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HOMOSEXUALITY AS A SOCIALY CONSTRUCTED DISABILITY
IN A HETERONORMATIVE CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

What is “normal?” It’s a question that does not, at least consciously, cross the minds of most people, yet it undoubtedly governs society. While homosexuality has been removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as a disability, it continues to be viewed as an undesirable trait, something that is arguably detrimental to the individuals who ascribe to that label. Society at large has a profound impact on the “normality” of an individual’s life. I argue that homosexuality is not detrimental to an individual in any way, but that white, able-bodied, “normal” members of society manage to subjugate the homosexual identity, therefore disabling homosexuals from attaining equality. I examined several films: *Milk*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, *Philadelphia*, and *The Crying Game*, in an effort to draw comparisons between disability studies and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered (LGBT) rights movement and examine the representations of queerness and gayness in dramatized versions of “real life.

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Introduction

"As it happens, I experience my homosexuality as a (mild) disability. If I could have designed myself in the womb, I would have chosen to be heterosexual, because I feel I am missing out on something special and irreplaceable by not being able to conceive and raise a child with the partner I love. On the other hand, I say the disability is mild because most people need to do without some important opportunity. Life is like that. We play the hand we're dealt."

--Jonathan Rauch, *Gay Marriage...*

As someone who has come out recently, and is just coming to theoretical and critical writings about homosexuality in the academy, I find it overwhelming: there are so many different ways to think in political terms about my status as a homosexual here and now – in the U.S. at the beginning of the 21st century.

Through my work researching the topic and learning about the history of my fellow gays, I have come to a somewhat troubling realization: I am disabled. I am not wheelchair bound; I have all of the digits, appendages, and organs that the average female hopes to have- and they all function relatively well. Yet, I am forced to fight for the very same rights my heterosexual sister has- despite being given an equal start in life by our loving parents. I am disabled not by my body (though some might argue that point), but by my society. I have been deemed “abnormal” by millions of people whom I will never meet because I am gay.

What I aim to do in this thesis is think through some of these political approaches to homosexuality. I have in mind three main approaches – although I recognize there are undoubtedly others. First, what does it mean to think of homosexuality as a disability? If, according to social theorist models of disability and social structures, disability is actually

created by built environments that only accommodate normate subjects (and thus stigmatize non-normate subjects), how might this model work in the context of heterosexual/homosexual difference? Second, what are the stakes of seeing homosexuals as a civil minority – on the model of racial or ethnic minorities, who demand the rights and recognitions accorded to majority populations? Are civil rights enough? According to the third approach I will touch on – the approach supported by Queer theorists, like Michael Warner, neither civil rights nor a consideration of homosexuality as a disability provide an adequate or even desirable approach to homosexuality. Both of them simply shore up, in their different ways, the centrality and unassailable authority of heteronormative culture. In the next few pages, as I discuss these three models, I will attempt to examine this concept of heteronormativity, which will, in turn, enable a consideration of potential positions of gay subjects.

Ultimately, however, I am interested in the representations of homosexuality – particularly in film – which, it seems to me, offer more capacious and less abstract ways of thinking about the lived conditions of queerness or gayness. To that end, the second half of this essay will examine four films that represent the perils and pleasures of homosexuality in four different (though admittedly general) venues of life. For a view of the complicated politics entailed in gay rights, I will look at Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008). For the domestic perils of passing, I will examine *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999). *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993) will provide a template for thinking about the heteronormative mandates of the professional male life, and finally, the open performance of transsexuality will frame my discussion of *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992).

Homosexuality as a Disability

“We live in a world of norms,” Lennard Davis says in “Constructing Normalcy” (3). He goes on to say, “[e]ach of us endeavors to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state. We consider what the average person does, thinks, earns, or consumes. We rank our intelligence, our cholesterol level, our weight, height, sex drive, bodily dimensions along some conceptual line from subnormal to above-average” (3). Normal – a word that, at least superficially, is quite simple – has managed to creep into the human psyche and manipulate our ability to grow and change as a society. When it comes to sexuality, like Davis says, we consider what the “average” person considers him/herself (heterosexual), but even that has subcategories in relation to dominance, masculinity/femininity, and various gender roles that a heterosexual couple chooses to embrace and enact. The sexual boundaries of what is acceptable and normal may seem rigid, but in reality they ebb and flow like any other aspect of our society. To that end, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) rights movement exists because the standard definition of normal sexual orientation is changing.

As Michael Warner points out in his book, *The Trouble With Normal*, “[p]opularized versions of evolutionary biology are enjoying quite a vogue now because they seem to justify the status quo as an expression of natural law” (4). All too often, people assume that their way of living is right, and that everyone else should follow the same standards. The struggle comes when something, like sexuality, seems as though it should be universal. As it happens, sexuality is not universal, or even binary, which makes considering diverse sexualities challenging because the first instinct is to think of them as wrong, abnormal, or flawed.

The real issue at hand is this: society is so heavily saturated with the privilege of “normal” that we are unable to authenticate what is truly disabling. Society privileges able-bodied heterosexuals and in doing so, disables those who do not meet those standards. People with physical disabilities are often limited because society has not “normalized” function, but fashion. Buildings are constructed without ramps or elevators in favor of a beautiful winding staircase; kitchen sinks and cabinets are placed high off of the ground rather than lower and easier to access. While these things are not relevant issues to the able bodied, they have become *normal* issues for many disabled people. Warner makes a similar comparison to the hetero/homo argument. He says, “it would be nice if the burden of proof, in such questions of sexual morality, lay on those who want to impose their standard on someone else” (5). Unfortunately, it rarely works that way. Instead, homosexuals and disabled people alike are expected to legitimize their differences to a group of people (heterosexuals/able-bodied) who still may never fully understand that difference does not disable, ignorance does.

Labeling homosexuality as a disability will certainly affect the gay community, and will most certainly be met with resistance. According to a longstanding stereotype of disability, the disabled individual tries to be seen as an able-bodied person; if he/she were to acknowledge or claim the disability, he/she would be understood as narcissistic, to use Tobin Siebers’s word: seeking attention because of the disability. In the case of homosexuality, receiving that attention could be beneficial to the community as a whole in an attempt to make members of the “norm” aware of society’s tendency to reject what they do not know. Some would say that this could be counter-productive; society may assume that because the gay community is accepting the label of disabled that attitudes toward gays and lesbians don’t need to change or that the gay community is simply interested in assuming the role of “victim.” However, it would seem that

not claiming homosexuality as a disability would simply be ignoring the problem that so clearly exists in the United States. Robert McRuer addresses this controversial issue of claiming homosexuality as a disability in his book *Crip Theory*. McRuer, an openly gay professor claims that there is an emphasis placed on the differences between hetero and homo, “not necessarily on essential difference but, rather, on how queers are *made* different by an oppressive society and how a minority identity emerges” (163). The idea that homosexuals are “*made*” different by some external force, or by the majority group, seems to take a more controversial position than the idea of liberal reformist counterparts who use the mantra “homosexuals are just like everyone else.” While the idea of being forced out of the “norm” and into an “other” category may be appealing to some as a way to draw attention to the lack of equality, McRuer and his students found “the suggestion that the construction of gays and lesbians as a ‘niche market’ [to be] problematic” (165). As to which approach is better, here is no right answer. Over the years, the gay rights movement has attempted to use both the “just like everyone else” and the opposite “we’re different because you (the heterosexuals) make us that way” slogan, and while the LGBT movement has come a long way from the Stonewall riots (the unofficial beginning of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) movement), neither movement has gained homosexuals the same rights as heterosexuals. The disparity between rights given to heteros as opposed to homos is perhaps the greatest marker of disability. Homosexuals are denied the *ability* to marry (in most states), the *ability* to visit partners in the hospital, and the *ability* to be themselves without fearing rejection; thus the appropriate categorization of disabled.

For years, homosexuals around the world, not just in the United States, have been oppressed, denied equality, and forced to ascribe not just to one label (homosexual) but many; the most challenging: disabled. The term disabled is challenging for many because the term is

too strong, inaccurate, ignorant, misinterpreted, and/or repulsive, but I affirm that claiming the term is the only way for homosexuals to achieve equality. Without doing so, there is no stimulus for change and nothing for which to fight. Because society is reluctant to change and is largely unable to understand the amount of change required to establish a new status quo, I assert that homosexuality is a disability; while not physically disabling, it has proved to be a mental and emotional handicap.

The Oxford English Dictionary offer several definitions of disability, including:

1. Lack of ability (*to* discharge any office or function); inability, incapacity; weakness.
2. Incapacity in the eye of the law, or created by the law; a restriction framed to prevent any person or class of persons from sharing in duties or privileges which would otherwise be open to them; legal disqualification.

There are two things that both of the aforementioned definitions have in common: both imply an intangible standard by which we are to measure “weakness” and “incapacity” because both of these words take their meaning from the context in which they are used, which establishes their relationship to the “norm”. Warner explains this phenomenon by saying that society implements conditions that are intended to prevent variation, which in turn undermine each individual’s sexual autonomy. He notes the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Roth v. the United States* (1957), in which states and the federal government were allowed to restrict anything they chose to define as “obscene.” The court later clarified its definition of obscene as “anything having ‘prurient’ interest in sex and ‘offensive’ by community standards” (12, Warner). The problem with the court’s definition is that it gave communities the right to impose standards not established in the Constitution. Furthermore, there is weakness in allowing a dominant culture the ability to administer and determine the rights that sexual deviants are allowed to have.

Minority Rights for Homosexuals

Unfortunately, as Michael Warner notes, the gay rights movement has primarily focused on the politics of identity rather than the more important issue of sexual shame associated with homosexuality. Shortly after the Stonewall riots, there was an emphasis on broad social change that was not politically centered, but as the movement progressed, the goals changed. I recognize that broad social change and civil rights are not mutually exclusive, and that one influences the other, but for the first time, civil rights, which, by definition are more concrete, were accorded a central importance. Janis Bohan and Glenda Russell's work *Conversations about Psychology and Sexual Orientation* acknowledges that "decreasing emphasis was placed on broader social change; the focus shifted to securing civil rights for LGB[T]s in particular" (143). It would seem that Bohan and Russell recognize homosexuality as a social disability because they contribute a powerful discussion of the socially constructed inequalities facing homosexuals, but it would also seem that they would suggest that it is not the claiming of homosexuality as a disability, but the way in which equality is sought that has kept equality out of the hands of homosexuals. By focusing on the micro (strictly LGBT) instead of the macro (all sexually oppressed groups, meaning people engaging in anything other than hetero, reproductive sex) the abnormality of homosexuality has been highlighted and exploited rather than blended into the spectrum of human sexuality. Expressing the oppression of the LGBT community as its own entity apart from other sexually oppressed peoples, including heterosexuals, creates more disparity in the formation of a group stereotype, and weakens the fight for collective civil rights for all. Often times the stereotype that forms of a group is born out of the extremes that exist within the group. These extremes, which are the exception rather than the rule, become the

substance of that group's biggest public and private battles. Michael Warner praises Erving Goffman by quoting his eloquent and succinct description:

Whether closely allied with his own kind or not, the stigmatized individual may exhibit identity ambivalence when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way, flamboyantly or pitifully acting out the negative attributes imputed to them. The sight may repel him, since after all he supports the norms of the wider society, but his social and psychological identification with these offenders holds him to what repels him, transforming repulsion into shame, and then transforming ashamedness itself into something of which he is ashamed. In brief, he can neither embrace his group nor let it go. (31-32).

Goffman is talking about stigma in general, but the implications are vast. Rights-seeking homosexuals are, in many ways, fighting the stigma that is associated with homosexuality in America. There is a certain benefit that comes with being included in the norm of society. There is also a benefit that accompanies the freedom to associate with whomever without the fear of being persecuted by others. It would seem that both Warner and Goffman would agree with the mantra that "homosexuals are just like everyone else," but they would be sure to acknowledge that that logic does not withstand the test of reality.

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) is the largest civil rights organization with more than one million people working to achieve equality for the LGBT community. The goal of the HRC is to mobilize grassroots movements in diverse communities, and strategically invest in the political campaigns of fair-minded individuals. The HRC's fight for civil rights began in the 1980s and has since endorsed two winning presidents: Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In part,

the diligent work of HRC leaders has resulted in more states than ever before allow gay marriage or some form of domestic partnership, and include sexuality under nondiscrimination laws.

While I appreciate the HRC for their commitment to bettering the lives of LGBT identified persons, I am simultaneously disheartened by the “we are the same as you, therefore we deserve rights” train of thought because to a certain degree, followers of that movement have been coerced into disavowing an innate part of their being in an effort to be accepted by the heteronormative culture. I am (generally) the same as any other person except for my sexual preferences, to which I am entitled. Everyone is. Sex, whether gay or straight, is a part of the human experience, and to say that my human experience as a gay woman is the same as any straight woman would be completely undermining the fact that I am proud to be gay and that I appreciate my sexuality as one more thing that makes me unique. I, like Warner, acknowledge that the mantra is true in theory, but in reality, it disregards the beautiful differences that make people singular and interesting.

Dissident Sexuality: The Queer Repudiation of Heteronormativity

The antithesis of civil rights seeking homosexuals and organizations are Queer theorists who focus on non-normative sexualities, challenging the authenticity of the heteronormative by stepping away from labels like gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, homosexual, and heterosexual in favor of a larger, more comprehensive, existential view of sexuality.

Queer theorists reject these labels because they are used to implement a hierarchy of sexualities, with heterosexuality at the top. While many people ascribe to Queer theory, explaining what it is, at least for me, has been rather more difficult than I originally anticipated. Queer theorists do not like to limit themselves to a definition precisely because to make a definition, you have to draw a line, and that might exclude a community, and it also would require the language and labels of the very society to which they have an aversion of ascribing. Furthermore, a definition might preserve an exacting form of Queer theory as standard or normal, which would undermine the fundamental reason the theory exists. Establishing any concrete definition could also limit the potential of Queer theory from developing into something else entirely. For explanatory purposes only, I might note that Queer theory concerns a broad view of sexuality that doesn't conform to expectations of gender or sexual orientation.

Perhaps the most interesting (and confusing) aspect of Queer Theory is that its best-known leaders, like Judith Butler, attest that it cannot succeed because that would imply that it was a widely acknowledged term, thus making it debunk. As Annamarie Jagose, writes in her book, *Queer Theory*,

Queer may be thought of as activating an identity politics so attuned to the constraining effects of naming, of delineating a foundational category which

precedes and underwrites political intervention, that it may better be understood as promoting a non-identity--or even anti-identity--politics. If a potentially infinite coalition of sexual identities, practices, discourses and sites might be identified as queer, what it betokens is not so much liberal pluralism as a negotiation of the very concept of identity itself. For queer is, in part, a response to perceived limitations in the liberationist and identity-conscious politics of the gay and lesbian feminist movements. The rhetoric of both has been structured predominantly around self-recognition, community and shared identity; inevitably, if inadvertently, both movements have also resulted in exclusions, delegitimation, and a false sense of universality. The discursive proliferation of queer has been enabled in part by the knowledge that identities are fictitious--that is, produced by and productive of material effects but nevertheless arbitrary, contingent and ideologically motivated.

Much like the “we’re the same as you” movement, it is an idea that works conceptually, but the moment it was given a name – Queer theory – gained a large following, its existence as an anti-identity group became largely duplicitous.

Because I find that I sympathize with Queer theorists and Civil rights-seekers alike, I am left to question what the implications are of not choosing one over the other. It would seem that inaction is more closely aligned with Queer theory, as it allows the individual to make personal choices without allegiance to a group – which is the epitome of Queer theory. Alternatively, indecision in regard to choosing between the Civil rights-seekers and Queer theorists could prove to further alienate sexual deviants from society because they have no connection to a like-minded

group of individuals.¹ However, choosing both seems contradictory.² Regardless of the various angles and sides that surround this particular issue, the underlying concept is that humans desire respect and understanding from the relationships that they create throughout their lifetimes.

Whether those relationships include elements of political dissent or simply persist in spite of stigmas or approval, they continue the ebb and flow of changing standards and norms within our society.

¹ That is not to say that those are the only two schools of thought, simply that they are broad categories that encompass many members of the LGBT community.

² Is it possible to have a non-conformist, anti-socially-ascribed-labels individual who also values equality and civil rights? I think I might be one of them....

Cinematographic Representations of Homosexuality as a Socially Constructed Disability in a Heteronormative Culture

While there are a multitude of “real-life” examples of the vast and intangible range of ‘normal,’ film offers us a useful venue through which to examine homosexuality as a disability in a hetero-normative culture is through cinema. Contemporary society is often influenced by the news media, television and movies. I’ve chosen to examine the dilemma through film because televised news media tend to be reductive about the core issue that I am trying to explore. Most television programs don’t dare to incorporate homosexuality into their plots and those that do only incorporate homosexuals in subplots or as supporting characters. That being said, the majority of films are geared toward a heterosexual audience. From a young age we are inundated with Disney films that show a young girl who relies on a strong young man to come along and save her from whatever trouble she may be in, and somewhere along the way they fall in love and “live happily ever after.” Those romantic comedies that explore homosexuality are often independent films that never amass much of an audience.

In what follows, I have (roughly) identified four arenas that disable members of the LGBT community in a variety of ways on a daily basis: the arena of public politics, the home, the workplace, and the social. I have selected four films, *Milk*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, *Philadelphia*, and *The Crying Game*, each of which represents one of these arena, in order to further explore the ways in which viewing homosexuality and disability through the same lens reinforces the idea that “normal” is a social construct that changes and adapts as new technologies and values emerge.

- *Milk* -

Milk is the story of Harvey Milk, an American gay activist who fought for LGBT rights and became California's first openly gay elected official. As a Civil rights-seeking homosexual, his platform tended to lean toward the “we’re the same as you” mantra, but he most certainly acknowledged that society was enforcing existing norms rather than working toward creating new ones. The film chronicles Milk’s foray into politics, and the various battles that he undertook in San Francisco. The film also examines the ongoing political campaigns meant to limit the rights of gay people in 1977 and 1978 run by Anita Bryant and John Briggs. Milk’s romantic and political relationships are also addressed, as is his fragile relationship with troubled Supervisor Dan White; the film ends when White commits a heinous double homicide of Milk and Mayor George Moscone.

Director, Gus Van Sant, screenwriter Lance Black, and actor Sean Penn embraced a figurative birth-to-death structure for their true-to-life biopic, except that Milk’s “birth” is not his literal beginning of life in Long Island, but rather his mid-life abjuration of his mainstream life as a researcher on Wall Street and his new beginning in San Francisco’s Castro district in the mid-1970s. Early in the film, Milk says, “Forty years old and I haven’t done a thing.” A significant part of the film’s power is derives from its unspoken declaration that it is never too late to enter into politics or to make an effort to better one’s community. Furthermore, the film suggests that it is impossible to separate the personal from the political, as exemplified by the few scenes of Milk’s personal life, which show how Milk’s activism impedes on the time spent with his boyfriend. In other words, the-film is more focused on the strategies and initiatives that made his cause a movement, have inspired so many, and are sharply relevant in today’s political environment. Indeed, although he was open about his sexual preference from the start, Milk also

campaigned on a broad platform that included expanded childcare facilities, low-rent housing and a civilian police-review board, in addition to the issue of gay rights.

Hoping to produce change through politics, Milk decided to run for a spot on the Board of Supervisors, San Francisco's city council. He found support for his campaign in the gay community, and sought to create an alliance with other minorities in the city. Of the thirty-two candidates in his first race for Supervisor, Milk came in tenth. Although he lost the election, he became a prominent figure in San Francisco's political arena. Milk, lovingly known as "the Mayor of Castro Street" by the gay majority in his district, spent much of the following year preparing for the next election campaign. He recognized that to garner more support from San Franciscans outside of the Castro, he would need to take on a more mainstream approach.

Milk ran for supervisor again in 1975, and despite the efforts he made, he lost again, this time placing seventh. Newly elected Mayor, George Moscone (1929-1978) recognized Milk's potential and his genuine concern for his community and appointed him to the Board of Permit Appeals – Milk's first role in public office. After just a few weeks, however, Milk announced his intention to run for the state assembly, which led to his removal from his city post. Milk ran against the Democratic Party on the campaign theme "Harvey Milk versus the Machine," and lost yet again. Regardless of his loss, he had established a political machine of his own, the San Francisco Gay Democratic Club. In 1977, on his third campaign for the Board of Supervisors, Milk was finally elected, becoming the first openly gay elected official in the city's history.

Milk began nearly every speech that he addressed to crowds of gay men and women saying, "My name is Harvey Milk, and I'm here to recruit you,"³ and in his victory speech, attributes his win to having built enough support from the LGBT community. He dedicated the

³ This is an interesting turn of phrase, considering that the vehement opposition to gay rights warned that gays would "recruit" children into the homosexual lifestyle.

last nine years of his life to fighting for gay rights. The film makes it clear that there was no discernable difference between his personal and professional life. Randy Shilts reproduced one of Milk's speeches in his book, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, in which Milk says,

You see there is a major difference--and it remains a vital difference--between a friend and a gay person, a friend in office and a gay person in office. Gay people have been slandered nationwide... it's not just enough anymore just to have friends represent us, no matter how good that friend may be... A gay official is needed not just for our protection, but to set an example for younger gays that says that the system works. (362)

Milk's goal in asserting gay pride through political empowerment, was not to force mainstream America to accept homosexuality, but to respect the homosexual's right to be homosexual, without governmental interference or hindrance. Unfortunately, money and power are invariably linked to policy makers, which ultimately limited Milk's effectiveness in office. Milk fought not for the universal acceptance of homosexuality as "an alternate life-style," but for a universal acceptance of homosexuals as human beings, endowed by their creator with the same unalienable rights as their heterosexual counterparts. Whether his audience was sympathetic or hostile, Milk always depicted the struggle for gay rights as "the fight to preserve *your* democracy." In regard to preserving democracy, Milk said,

...you've got to keep electing gay people...to know there is better hope for tomorrow. Not only for gays, but for blacks, Asians, the disabled, our senior citizens and us. Without hope, we give up. I know you cannot live on hope alone, but without it life is not worth living. You and you and you have got to see that the promise does not fade.

While Milk urged his constituents to vote for minority groups, there is a group of homosexuals who refuse to vote for gay political leaders or petition any wealthy heteronormative, rights-granting body for equal rights because they believe that such inalienable rights cannot be given by a governing body comprised of men and women who are no better and no different than they. Of this group of people, Warner says,

Homosexuals who are not petitioning for rights] lay at the heart of an ethical vision of queer politics and centered on the need to resist the state regulation of sexuality. Queer thought both before and after Stonewall rested on these principles: . . . It resisted any attempt to make the norms of straight culture into the standards by which queer life should be measured. It especially resisted the notion that the state should be allowed to accord legitimacy to some kinds of consensual sex but not others, or to confer respectability on some people's sexuality but not others" (88).

Warner notes that these insights made up the ethical vision he encountered when he was coming out and feels that any movement to gain political equality should not be strictly meant for same-sex couples, but for any unmarried and/or nonstandard households. A character in *Milk*, Cleve Jones, a young man who meets Milk in the Castro, seems to align himself with this camp. During their first encounter, they have the following exchange:

Milk: We should get you over here and get you registered, Mr. Jones.

Cleve: Fuck that. Elections of any kind are fucking bourgeois affectation.⁴

While Jones eventually works on Milk's campaign, he was reluctant in the beginning because he felt that his efforts would be in vain and that no governing body had the authority to give him rights. It is important, however, to remember that hetero- does not exist without homo, just as

⁴ *Milk*. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Universal Pictures, 2008. Film.

normal does not exist without abnormal. Jones eventually realizes that the homosexual movement will not gain traction without support from the heterosexual community. Consistent with the social model of disability theory, educating “normal,” able-bodied members of society on the ways in which “abnormal,” disabled bodies are only made so by society as a whole serves as a method of removing stigma and removing disabled bodies from unnecessary isolation. Both the LGBT movements and the social model of disability theory call for changes in society in regard to popular attitudes, social support, and information. Rather than claiming to be a part of the social majority, or standard norm, proponents of the social disabilities model and the social gay rights model simply ask for acceptance and accommodation of different needs and goals – the very same thing for which Milk was both personally and professionally campaigning.

In an entry in the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) titled “Homosexuality,” Brent Pickett writes,

“[t]he debates about homosexuality, in part because they often involve public policy and legal issues, tend to be sharply polarized. Those most concerned with homosexuality, positively or negatively, are also those most engaged, with natural law theorists arguing for gays and lesbians having a reduced legal status, and queer theorists engaged in critique and deconstruction of what they see as a heterosexist regime. Yet the two do not talk much to one another, but rather ignore or talk past one another. There are some theorists in the middle. For example, Michael Sandel takes an Aristotelian approach from which he argues that gay and lesbian relationships can realize the same goods that heterosexual relationships do (Sandel, 1995). He largely shares the account of important human goods that natural law theorists have, yet in his evaluation of the worth of same-

sex relationships, he is clearly sympathetic to gay and lesbian concerns. Similarly, Bruce Bawer (1993) and Andrew Sullivan (1995) have written eloquent defenses of full legal equality for gays and lesbians, including marriage rights. Yet neither argue for any systematic reform of broader American culture or politics. In this they are essentially conservative. Therefore, rather unsurprisingly, these centrists are attacked from both sides. Sullivan, for example, has been criticized at length both by queer theorists (e.g., Phelan, 2001) and natural law theorists (e.g., George, 1999).

Pickett suggests that the policy and legal debates surrounding homosexuality tend to move cyclically instead of forward because they involve fundamental issues of morality and justice. While Milk most likely would have agreed with Sandel's Aristotelian approach, he also would have recognized that it is not possible without some sort of reconciliation of morality and justice. Milk acquiesced his personal life with his professional in an effort to find a comfortable balance between homo and hetero politics, but because hetero politics and ideals are privileged, his effectiveness was stifled.

Milk offers a transparent representation of how homosexuality functions as a disability within the politics of our heteronormative culture. Milk's story is still relevant to us today: despite the level of involvement in the political arena by the LGBT community, gay men and women must run smarter campaigns, raise more money and fight harder for viability and support than their opponents.

- *Boys Don't Cry* -

If there is one place that a person should be free to live in the manner that s/he chooses, it is in his/her own home. The story of Teena Brandon/Brandon Teena in Kimberly Pierce's *Boys Don't Cry* rejects this notion emphatically. While the filmmakers admit to having taken some creative liberties with the storyline, the underlying account of the female-to-male transsexual, Brandon Teena, a real person with dreams, desires and needs, is true and truly disheartening. In presenting the rage produced among heteros by Brandon's cross-dressing, the film explores what happens when the "suppression of female masculinities allows for male masculinity to stand unchallenged as the bearer of gender stability and gender deviance" (Halberstam, 41). It also refutes the idea that passion cannot exist unless it is between a man and a woman; it can and it does, so in effect passion must be policed so that no deviation may arise. Pierce uses the film to destabilize and discredit the binary gender system that has plagued America since its foundation.

Social pressure to conform to a heteronormative culture puts undo strain on homo-identified individuals. This pressure prevents some homosexuals from living their lives as freely as their heterosexual counterparts, even within the walls of their own home. Some find that passing as straight is a solution to this problem, while others maintain that passing only creates a larger problem in regards to self-identification and self-worth. In the film, when Brandon's new social group, formed around "his" love relationship with a girl, learns that he was born she, they are outraged to the point that they murder him, and not only for his deviance, but for the fact that they were fooled by it.

Pierce resists the temptation of ascribing too much sympathy to Brandon in the beginning of the movie. Instead, she allows the viewer to experience his various differences from the all-too-familiar hetero-normative society, but also to experience how his character—his

recklessness, his passion—is entirely typical of all adolescents. The film’s unapologetic protagonist is clearly a more positive character than those surrounding him, and is nothing more than a victim of the vehement opposition to anyone challenging heterosexual norms.

“Who are you?” A short, but poignant question asked of Brandon by his love, Lana, this question lies at the core of the film and the gay rights movement. *Boys Don’t Cry* is about the search for freedom and identity in a society where sexual diversity is rarely accepted. Perhaps it should be easy to answer the question, but in reality it is highly complex and abstract. Members of the LGBT community struggle to answer this question in the home, like Brandon, because so many family units mimic the hetero archetype. A child raised by a heterosexual couple encounters the associated expectations: s/he will grow up, go to school, get a job, fall in love with someone of the opposite sex, get married, and have children. When a child “comes out,” his or her parents often feel as though they do not know their child as well as they thought they once did because they feel that their preconceived expectations are no longer realistic. The realization that a family member or friend is gay works to undo the heteronormal ideals that are so firmly ingrained in our society.

Boys Don’t Cry is not only a story about Brandon’s search for identity, but about how others’ identities are challenged by his assertion of maleness.⁵ Brandon has already answered Lana’s question (who are you?) before the movie begins. It is not until Brandon’s maleness infringes upon the masculinity of another character, Tom, that the question of identity really emerges. Pierce begins the movie without allowing the viewer to see Teena before her transformation into Brandon because she specifically wanted the audience to associate with Brandon with his own self-identity as male. Therefore, within the context of the movie, Brandon

⁵ Brandon’s assertion of maleness is the catalyst to Tom’s violent attack. Tom claims that Lana cannot be with Brandon because he is a woman, but the underlying issue is that their relationship breaks with hetero-norms.

never questions his own identity. He is Brandon Teena, and not Teena Brandon. It is the other characters who begin to question identity. Prior to Brandon's true sex being divulged, the others think that he is "normal," and they enjoy his company. The love between Brandon and Lana is obvious, and their passion is convincing to everyone that knows them, including Tom. But when Tom learns that Brandon is actually biologically female, he polices that passion; the realization that what he thought was a hetero relationship was actually taking place between two women completely undoes the entire notion that they were ever – or could ever – be in love. Tom's insecurities about the instability of gender and sexuality roles triggers a violent reaction. If Brandon is living proof that gender can be changed, then he must be raped and murdered in order to restore the fiction of gender.

It would be too easy to say that sexual identity is irrelevant and that people should be allowed to identify with whatever sex or gender role they wish. The fact of the matter is that in a hetero-normative culture there is little-room for deviance. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Americans, like Brandon, are encouraged to ascribe to a label and assume the position of "other" by the hetero- community because the average heterosexual American is trained to think in binary terms, male and female, and is challenged by the concept of a spectrum of genders and sexualities. Brandon Teena's story in *Boys Don't Cry* shows these labels don't serve to help LGBT individuals, who most likely wouldn't identify themselves by their sexuality if it weren't such a taboo subject; these labels serve the hetero-normative culture.

- Philadelphia -

There seems to exist a scale by which we divide disabilities into categories based on the extent to which they affect the individual. A homosexual person does not experience any loss of physical strength, or mental ability (although some would argue that mental ability is compromised), but like other disabled persons, homosexuals face a rejection because they are deemed to deviate from society's norm. Just as the blind and deaf are made aware of their differences from what is considered normal, so too, are homosexual men and women. This division is usually accompanied by stigma and related degrees of shame. Warner discusses shame as one of the most significant disablers associated with homosexuality: "Stigma," he writes, "like its etymological kin *stigmata*, refers to a mark on the body, like a brand or a tattoo or a severed ear, identifying a person permanently with his or her disgrace" (27). He goes on to say "it mark[s] the person, not the deed, as tainted" (28). In *Philadelphia*, Andrew Beckett, the homosexual character played by Tom Hanks evinces no identifying "gay" traits. He is, for all intents and purposes, a very masculine male, and is therefore, in his public persona, untouched by the stigmas of homosexuality. But shame persists in his life nevertheless. Early in the film, Beckett is introduced as a well-liked, respected lawyer. In a late-night meeting, his bosses⁶ assign him to an important case, and he is thrilled to have gained their respect and trust. During the meeting, one of the executives notices a lesion on Hanks' face, and it is clear that he knows Hanks is not only lying when he says he received the mark after being hit in the head with a racquetball, but that he has AIDS. Later that night, Beckett finishes a report and leaves the file sitting on his desk, then goes home for the evening. The next day, his secretary calls saying the file is gone and the attorneys need it in court in fifteen minutes. Beckett knows that the file was on his desk, and knows that someone moved it in an effort to jeopardize his career. Although

⁶ They are men who could very accurately be described as "good-ol'-boys."

Beckett finds the file and gets it to court in time, he is fired regardless. He knows that he was fired because his secret is out: he is a homosexual man infected with HIV.

The workplace, particularly a conservative environment, proves to be a challenging area for some homosexuals because the notion of professionalism is called into question. For many people, their sexual orientation is such an integral part of their identity that to remain closeted in the workplace would seem false. Others, however, might prefer or be compelled to maintain separation between their personal and professional lives, only sharing information about their orientation with close friends. Hiding one's identity could lead to feelings of lowered self-esteem and frustration at leading a dual life; being openly gay could lead to discrimination, harassment, or even the loss of one's job. There is no "right" answer.

The professional consequences for leading an openly gay lifestyle can be severe, and extremely disabling. In a society that privileges heterosexuality, and doesn't provide protection to gay members of the community, outing oneself in the workplace can result in termination; so many choose not to take the risk. In an effort to live without the judgment (positive or negative) of others, many members of the LGBT community attempt to "pass."

Passing refers to a person's ability to be accepted or regarded as a member of the sex or gender with which they identify, or with which they physically present. Typically, passing involves a mixture of physical gender cues as well as certain behavioral attributes that tend to be culturally associated with a particular gender. This does not mean that the individual is pretending that they are not gay; it simply means that they are able to blend in with "normal" heterosexual society because they physically match the stereotype of a heterosexual person. Gay men and women live in an environment that is perceived to be completely heterosexual by most people who live in it, so some find it better to adhere to the status quo rather than disturb it and

risk creating chaos for themselves. In *Philadelphia*, Tom Hanks' character seems to fit the standard heterosexual mold. He is attractive, strong, physically active, articulate and employed at a very conservative law firm. In fact, he comments that he never told, or led his coworkers to believe that he was gay or infected with HIV because he felt more comfortable allowing them to assume that he was "normal". The validity of his court case – when he brings a discrimination suit against his law firm – rests upon that fact and that he was fired only after his employer discovered that he was a gay man with HIV.

Hanks' character, Beckett, made the conscious choice to pass at work because it was easier for him. He clearly understood the benefits and consequences of passing in the workplace, and his fears of the consequences were justified. In regard to the benefits, Gregory M. Herek, Series Editor along with Allen Omoto and Howard Kurtzman, editors of *Sexual Orientation and Mental Health* claims that there are "three broad categories of reasons why people might reveal their sexual orientation; improving interpersonal relationships, enhancing one's mental and physical health, and changing society's attitudes" (228). The editors go on to describe a study in which twenty lesbians and gay men were interviewed about how, when, where, why, and to whom they disclosed their sexual orientation. The interviewees reasoned that they disclosed their sexual orientation in an effort to be honest; develop close relationships; be comfortable with one's self; and to be affirmed and supported (Omoto, 228). There are, however, obvious advantages to cloaking one's sexual orientation, since ridicule, rejection, jokes, harassment, discrimination, and physical or emotional abuse may well accompany the disclosure of one's sexual orientation. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of passing is that it requires a "constant vigilance regarding the personal information one shares with other people" (Omoto, 228). Obviously, the environment and social climate in which an individual lives is a determining

factor as to whether or not he or she feels comfortable disclosing such personal information. In Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, one of the gay characters, Roy Cohn, who is also a lawyer infected with HIV, notes the difference between being a labeled homosexual and simply sleeping with someone of the same sex. He says,

"Gay," "homosexual," "lesbian;" you think they tell you what a person is, but they don't tell you that. Like all labels, they refer to one thing and one thing only: Where does a person so identified fit in the food chain? In the pecking order. Not ideology of sexual taste, but something much simpler — clout. Who owes me favors. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call. To someone who doesn't understand this, homosexual is what I am because I sleep with men, but this is wrong. A homosexual is someone who, in 15 years of trying, can't get a pissant anti-discrimination bill through City Council. They are men who know nobody, and who nobody knows (85).

Clout is something that takes a long time to develop, but an instant to lose, a fact that Beckett learns after being reduced to “a homosexual” rather than the exceptional lawyer that he was.

Philadelphia was inspired in part by the story of Geoffrey Bowers, an attorney who in 1987 sued the law firm Baker & McKenzie for wrongful dismissal in one of the first AIDS discrimination cases. In 1982, AIDS did not have an official name; it was commonly referred to as GRID (gay-related immune deficiency), and there wasn't much information available about the disease in 1987 when the case took place. Consequently, employers like Bowers's, chose to fire infected employees to avoid becoming infected themselves. Unfortunately, even with all of

the available information about AIDS and homosexuals, both are still cause for dismissal from the workplace in today's society.

For that reason, a persons who are passing, who blend into "normal," heterosexual society, are more able to maneuver in society without the fear of discrimination; they are considered to be "normal" by the public, but in private they are able to be open about their identity. The negative consequences of passing can have psychological and emotional consequences for relationships. Barry Adam asserts, "those who pass improve their own life . . . but they fail to change the existing system of social privilege and economic distribution. They may win greater acceptance and wealth but only by pretending to be someone they are not and supporting the continued oppression of the group to which they do belong" (Siebers 117). As Adam points out, passers can be subjected to ridicule from members of their own community because they are seemingly not proud of their identity. Passers may also feel ostracized by non-passing homosexuals who bare the pain of social rejection. The rejection associated with passing can be quite disabling in its own right because it often times leaves the individual feeling as though he or she does not have a place in society. While Beckett was passing at his law firm, and had a secure place in his society, but that vanished at the moment of his exposure as a gay male infected with AIDS.

- *The Crying Game* -

Passing also lies at the heart of *The Crying Game*, though in a completely different context. The film tells the story of several rogue members of the Irish Republic Army who take a black British soldier named Jody prisoner. As the story unfolds, Jody, played by Forest Whitaker is killed, but not before telling Fergus, one of his captors, about his beautiful girlfriend at home. Fergus, saddened and troubled by Jody's death, finds the beautiful woman, Dil, in a London nightclub where she works as a stage performer, and begins to date her. Their relationship continues to grow, and one night, they return to Dil's flat and begin to engage in sexual relations. The twist of the film comes when Fergus learns, to his shock, that Dil is anatomically male.

The Crying Game allows viewers a glimpse into the struggles of a transgendered individual, and non-normative individuals in a broader sense, in a social context. The romance that blooms between Fergus and Dil seems to suggest something natural about alternative expressions of gender. Homosexual audiences expect that the male, heterosexual gaze will finally be debunked as the authority, but instead, Fergus reinforces the male, heterosexual hero. Because Dil refuses to acknowledge her male-ness, Fergus is not in a homosexual relationship, but a heterosexual relationship with a transgendered woman. Judith Halberstam discusses the "misuse or simply the avoidance of the transgender gaze in mainstream films that purport to be about gender ambiguity. She says, "by asking media and audiences to keep the film's secret, then, *The Crying Game*'s producers created and deepened the illusion that the film would and could offer something new and unexpected. In fact, the secrecy constructs a mainstream viewer for the film and ignores more knowing audiences" (80). She goes on to say, "the film create[s] the illusion of alternatives, but return[s] time and again to the stable political format of white

patriarchy” (81). Because audiences view the film through Fergus’s perspective, Dil is never in control of the gaze with which she is viewed. Consequently, the normative logic projected by Fergus onto Dil only serves to reinforce the heteronormative stereotypes.

Halberstam examines three definitions of “crying” as they relate to the film. The first, she says is “to announce in public, utter in a loud distinct voice so as to be heard over a long distance.” She equates this definition with the tender balance between being “out” and being closeted, a game that both Fergus and Dil play daily. Fergus keeps his relationship with Jody “closeted” as he does not tell Dil that he was involved in Jody’s death. Dil, on the other hand, seems “out” to her friends, and even assumes that Fergus knew she was transgendered. The film therefore explores Dil’s experiences “crying out” her truth. Halberstam’s second definition of “crying,” is perhaps the most literal definition, which she says means, “the process of shedding tears (usually accompanied by sobs or other inarticulate sounds).” Dil’s character cries often, and Halberstam relates her emotions with the “potential for tragedy in and around the transgender figure” (82). Dil is unable to attain happiness because she is an outcast from her society--even when she thinks she’s found someone that she loves he is literally sickened by the discovery that she is a man.

The Crying Game is the perfect example of how nothing is what it seems on the surface. The film serves as a very important revelation of what is hiding in plain sight, and deconstructs the notion of identity. A white, Irish soldier leaves his homeland in pursuit of a woman whose race and sex are all questionable, and who lives in a country that is the historical enemy of Fergus’s IRA. Both Fergus and Gil are outcasts in a society that does not allow for deviation, yet they manage to move within “normal” limits of social acceptability because neither of them

seems, on the outside, to be violating those social constructs. In addition, neither shows any desire to change the society in which they are living; they seem only to want to blend in.

Conclusion

To say that “coming out” is a difficult process is an understatement. There is a misunderstanding amongst mainstream, heteronormal society that homosexuality is strictly about sex; discussing sex is taboo, so in turn, discussing sexual orientation is taboo. Because heterosexuality is dominant and “normal,” the degree to which it influences aspects of life outside of the bedroom is underestimated. As a result of the same social constructs, sexuality determines the friendships a person maintains, and the environments in which a person feels comfortable. Clearly, for Dil, her sexuality is more than just sex because it affects every part of her daily life. She works as a hairdresser in a mediocre shop, with people who do not seem to respect her. She spends the majority of her free time at a gay bar, and the friends that she has are also gay, or gay friendly. Society has narrowed the definitions of gender and sexuality and their relationship to the norm so drastically that they no longer refer to a person’s sexual preferences, but their lifestyle in general; as Gillian Spraggs writes in the book *Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education*:

When I say that I am a lesbian, I am opening a gate behind which lie a great many more very important things: the central relationship in my life, and much of my experience of love; my experiences as co-parent, and my affection for my lover’s children; several, though by no means all, of my closest friendships; quite a few of the books I read, and the films I watch, and the plays I go to see; a considerable part of the reasons for my wariness towards policemen and fundamentalist Christians (180).

For Spraggs, passing would weaken her relationships with others. If she were to pass successfully--meaning that no one suspected that she were a lesbian--some of what she considers to be the most important parts of her identity would have to be hidden. As Spraggs recognizes,

coming out is not a once and for all experience; it is a reoccurring process. Even if an individual is open about his or her sexuality, he or she still has to disclose that information to any new acquaintance. Heterosexual men and women have the luxury of the vast majority of society assuming their sexuality for them: straight. While this assumption is a luxury for some, may be a disabler for members of the homosexual community. Nevertheless, passing offers homosexuals the option of not feeling pressured to announce his or her sexual preference. Spraggs observes that “many, perhaps most of us move in and out of the closet several times a day, depending on where we are and who we are with: at home, at work, with family, with trusted friends” (180).

The idea of passing is relevant to all four films previously discussed. For Milk, passing is not an option, as he lives his life in the public eye, but for Brandon, Beckett, and Dil, passing is a part of their daily lives. Some might argue that a person who is passing could be admitting that there is something wrong with them, or that there is a judgment by others that they are trying to avoid. Brandon, Beckett, and Dil are all examples of how psychologically draining and disturbing repressing a central aspect of one’s existence can be. Their exhaustion is exacerbated because they refuse to acknowledge that some part of them is suffering so that other parts may emerge. Depending on the amount of time a person spends passing as opposed to being openly or markedly homosexual, the tangible benefits may or may not outweigh the consequences. All four protagonists face some degree of judgment based on their choice to pass or not. Milk lost three elections because he was an outspoken homosexual, Brandon lost his friends, family, and life because he hid his identity from them, Beckett lost his job, and Dil lost the man she loved, all because society had disabled them from being who they are without fear of rejection.

To be clear, there is a difference between passing and simply not disclosing one’s sexuality. For instance, many homosexuals feel that the work place has no connection to their

personal lives, and for that reason feel no compulsion to disclose their sexual preferences. This does not mean that the person is passing because they may or may not make any efforts to conceal their sexuality- they may just simply not make it known.

The vast amount of pressure to conform to societal norms creates a variety of issues for anyone who does not fit the definition of “normal,” including homosexuals. While identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual is not physically disabling, it can be extremely emotionally, mentally, and socially disabling. Humans, in general, have a strange desire to categorize everything. Behaviors can either be good or bad, right or wrong, beneficial or detrimental. We are all humans, and while that should be enough to ascribe value to life, it is not. Homosexuals are not different from heterosexuals; they still experience love and long for a companion to share in life’s pleasures. In a country that promises to provide “liberty and justice for all” there most certainly is a discrepancy between the denotation of these words of and the connotation ascribed to them by society.

My whole life I have wanted to be normal – a concept that is so infinitely gray that it is impossible to definitively achieve. There is no black-and-white definition; it is subjective. What I have learned through writing this essay is not where I stand on political agendas in regard to gay rights, or if I will be comfortable outing myself in my future workplaces, but that there is only a chaotic, contradictory, hopeful adaptation of how I feel most comfortable in my own life. I am the truest, most authentic version of myself not because of my education, my material possessions, or the political battles I choose to fight, but because of the people with whom I surround myself: my family and the love and safety they so graciously give to me unconditionally, as well as my friends who are un-phased by the beautiful girl who loves to hold my hand at dinner. It is courage, optimism, hard work, laughter and imperfection that are so

often overshadowed in pursuit of the unattainable. What I have come to realize is that I cannot change the system, this society so dedicated to “normal,” but I can assert *my* normal – and that is exactly what I intend to do.

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