able to identify several additional factors that contribute to the ability for queer-identified people to navigate

these settings with more or less ease and sense of acceptance. Vidal-Ortiz concludes that nationality and ethno-racial categories do shape experiences of homophobia within *Santería* spaces. However, these categories are complicated by economic class (for example, the relative wealth of Cubans compared with Puerto Ricans) and by reasons for participation (inter-generational culture for many Cubans versus individual health and personal needs for Puerto Ricans). Perhaps the most important contribution of this article in respect to the theme of retheorizing homophobia is Vidal-Ortiz's portrayal of communities of color relying on discourses of homophobia that may have very little to do with the actual experiences of the people involved, but which are employed to make ethno-racial distinctions. To this end, he finds that, in *Santería*, 'the term "homophobia" serves as a racial distinction marker between the various ethno-racial and national groups that participate'. The significance of this analysis is in Vidal-Ortiz's insistence on observing the complexities of spaces as they are infused with the ethno-racial and national identities of participants. Further, these positions intersect with expressions of gender and sexuality that are beyond simplistic renderings of homosexuality as a master-status unmarked by other forms of social position, particularly in this case, race, ethnicity and nationality.

Concluding comments and future directions

In a phrase much more eloquent and succinct than any of the vast sociological literature on the subject, poet June Jordan has written, 'There is difference and there is power. And who holds power decides the meaning of difference' (1994: 197). A central question that these articles raise for me is how to locate the *relative* power to define, constrain and shape the expression of sexual difference when conducting inquiries that are contextually situated. Homophobia as a general construct denotes an overarching, culturally non-specific manifestation of social power that is presumed to operate invariably across contexts. As each of these articles demonstrates, when used discursively, homophobia takes on a wide variety of meanings and these meanings may or may not be relevant and useful to the context in question. Problematizing and complicating homophobia (and by extension, the very idea of homosexual expression) entreats us to ask questions about the ways in which varying forms of social privilege (for instance socio-economic class, nationality, urban experience) intersect with other, often marked social statuses such as race and ethnicity, gender presentation, immigration status and others, and with communities (such as religious groups, ethno-racial groups, families) as well as social institutions that have the power to confer legitimacy (medicine, law and religion for example). The ways in which we make

sense of our circumstances, including our relative freedom to define our own, in this case, sexual, subjectivity are derived from the complexities of these intersecting statuses and contexts.

To this end, while reading these articles, I was reminded of Ken Plummer's (1995) writing on sexual storytelling. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we can do and be sexually reflect both cultural scripts and our individual and contextual resources for engaging with the expectations conveyed through these scripts. As sexualities scholars we have had a great deal to say about the ways in which cultural expectations of heterosexuality function as compulsory scripts whereby individuals organize and evaluate their behavior. The material in this volume is a welcome step in inviting us to engage in similarly critical assessments of the scripts employed around expectations for homosexuality as reflected in the use of homophobia. The challenge for the scholars and activists interested in comprehending the ways in which different individuals and groups define their own sexual subjectivity, including mechanisms of oppression and resistance, is in mapping out the complexities, contradictions and tensions that constitute the actual, lived terrain of experience.

An example drawn from an emerging literature in the construction and presentation of ethno-racial identities may serve as illustrative of this complexity. The concept of *covering* has recently made its way into conversations about ethno-racial subjectivity (e.g. Yoshino, 2006). The concept actually originates with Erving Goffman, who observed the tendency for people of stigmatized statuses to employ strategies of 'covering' in interaction so as to put others at ease. Covering strategies in interaction include playing down aspects of identity that will lead to interactional awkwardness and playing up features that allow for commonality and connection. Covering is often accompanied by 'comforting' and includes strategies such as the use of humor to put others at ease when faced with a person of stigmatized identity.³

Covering (and comforting) are distinguished from the more commonly used construct of 'passing' in terms of intent and self-awareness on the part of the subject. Whereas 'passing' has been defined as an attempt to present an identity that is consistent with hegemonic expectations (appearing white or appearing straight for example) for reasons presumed to reflect social shame, 'covering' is considered a self-reflexive strategy that is used varyingly depending on the interactional setting and the intentions of the subject. The distinction is subtle, but significant. In the former, the motivation is presumably internalized self-hatred (homophobia, racism, sexism) whereas in the latter, the manifest behavior reflects a subjective awareness of the complexity of varying social circumstances and subjects' ability to make choices that grant them power in the interaction.

Like passing, covering is also a problematic process, but by granting the subject self-reflexivity, it can be seen as a form of potential strategic resistance (or minimally, an attempt to gain interactional leverage) rather than as simple conformity based on non-reflective self-hatred. Instead of focusing on psychological processes of presumed internalized oppression, we view the subject as self-aware and strategically engaged. To this end, we are prompted to ask different questions regarding experiences of discrimination and oppression. For instance, 'covering' and 'comforting' may require substantial emotional work. How does someone experience and manage this? Processes of 'covering' also reflect complicated boundaries and contradictions. How are these tensions experienced and managed? The literature on 'mestiza consciousness' (e.g. Anzaldúa, 1987) is likely to be just as instructive here than the literature on psychological homophobia.

The ability to engage in 'covering' also reflects cultural resources, including scripts or social repertoires for comprehending what is expected to successfully navigate a particular context. For example, to what extent do social class and educational background shape the ways in which the so-called 'militant butch lesbian' does not successfully 'cover' and 'comfort' in a conventional office setting where she is employed? Is her self-presentation a strategic choice or a reflection of cultural 'training' in which she has little experience? Alternatively, in some settings, such as academe, being 'out, proud and loud' may be a kind of cultural capital exercised by white lesbians who may not recognize that this position reflects power and privilege that may not be available to other colleagues and students (e.g. people of color). These processes tie directly to manifestations of homonormativity and include questions such as how one learns to be 'acceptably gay' and what cultural and material resources are necessary for this kind of self-presentation. What I am suggesting here is that there are existing literatures, many of which derive from critical race theories and critical contemporary social psychologies that may be more useful than an uncritical psychology of homophobia for mapping the ways in which subjects who occupy sexually marginal positions experience and navigate this marginality.

Furthermore, these experiences take place within situated spaces and relationships, many of which impart culturally specific scripts and expectations that exist in tension with the larger cultural context. In this regard we could take a lesson from scholars who study sexuality (primarily heterosexuality) in cross-cultural settings and border spaces. For example, in her highly detailed study of the ways in which Mexicans in the USA navigate sexuality, González-López underscores the significance of the family as a 'social institution regulating [one's] sex life and romantic choices' (González-López, 2005). This research on the specific context of the

Latina/o immigrant experience is an instructive reminder of the ways in which family as a social institution influences not only sexual expression, but the scripts or discourses one uses for making sense of erotic desire and sexual behavior. Taking this context as a starting point, subsequent behaviors such as decisions to ‘cover’ or ‘confront’ can be understood within the context of strategic response to complex cultural expectations for sexual expression.

González-López also points out some of the ways in which self-described Mexican women activists employ linguistic creativity as a form of resisting heteronormativity. Using verb conjugations that indicate temporary rather than permanent status, these women knowingly, and even mischievously, make claims to sexual identity as something that is fluid (e.g. ‘I am heterosexual for the moment . . .’). The suggestion I take from this is that we need to compile more culturally specific histories that focus on how individuals make sense of their own experiences and what, if any, forms of resistance they see available to them in the face of what they perceive as oppression. These histories need to take into consideration not only the usual dimensions of difference (class, gender and race) but need to be critically informed with regard to the geographies of space (urban/rural, migration borderlands and so on), culture (including linguistics) and institutional communities such as religion and family. Yes, this is complicated, but given that individuals and groups do not live in generalities, these specificities should provide a much more relevant and resonant comprehension of the vast and differing experiential terrain of sexual desire and expression.

The articles in this special issue are a compelling reminder that forms of discrimination and oppression are multi-faceted. Applying a ‘one-kind-fits-all’ model of homophobia uncritically and universally may actually result in unintended forms of discrimination, including the discrimination that results from the hubris of the scholar who fails to acknowledge the complexities of individual lives and contexts, and the oppression that results when so-called activists hold everyone to specific standards of expression regardless of circumstance.

Notes

1. Or worse, homosexuality as a social status is often considered as a simple parallel to these other forms of social difference and marginality. This occurs, for instance, in the frequent and uncritical attempts to treat lesbian and gay social movements as if they were the same as the civil rights movement in both intent and expression.
2. This particular acronym reflects the complexity and challenges of trying to incorporate several distinctive but interrelated social movements. The expression ‘lesbian and gay’ does not include those who self-identify as

'bisexual' or 'queer' but in this context it may be more accurate in that 'queer' social movements have emerged, to some extent, in critique of the relative narrowness of lesbian and gay identities and movements. Similarly, transgender identities and movements have a specific history and reflect distinctive prejudices that are not accurately captured in a single acronym. At the same time, the all-inclusive acronym does reflect the degree to which, culturally, many self-identified lesbians, gay men, queers and trans individuals are lumped together as 'social problems'.

3. See, for example, Spencer Cahill and Robin Eggleston (1994) on the strategies that people in wheelchairs use to put others at ease in their presence.

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