Deconstructing and Reconstructing Identity: How Queer Liberation Organizations Deploy Collective Identities

Ben Anderson-Nathe
Portland State University, banders@pdx.edu

Joseph Nicholas DeFilippis
Seattle University

Gita R. Mehrotra
Portland State University

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The mainstream gay rights movement has made significant strides toward its agenda, at least in part due to the movement's claim that it represents all the interests of all LGBTQ communities. However, a queer liberation movement (QLM) led by queer people of color and other marginalized LGBTQ people has existed alongside the mainstream movement since its inception. This movement pursues a radically different agenda and employs organizing strategies distinct from those of the mainstream movement, centering the interests of those LGBTQ people most often left behind by the mainstream agenda. This paper examines how the QLM negotiates and deploys collective identity in and through its work. Collective identity is explored in the context of existing LGBTQ social movement theory and points to how the QLM challenges and extends social movement theorizing regarding collective identity and use of identity as a site for organizing.

Keywords: LGBTQ activism; collective identity; social movements; queer identity deployment; women of color feminism

Introduction

In recent years, the United States has seen the emergence of a new queer liberation movement (QLM), comprised of small, grassroots organizations across the country led by and for queer people of color, transgender people, LGBT immigrants, and/or low-income LGBT people. The QLM is distinct from what we call the dominant mainstream gay rights movement (the GRM), which is comprised of national LGBT organizations and state-wide equality groups. As opposed to the GRM's core focus on equality, the QLM operates from a framework of justice and liberation (DeFilippis & Anderson-Nathe, 2017). The QLM's agenda differs markedly from the GRM's focus on obtaining inclusion into existing systems (e.g., marriage, military) and securing legal protections (e.g., nondiscrimination laws and hate crime protections). Rather, the QLM is focused on a broader, more intersectional political agenda that includes: challenging the entire criminal legal system; expanding health care and the social safety net; and fighting for comprehensive immigration reform (DeFilippis, 2015, 2018).

This paper examines how these values and priorities impact the QLM's collective identity and use of identity as a site for organizing. Social movement scholars have written extensively about the role of collective identity in movements, including movements involving LGBT people. However, these scholars have focused almost exclusively on the GRM, likely because it has been the more dominant strand of LGBT activism and has long been conceptualized as representative of all LGBT communities. We examine some of the most significant theories that have been applied to the GRM, analyze whether and how they may also apply to the QLM, and offer alternate frameworks for understanding the QLM.

Social Movement Theory in LGBT Activism

Before examining the use of collective identity by this new queer liberation movement, it is important to first understand how collective identity has been understood thus far in existing social movement scholarship about LGBT activism. The following sections present an overview of some of the most significant theories that have been developed for, or applied to, the GRM.

Collective Identity

"Collective identity" is a significant concept in social movement literature, which explains how social movements generate long-term commitment and unity between activists, and how individuals acquire the motivation to act. This concept has gained tremendous importance among social movement scholars, primarily because of their understanding that collective identity provides important advantages in activism and mobilization (McGarry & Jasper, 2015).

"Collective identity" describes the process by which individuals realize their commonalities and decide to act together (Melucci, 1989). Organizers use collective identity to build solidarity around an idea or campaign (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009). These collective identities are formed by pre-existing membership in a social identity category (e.g., the disability rights movement) or by creating a group with an actual membership (e.g., labor unions). Collective identities can promote inclusiveness among actors who may share limited identification and social and political experiences (della Porta, 2005). Taylor and Whittier (1999) define collective identity as "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences and solidarity" (p. 170). In defining collective identity, Snow (2001) claims, "its essence resides in a shared sense of 'one-ness' or 'we-ness' anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity" (p. 3). Snow connects that "shared we" to collective agency, explaining that groups sharing collective identity also share a belief in their ability to take action together.

LGBT Identity as Essentialized Ethnicity

Much has been written about how LGBT activists developed a collective identity that emulates ethnicity. There have also been numerous critiques about how that construction perpetuates essentialized constructions of sexual orientation and gender identity. In the 1970s, gay and lesbian groups began to identify themselves as a legitimate minority group, positioning themselves as having a "quasi-ethnic" status (Altman, 1973; Armstrong, 2002; Bernstein, 2005; Epstein, 1998). Accordingly, they increased their demands for the same rights as other

minority groups. In the process, gays and lesbians began to publicly present themselves in ways that made generalizations about the unique and inherent traits that comprise sexual orientation, such as being born with a fixed attraction to people of the same sex, common experience of homophobia, and shared cultural worlds, as demonstrated by queer neighborhoods and spaces (Altman, 1973; Epstein, 1998). They also utilized a strategy of "coming out" to raise visibility and build community cohesion. This strategy contributed to the notion that identities of gay and lesbian are fixed, generalizable identity categories, because coming out defines people in rigid ways, and effectively serves as a declaration of "this is who I am, forever" that does not allow room for an understanding of sexuality as either complicated or fluid (Phelan, 1997; Savin-Williams, 2005).

Similar fixed constructions of identity continue to be deployed in arguments made by gay and lesbian activists comparing race and sexual orientation, such as when campaigns for lesbian and gay access to the military and marriage made comparisons to when those institutions discriminated based on race (e.g., "gay is the new black"). Such comparisons not only obscure that those victories did not end structural racism or oppression of people of color, but they also essentialize both sexual orientation and race and assume these to be mutually exclusive identity categories.

Similar discursive strategies justify the extension of legal rights to gays and lesbians on the basis of genetic predisposition ("born this way"), or in analogous contentions made about trans rights ("trapped in the wrong body"). This quasi-ethnicity framework, with its generalizations about the inherent traits comprising sexual orientation or gender identity, constitutes an essentialized identity category (Epstein, 1998; Gamson, 1995; Phelan, 1997; Savin-Williams, 2005; Seidman, 1993). Scholars disagree, however, about whether it is problematic for social movements to employ essentialized identity categories.

Strategic Essentialism

Some have argued that all identity groups engage in strategic essentialism to achieve a collective identity. Strategic essentialism, introduced by literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, 1990), is a significant postcolonial

concept describing a tactic that ethnic groups, nationalities, or minority groups may use to present themselves. Although any given group may have tremendous differences (of ideologies and politics, or in demographics or other traits), they may sometimes find it strategic to use provisional solidarity as a basis for social action. Strategic essentialism describes how groups temporarily essentialize themselves to present their collective identity in a simplified way that helps them reach specific objectives.

Spivak (1988) argues that universalizing discourse could be useful, provided that the limits of such discourse are understood. While simultaneously critiquing and endorsing this tactic, she contended that minority groups could engage in transactional strategies that temporarily adhere to essentialism in order to achieve their aims. Her critiques are important, in part, because she articulated particular concern for how White American feminism employed similar strategic essentialism at the expense of an "other woman" (Ray, 2009).

Identity Deployment

Identity deployment theory grew out of Spivak's construct of strategic essentialism. Identity deployment explains how activists often strategically minimize their differences from the dominant society (to publicly emphasize similarities to the majority of Americans who are heterosexual) while at the same time celebrating those differences in other settings. Bernstein (1997), for instance, offers case studies of gay activists who have chosen to highlight their similarities to mainstream society. For example, recent statewide and national campaigns for "marriage equality" used this strategy in their rhetoric that LGBT people are "just like everyone else" and therefore deserve access to the same institutions (Anderson-Nathe, 2015; Ryan, 2009; Ward, 2008; Warner, 2000).

This concept of identity deployment largely disregards Spivak's concern about the limits to the utility of universalizing discourse and essentialism (Bernstein, 2005). Instead, Bernstein and Taylor (2005), for instance, contend that identity categories are too difficult to challenge, implying that activists should not be burdened with such expectations. They further posit that essentialized constructions of identity are deployed because the dominant culture places value on these essentialized identities

and devalues other identities. Functionally, this argument serves as a defense of the GRM against the numerous critiques made by queer activists of color and transgender people who challenged it for centering the needs, agenda, and representation of White, middle-class gays and lesbians. By arguing that these identities are deployed because they are most valued by the dominant culture, Bernstein and Taylor imply that an essentialized identity is savvy, strategic activism, and has been responsible for much of the success of the GRM.

Unity Through Diversity

Sociologist Elizabeth Armstrong (2002) developed a collective identity framework to describe the GRM that both avoids the entire question of essentialized identities and indirectly perpetuates them. She argues that gay activism owes its success to the movement's strategic diversity. Armstrong further contends that gays and lesbians understand their "ethnic" status as distinct from other ethnic identities because sexual orientation encompasses people from multiple backgrounds, and who come to this identity later in life than they do their ethnic identities. Consequently, gays and lesbians have claimed to celebrate diversity in two ways: recognizing sexual differences between groups, and claiming that the LGBT community itself is internally diverse.

Armstrong describes how many advocates in the San Francisco gay rights organizations of the 1970s referred to a wide array of groups, focused on many different interests but united in their gay identity, as "unity in diversity." Armstrong used that term to explain the success of the GRM over the subsequent decades. In this model, people took various identities or interests (e.g., religion, sports, professions, etc.) and combined them with their gay identities to form what she calls "Gay+1" identity groups (e.g., gay Jews, gay football players, gay doctors). Consequently, a wide range of gay and lesbian people with many identities could find commonality, mobilizing large numbers. In her theory, it is this strategic diversity, rather than any strategic essentialism, that has contributed to the success of the movement.

However, this "unity in diversity" approach minimizes some of the basic hallmarks of diversity: race, class, and gender. By those measures, the San Francisco groups were not particularly

diverse (as she acknowledges elsewhere, but does not substantially incorporate into her theory), nor are the subsequent GRM groups. Consequently, "unity in diversity" perpetuates a form of essentialism that limits gayness (in all its "diversity") largely within the bounds of White, middle-class people.

Respectable Diversity

Furthering this critique, Ward (2008) argues that mainstream gay and lesbian activists largely embrace diversity of race, class, gender, or sexuality, when it is "predictable, profitable, rational, or respectable" and actively work to suppress diversity when it is "unpredictable, unprofessional, messy, or defiant" (p. 2). Although Ward and Bernstein both claim that gays and lesbians suppress identity differences, Ward diverges from Bernstein significantly because Ward is deeply critical of this dynamic, whereas Bernstein appears to admire it. Ward and others describe the identity deployment strategy of the GRM in the past thirty years as one of calculated suppression of gay and lesbian difference. This strategy distances "gay" from "abnormal" and, specifically, from "queer" and constitutes what Phelan (2010) calls "a flight from strangeness" (Phelan, 2010), politically and socially distancing itself from bisexual, transgender, and queer people (Gamson, 1995; Phelan, 2010; Ryan, 2009).

Ward argues that GRM activists employ "instrumental conceptualizations of difference, privileging those forms of difference that have the most currency in a neoliberal world and stifling difference that can't be easily represented, professionalized, or commodified" (2008, p. 2). Through this critique of "respectable diversity," Ward also suggests that gay organizations engage in the rhetoric of diversity in order to improve their public image and "accrue liberal capital" that will help them secure corporate funding and public legitimacy. The result is that these organizations seek functional and readily quantifiable forms of difference, such as hiring college-educated people of color to do outreach, and "creating the most room for those who embody predictable and fundable kinds of diversity, adversity, or transgression" (2008, p. 6).

Queer and Post-Structuralist Theories

Applying queer and post-structuralist theories can offer insight into collective identity within the QLM. For instance, arguing that the postmodern subject is decentralized, with multiple constructed and historically situated identities, Alarcón (1990) observes that subjects must nevertheless sometimes engage in provisional solidarities through social movements. Consequently, "one may recognize the endless production of differences to destabilize group or collective identities, on the one hand, and the need for group solidarities to overcome oppression through an understanding of the mechanisms at work, on the other" (p. 376).

Gamson (1995, 2009) expands this argument, questioning whether social movements should continue to use fixed, essentialized identity categories (e.g., gay and lesbian) as organizing sites, or instead emphasize the subversion and deconstruction of categories (queer). Examining the relationship between politics of ethnic essentialism and its deconstructionist critiques, Gamson articulates how these tensions relate to the larger question facing all identity-based social movements: "Fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power" (1995, p. 383). He argues that critiquing essentialized identities is important because in reality, the categories are more fluid than indicated by essentialized identities. However, he also maintained that without boundaries, there are no groups, no solidarity and thus, no cohesive social movement.

Broad (2002) examines the processes of identity in transgender social movement activism, looking at how collective identity is both deconstructed (by challenging dichotomous male and female gender scripts) and constructed (as transgender). She argues that transgender politics are not centered exclusively on either the identity politics of the GRM or the destabilizing politics of queer theory and queer organizing. Just as Gamson (2009) considers the complications of utilizing queer theory to destabilize collective categories despite knowing that forming a collective identity inherently builds the categories up, Broad (2002) makes a similar argument about transgender activism. She posits that transgender politics and activism are shaped by the simultaneity of both constructions and deconstructions of identity.

Seidman (1993) also theorizes about the relationship between poststructuralism and identity constructions. His examination of how queer theory deconstructs rigid sexual identity categories led him to integrate Black feminism's intersectional analysis. He addresses the limitations of a collective identity limited to White, middle-class gays and lesbians, demanding a more intersectional approach to LGBT organizing.

Cathy Cohen (1997) famously claimed that a truly transformative queer and trans movement should not be organized around identity categories such as queer. She argues that this has merely served to distinguish between those who are queer and those who are not, without adequately addressing the roles of race, gender, and class, people's relations to "dominant and normalizing power" (p. 457). Recognizing that it may be strategically useful to deploy a specific identity category to highlight certain forms of oppression, she cautions that activating only one aspect of identity usually fails to recognize the "multiple and intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life chances" (p. 440). Because identity politics have not centered those who are most marginalized, and have failed to challenge the dominant structures that oppressed them, she calls for a movement built upon shared *status*, rather than upon shared identities. Cohen argues that movement building must be constructed around shared marginal status within the dominant power systems, rather than being limited to people with shared queer and trans identities.

Methods

The analysis presented here builds upon a larger research study conducted by the second author that focused on some of the QLM organizations, which investigated their status as a social movement, their shared values and agenda, and their organizing tactics (DeFilippis, 2015, 2018; DeFilippis & Anderson-Nathe, 2017). The organizations studied were chosen from among the 2007–2012 recipients of the Movement Building grants that were awarded by the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice. These organizations were: Affinity Community Services (Chicago); allgo (Austin); ALP: the Audre Lorde Project (New York City); CAR: Center for Artistic Revolution (Little

Rock, AR), NQAPIA: National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance (national); QEJ: Queers for Economic Justice (New York City), now closed; SONG: Southerners on New Ground (Atlanta); and SRLP: Sylvia Rivera Law Project (New York City). The current analysis sought to answer a two-part research question: how do the QLM organizations articulate a collective identity through their agenda formation and activism strategies, and how does their treatment of identity inform existing social movement theorizing?

Despite their location in different parts of the United States, these organizations had a documented history of working together (and with numerous other similar groups) in various combinations in numerous short-term informal collaborations, as well as in various structured networks (including, most notably, their Roots Coalition). The study investigated the collaborative work of these organizations, including their relationships to identity deployment as an organizing strategy and their positionality outside the GRM.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff at each organization. Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and was audio-recorded. Due to their activist roles, participants all consented to use their actual names and organizational affiliations in all publications resulting from the study. Additional texts for analysis were drawn from organizational videos published by each group (e.g., speeches by organization leaders, recordings from rallies and other organizing activities, etc.). Finally, each organization's mission statement was analyzed as well. The study used deductive content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), informed by a predetermined categorization matrix drawn from social movement theories, and also featured inductive analysis to expand those categories throughout the analysis.

Findings

We have previously asserted that individual QLM groups hold separate but similar identities as intersectional, radical, social justice, and liberation organizations (DeFilippis & Anderson-Nathe, 2017). This paper extends those claims by presenting the collective identity of the QLM as a whole movement (rather

than as individual organizations) as well as how the movement deploys identity in its organizing and activism. Our analysis revealed four central themes characterizing the collective identity of the QLM: Intersectionality; Complicated Identities; Untidy Diversity; and Status-Based Organizing.

Intersectionality

The QLM has a clear set of values that drive its agenda (De-Filippis & Anderson-Nathe, 2017). They identify their individual organizations as intersectional, social justice and liberation organizations. In their individual mission statements, in their collective work in the Roots Coalition, and in interviews with organizational representatives, they repeatedly referenced their commitment to an intersectional understanding of their collective identity. QLM activists and research participants often referenced the Roots Coalition as a proxy for their collective work as a social movement. The Roots Coalition's mission statement identifies its members repeatedly as "queer and trans people of color (POC)" groups. By classifying themselves as a queer and trans people of color movement, the QLM groups enact a clear collective identity. Their positionalities as queer and trans people formed part, but not the full extent, of their shared identity. Kim L. Hunt, with Affinity, offered a clear statement of this intersectional politic. She said her organization was, "always looking at the multiple identities that people bring to an issue. And looking beyond just the LGBT component of who folks are."

Former executive director of Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ) Amber Hollibaugh further illustrated this intersectional identity, demonstrating that while QEJ was explicitly an organization for, by, and of queer people, sexual orientation was far from the only of the organization's concerns:

> If you're poor, if you're transgender, if you're a person of color, if you're HIV positive, if you're homeless, the ability to act on desire, the ability to be safely somewhere to make love with anybody you want to make love with, is unlikely … And QEJ works on the notion that says the economy is not removed from the way you live out your private life. If you struggle with issues of documentation, of your health care, of whether or not you'll be punished for being open about who you are,

> if you can be employed or not employed, if you can get an
> apartment or not get an apartment, then those things affect
> how it is that you feel free or not free.

Here Hollibaugh breaks down the fixed, one-dimensional identity
category of gay or lesbian centered by the mainstream gay rights
movement. She delineates how queer people belong, instead, to
numerous intersecting identity categories; organizing around a
single dimension is not only shortsighted, it is also ineffective.

This intersectional treatment of identity represents one of
the QLM's main goals: challenging the centrality in LGBT ac-
tivism of the experiences of White, middle-class gays and les-
bians. Their commitment to an intersectional analysis leads to
a focus on the needs of the most marginalized because of the
impacts of multiple systems of oppression. Specifically, they fo-
cus on LGBT people who are low-income, people of color, trans-
gender, and/or immigrants. Because of how these groups have
been ignored by other social movements, the QLM centralizes
the needs of those populations in their agenda and also pro-
motes their participation in the organizational leadership—em-
bodying bell hooks' concept of margin to center (hooks, 2000).
In doing so, the QLM focuses on what some activists refer to as
"impossible people"—those queer people on the margins with
no recognized social narrative because White, affluent gays and
lesbians are centered by the GRM and treated as representa-
tives of all LGBT people (DeFilippis & Anderson-Nathe, 2017).
Impossible people, in these terms, are those people whose ex-
periences of multiple forms of oppression are so interconnected
that they cannot claim or identify with only one single essen-
tialized identity category.

Complicated Identities

By using language such as "queer," or "impossible people"
to describe themselves, the QLM presents their collective identi-
ty as inherently complicated. Part of this complicated identity is
the natural result of using an intersectional analysis that inher-
ently assumes multiple identities and the interconnectedness of
various forms of oppression. However, the QLM's complicated
identities challenge the easy binary categorization that is some-
times utilized by others when using intersectionality.

For instance, the QLM complicates typical racial categories and constructs a multi-dimensional understanding of race. Their analysis goes beyond the usual "White people versus people of color" binary (that implicitly situates all people of color as one unified group, and all White people as another). Staff from QLM organizations provided numerous examples of this complicated race analysis throughout the interviews. For example, when Ben de Guzman described the numerous distinct API communities that comprise the National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance (NQAPIA), or when Affinity's Kim Hunt and allgo's Rose Pulliam addressed tensions that exist between queer Latinos and queer Blacks, they challenged a too-often simplistic narrative that positions all people of color as a homogeneous group. And when QEJ's Kenyon Farrow and Paulina Helm-Hernandez from Southerners on New Ground (SONG) described working with White people who are among the urban homeless or the rural poor, they complicated the standard narrative equating White people with affluence and that is too often assumed in describing organizational demographics. Similarly, Helm-Hernandez pointed out class and geographic distinctions and tensions among queer Black people:

> Now we have gay Black Pride celebrations in Atlanta that are focused on the beauty of our community, and it's great, but at the expense of the invisibility of a lot of rural poor people that don't have access, can't get there, won't be allowed in even if they show up.

This quote illustrates how a single identity category, such as queer Blacks, is understood by the QLM to be complicated and nuanced. By recognizing the multiplicity of identities embodied by queer people, the QLM employs intersectional constructions of identity categories that destabilize single-axis articulations of identity.

The QLM similarly unsettles the category of nationality, deconstructing "American citizen" and "Immigrant" as dichotomous categories. For example, the Audre Lorde Project (ALP) and SONG participate in the Tribal Sovereignty Movement, which in itself complicates the conventional citizen/immigrant binary. In addition, when staff from ALP, NQAPIA, and SONG discussed their immigration work, they interrogated the very

meaning of citizenship. For instance, SONG's Helm-Hernandez discussed how she has learned from the experiences of Black colleagues to question the assumption that becoming a citizen will lead to safety or equality. And when ALP, QEJ, SONG, and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) staff discussed Mexican immigration to the U.S., they each situated it in the larger contexts of American neoliberal policies and global migration patterns. In these ways, the queer liberation movement unsettles hegemonic binary categories of citizenship and introduces space for more complicated claims to individual and collective identities around nationhood.

In some ways, the QLM also destabilizes fixed sexual and gender identities. They claim a multitude of sexual and gender identities, expanded beyond the default fixed categories of gay and lesbian. These organizations have constructed sexual and gender identities that destabilize the notion of a single authoritative experience. In interviews, activists described their organizations (individually and as a collective movement) at different times, as "LGBT," "LGBTQ," "lesbian, gay, bisexual, Two Spirit, trans and gender nonconforming (LGBTSTGNC)," "sexual minorities," "queer," "queer and trans," "gender variant," and "transgender, transsexual, intersex and other gender nonconforming people." Activists explained how they deploy those terms deliberately, as a more accurate characterization of their members than would be using "gay and lesbian" as a default. In addition, each organization used more than one of these phrases to describe their constituents. The Roots Coalition uses "queer and trans people" on its website and in its mission statement, terms with particular meaning. Both words are not merely umbrella terms that subsume a variety of other identity categories; they each also challenge hegemonic notions of "normal." Consequently, the QLM organizations' use of these different terms appears both deliberate and fluid. Even as they identify themselves in a collective identity, they contest the notion of fixed authoritative identity categories.

Untidy Diversity

ALP's Cara Page and allgo's Rose Pulliam appeared to share Ward's (2008) critique of "respectable diversity" when they each expressed their discomfort with the GRM's selective embrace of

diversity. Positioning the QLM organizations in contrast, Page claimed the GRM was "codifying, sort of pulling trans and gender nonconforming people of color in, but still as a secondary thought in many ways." She continued, "I think that movement must learn how to honor leadership without objectifying, exploiting, or exoticizing our leaders." She argued that it was happening to people of color, to Two Spirit people, and to trans and gender nonconforming people. She maintained the GRM was ignoring the contributions of those communities, "not identifying their role in our movements… and doing some weird elevation of some and not everyone." Similarly, Pulliam argued that the mainstream movement fails "to think about queerness in all its beauty, in all its glory. I get disturbed by the way that movement is determining what's appropriately trans and what is not appropriately trans."

Page and Pulliam offered those critiques in the context of explaining how, by contrast, their movement has embraced, centralized, and highlighted all of its constituents' diversity. However, the QLM's focus on diversity primarily centers racial, gender, and class diversity; it is less obvious that the QLM also celebrates "queerness in all its beauty, in all its glory" with regards to sexuality. Although the QLM is comprised of people claiming numerous sexual and gender identities, these identities are still quasi-ethnic in their construction. They describe who people *are* sexually, not what they *do* sexually, and thus sexuality is constructed as a fixed identity, not as a set of (possibly fluid) behaviors. This stands in delicate tension with the organizations' commitments—as stated previously—to contesting fixed identity categories (e.g., through their use of queer and trans as politicized and negotiated identity markers). Illustrating this tension, the diversity of sexual behavior or terminology to mark specific sexual identities within the QLM's communities (from monogamous "vanilla" sexual relationships, to people who engage in non-monogamy, or practice BDSM) is not highlighted nearly as visibly as the diversity of other identity markers. Both allgo and Affinity have engaged in programmatic work focused on AIDS, but aside from that (and attempts by a few individuals, such as QEJ's Amber Hollibaugh, to raise issues of sexual liberation), the QLM organizations have little to say publicly about sexual behavior or sexual diversity. Ward's analysis may thus partially apply to the QLM, with regard to how it strategically downplays

difference, at least within the arena of sexual behavior. This is not necessarily a limitation, but rather a strategic choice of identity deployment. Sexual diversity is presumed (just as it is in other social movements) and is not primarily the focus of the QLM's identity or work. In addition, the QLM centers shared marginal statuses more than specific identities, as we explain in the next section, making the question of quasi-ethnic sexual identities less relevant than it is for other identity-based social movements.

Status-based Organizing

The QLM works to organize people based upon the shared marginalized status of their different identity categories and, in fact, centers this focus on marginalized status as one defining feature of the movement's own collective identity. QLM groups organize LGBT people who are: on public assistance; undocumented immigrants; in prisons; transgender; homeless; and/or people from various racial identity categories. The most common denominator among these disparate populations is their shared experiences of oppression, rather than their specific identities.

One example of this can be seen in Reina Gossett's description of SRLP's work on access to social services. She argued that it is not enough for SRLP to work to end gender-based discrimination at welfare offices; they also must work to raise welfare payments for all poor people. As such, while the organization fought transphobic practices at the welfare offices and helped trans people to access needed resources, they simultaneously advocated that all poor people have access to greater financial support. Similar politics can be seen in QEJ's campaign to allow homeless domestic partners to access NYC's family shelter system. The Bloomberg administration's response to this campaign was to offer to allow only same-sex Domestic Partners to access the family shelters, while requiring that other-sex couples get married in order to gain access. When their coalition partner The Empire State Pride Agenda (at the time, New York's largest equality organization) wanted to accept the City's offer, QEJ refused—insisting that the city allow homeless heterosexual couples the same rights as it offered to gay and lesbian couples. Each case illustrates that marginalized status trumps membership in an LGBT category in terms of these organizations' commitments to collective identity.

This approach is not limited to their work on social services. QLM organizations actively partner with non-LGBT immigrant organizations to work towards comprehensive immigration reform. Even when groups like NQAPIA work on issues impacting queer immigrants, they situate that work within the need for larger immigration reform, and groups like ALP and SONG play prominent leadership roles in non-LGBT immigrant coalitions. Similarly, SRLP and ALP both partner with non-LGBT criminal justice groups in their work on police violence and prison abolition to benefit all marginalized people. In this way, although the QLM uses identity categories as one basis for organizing, it does not follow in the footsteps of other identity-based movements that limit their scope to working solely with people who identify with matching identity categories.

Discussion and Implications

The QLM has built and utilizes a markedly different collective identity from that of mainstream LGBT activist movements. In so doing, the movement simultaneously challenges and extends how identity is used in social movement organizing. This complex treatment of identity by the QLM offers challenges to existing analyses of LGBT organizing in the United States, largely due to those analyses' exclusive focus on the mainstream gay rights movement as the representative of LGBT community organizing.

Bernstein (1997) focused her analysis on the GRM, arguing that it was successful because of its reliance on those identity claims that positioned lesbians and gay men as close as possible to dominant identities which are most socially valued (e.g., White, middle-class American citizens). Extending this argument to the QLM renders these organizations unlikely to succeed because of their reliance on destabilizing rather than drawing nearer to dominant and essentialized identity markers. For example, when the QLM uses phrases such as "impossible people" and "queer" they defy the traditional logic of identity deployment. Both terms, by definition, describe people who are dissimilar to dominant society. And yet, the QLM sees little choice, due to their commitments to many LGBT people whose intersecting identities position them so far outside the

socially-desirable mainstream that they could not suppress their differences even if they wanted to.

Either term ("impossible people" or "queer") marks an identity group, and an argument can be made that these are essentialized identities. Nevertheless, they are marginalized identities, and consequently, their deployment is far from strategic in terms of achieving the aims of increased recognition, equity, or justice. The goal of identity deployment in traditional social movement approaches is to publicly simplify identities to highlight similarities to, rather than differences from, dominant society. Consequently, although the QLM sometimes engages in strategic essentialism, at other times it also actively works to combat the identity categories on which the GRM has strategically relied. By refusing to deploy this identity construction (in part, because they cannot), the QLM complicates its ability to build solidarity between the dominant and the communities represented by QLM organizations.

Interestingly, an application of "unity in diversity" theory (Armstrong, 2002) to the QLM offers a more optimistic prognosis than identity deployment. Whereas strategic identity deployment portends failure for the QLM (for not strategically deploying a collective identity valued by dominant society), Armstrong's "unity in diversity" theory would suggest that the QLM has the potential to achieve even greater success than the GRM. By constructing an identity as queer and trans people of color, the QLM embodies a broad conception of diversity (inclusive of a multiplicity of race, class, gender, and immigration status categories). And by working outside the limits of these categories, by organizing with heterosexual and cisgender people with shared marginal status, the QLM creates a bigger umbrella than they would by organizing solely around identity.

Deconstructionist Politics

The QLM can be understood as engaging, to a certain degree, in strategic essentialism. By organizing around queer and trans people of color (POC) identities, the QLM does not allow differences of geography, race, class, or gender identities, to distract from their public identity. For instance, the fact that some individual groups organize around a specific racial identity (e.g., NQAPIA is Asian, while Affinity is Black) is subsumed in

the movement's larger umbrella identity as POC. In addition, QEJ and SONG were created as multi-racial groups inclusive of White people, yet when working with QLM groups, all the organizations collectively identify as POC. In this way, POC becomes a strategically essentialized identity, which the movement can strategically use for purposes of funding, base-building, organizing, advocacy, and research. Indeed, even organizing around a singular racial identity (e.g., Affinity is an organization of Black LBT women) is to engage in strategic essentializing (e.g., of Blackness). Consequently, by collapsing all differences among and between various racial groups into a shared identity of "people of color," the QLM made a strategic choice to essentialize its respective identities and characteristics.

However, the QLM simultaneously shares Spivak's critiques of such essentializing. Spivak (1988) cautioned about the limits of universalizing discourse, criticizing how American White feminists had failed to recognize those limits. Likewise, the QLM criticizes how the GRM has failed to recognize the limits of its universalizing discourse. That critique informs how QLM activists deploy their own identity categories. Although they engage in strategic essentialism, they simultaneously speak openly (publicly, as well as in interviews for this project) about the many differences, both among constituents in each organization and between the QLM organizations. For example, Affinity's Kim L. Hunt described how their Black membership had difficult conversations about Black-Brown solidarity when figuring out how to engage in the QLM's immigration work (which, on the surface, could be argued did not directly affect Black American citizens). And Ben de Guzman explained how the umbrella term of "Asian" encompasses many different cultures, and discussed the strengths and challenges that result from the differences among the multiple API communities that comprise NQAPIA. Examples like these illustrate how these groups utilize strategically essentialized identities as POC while concurrently deconstructing and/or complicating those essentialized identities.

While the QLM uses identity in ways that are markedly different from the GRM, theirs is not an entirely new approach. The QLM is part of a lineage of queer activism that pushes against narrowly defined identity categories. This history goes back to 1970s liberation activists (e.g., Gay Liberation Front),

and re-emerged in a very different form with queer politics in the 1990s (e.g., Queer Nation). These groups differed from each other in their goals and strategies but shared a commitment to abolishing constraining identity categories and labels. While this abolition of identity categories is not an explicit objective of the QLM, the movement clearly seeks to destabilize the same categories that were targeted by prior generations of activists.

Consequently, the QLM engages in a queer politic that embodies queer theory. Queer theory rejects a single authoritative account of experience, and contends that gender and sexual identity are social constructs that must be deconstructed (Sullivan, 2003). However, what can be deconstructed can also be reconstructed. For example, while employing the term "queer" deconstructs rigid identity categories, forming a collective identity around "queer" inherently builds this category up. The QLM has engaged in this simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of identity categories. Although the QLM's extensive list of sexual and gender identity categories certainly complicate common essentialized categories, they are still categories. As such, they do not enact queer theory to its full potential to completely subvert the concept of identity categories. Nevertheless, they do challenge the idea of an authoritative gay or lesbian identity. By framing the constructs of gender and sexual identity, race, class, and nation in these complicated ways, the queer liberation movement enacts calls to employ queer theory to deconstruct those identity categories. This process can be seen in the following excerpt from the statement drafted by the Roots Coalition (2010), and signed by 15,000 people at the 2010 U.S. Social Forum:

> Our identities are not our possessions; we do not own them, and we are more than any one label. However, our embodied existences are under attack and we do know that it is our duty to fight for specific and concrete human rights and overall system transformation. (para. 1)

Even as these QLM groups recognize that they challenge hegemonic notions of "normal," with regard to gender, sexuality, race, class, and nation, they also know that they have built their individual organizations, and their collective social movement, around identity categories. The strategic use of these categories

creates group cohesion, even as the organizations actively work to avoid simplistic, essentialized identity categories. Such a delicate balancing act is rife with contradictions and may make it more difficult for mainstream actors accustomed to single-issue or single-population movements to understand. Consequently, the QLM will have to engage in complicated public education, helping mainstream audiences understand the connections that the QLM has made between different identity groups and between different social justice issues. It may prove difficult for them to make legible how their constituents have a shared collective identity and, subsequently, how the issues on their agenda are "gay issues." Nevertheless, to simplify how these organizations deploy identity would betray their broader politic.

Enacting the Ideas of Feminists of Color

Perhaps the theoretical tradition that most characterizes the QLM is U.S. Women of Color Feminism (sometimes called U.S. Third World Feminism). The QLM's collective identity as queer and trans POC organizations challenges the GRM in much the same way feminists of color challenged second-wave feminists. Just as U.S. Third World feminists sought to complicate reductionist feminist constructions that hegemonized the experiences of White, middle-class women, so too does the QLM destabilize the dominant conception of LGBT identity as the terrain of White and middle-class bodies. This is most obvious in how the QLM centralizes Black feminism's intersectionality framework. This is a fundamental principle for the QLM – one which has driven their organizing work and shaped their collective identity as a queer and trans POC movement.

Both the QLM and U.S. feminists of color focus on people whose very identities challenge binary categorization. Sandoval (2000) explained that U.S. Third World feminists exist in the gaps created by binary identity categories, residing "in the interstices between normalized social categories," by virtue of being gendered, raced, sexed, and classed "between and among" the lines that exist between men and White women (p. 45). The result is that women of color comprise a conceptual third, divergent, and supplementary gender category. Anzaldúa (1987, 1991) used the term "new *mestiza*" to describe people who embody identities that do not conform to binary conceptions of

identity categories, but instead claim multiple racial, cultural, sexual, and political identities. A *mestiza's* contradictory and interlocking identities situate her as belonging in many spaces and not belonging anywhere, thus resisting essentialist single identity categories and providing her with "new angles of vision" to challenge society (Anzaldúa, 1987). *La mestiza* lives in "the Borderlands," between cultures, straddled by invisible borders that exist between groups normally delineated by binaries (e.g., men/woman, heterosexuals/homosexuals, Mexicans/Americans). People living in the Borderlands live in and between multiple worlds (Anzaldúa, 1987).

The QLM organizations are similarly situated in multiple worlds. For example, ALP's Director Cara Page often used the language of borders: "We are moving across borders or wanting to undefine what borders are." The identities of queer people of color require navigating at least four worlds (navigating two cultures demarcated by sexual orientation: the queer world and the mainstream straight world, and at least two worlds delineated by race: their individual racial identity(ies) and dominant White culture). In addition, most straddle additional worlds. For instance, queer immigrants of color must navigate at least two additional cultures: those determined by nationality (the U.S. and their country of origin). Similarly, transgender people of color must also often be fluent in the languages of multiple genders (the gender they were assigned at birth, and the gender world with which they identify).

Consequently, the QLM can be metaphorically understood as living in another kind of borderlands, working between and among various social movements (e.g., the GRM, the prison abolition movement, or the immigrant rights movement). This is a departure from other identity-based social movements organized around single-axis identities and/or a single issue. U.S. Third World feminism complicated previously essentialized identity categories, and the QLM continues that practice. In addition, U.S. Third World feminists sought to bring together people of various identities "on the bottom" with whom they have connections (Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981): a central operating premise of the QLM. The QLM organizes across a range of different experiences (whether that is homelessness, undocumented legal status, incarceration, or poverty)

situated on the margins and at the bottom of society's social hierarchy. The QLM shares with U.S. Third World feminists the understanding that people of all marginalized identities must work together collaboratively to create social change. In this way, both movements challenge constructions of identity politics that rely on single-axis identity categories as criteria for collaboration ("we share the same identity, so you are in / we are different, so you are out").

The QLM's collective identity is based on solidarity among differently disempowered groups at least as much as it is upon sexual identity or gender identity categories. As such, the QLM embodies Cohen's (1997) call for organizing around shared marginal status rather than around queer identity. By organizing those who share marginal status within dominant power systems, the QLM not only centers the movement around the needs of the most marginalized LGBT communities, while bringing in heterosexual people who are similarly marginalized within those systems, but it also potentially removes affluent LGBT people from the movement entirely, except in the role of allies. Yet, even as it organizes beyond identity categories, it simultaneously organizes around a collective identity (queer and trans POC). This complicated juggling act of competing principles is a significant theoretical framework that must be integrated into social movement analyses of LGBT activism.

Conclusion

The QLM challenges existing social movement theory about LGBT activism and extends social movement theorizing and strategy. By simultaneously challenging and extending identity deployment, the QLM is different from the GRM with its deployment of a singular, essentialist identity. Rather than understanding the QLM as sharing a unified, ethnic identity, it can be better understood through a lens that incorporates both U.S. Third World feminism and queer theories.

Of particular significance is the QLM's practice of organizing around a collective identity while simultaneously enacting Cohen's call to organize around status instead of identity. It embodies an emerging trend in other 21st century social movements (see Dixon, 2014), but has not, until now, been understood

as a feature of U.S. LGBT activism. This practice in the QLM has important implications for social movement scholarship. It does not merely complicate collective identity categories—it actually challenges and importantly augments the very concept of identity-based organizing.

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