

"YOU CAN TELL JUST BY LOOKING"

mentators from across the political spectrum suggest that religious accommodations are required, in the meantime, to guard against backlash. It is clear that we do need arguments and activism outside the narrow parameters of the law. Nevertheless, legal and policy arguments over the need to "balance" religious liberty and LGBT equality ignore that LGBT rights are a matter of religious freedom, too. This is all the more reason vigorously and expansively to debate these issues.

Religious freedom, far from being the opposite of "gay rights," forms a necessary ground for LGBT equality and freedom. How people arrange their intimate relations and their gender identities involves important moral decision-making. This is quite different from a moral consensus, where a mythical "we" have to agree on the acceptable ways very personal sexual and gender choices get lived. As a society, we should be expanding possibilities for religious liberty. We can do this by broadening the scope of what counts as the good life and who counts as worthy of flourishing. In doing this, a context may emerge for changes of heart about what it means to live in a democracy and bump up against people different from ourselves.

MYTH 12

PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE MORE HOMOPHOBIC THAN WHITE PEOPLE

A clear, recent example of the myth that people of color are more homophobic than white people is the discussion of voter turnout for California's Proposition 8, in November 2008. Proposition 8 was a ballot initiative amending the state's constitution to read, "Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California." The amendment essentially overturned the state Supreme Court ruling earlier that year that had allowed same-sex marriage. Both proponents and opponents raised enormous amounts of money, and lobbying for and against the ballot initiative was fierce, often focusing on bringing specific communities to the polls. The final vote was 52.24 percent for Prop 8 and 47.76 percent against. In the analysis afterward, many commentators claimed that the African American vote was decisive in defeating same-sex marriage in California. According to exit polls, 70 percent of California's African American voters were in favor of Prop 8, compared with 53 percent of Latino voters, 49 percent of Asian voters, and 49 percent of white voters. Op-ed pieces in the LGBT and mainstream press immediately asked why the "black vote"—inaccurately presented as monolithic—was "homophobic."

Even before the voting began, pundits were predicting that black voters would tip the balance in favor of Prop 8 and against same-sex marriage. An analysis in the September 21, 2008, *New*

York Times, "Same-Sex Marriage Ban Is Tied to Obama Factor," argued that then-candidate Barack Obama would be to blame, as the anticipated large African American turnout at the polls would make the passage of Prop 8 more likely.

When Prop 8 did pass, many in the LGBT and mainstream media tried to explain the supposedly higher levels of homophobia among African Americans by pointing to deep, long-standing tensions between the African American and gay communities. This explanation ignored the reality that there are many LGBT people in the African American community and many antiracist, nonblack LGBT people. Popular national advice columnist and news analyst Dan Savage even complained on his blog that, while the LGBT community supported African American civil rights, "I can't help but feeling hurt that the love and support aren't mutual." He went on to write, "I do know this, though: I'm done pretending that the handful of racist gay white men out there—and they're out there, and I think they're scum—are a bigger problem for African Americans, gay and straight, than the huge numbers of homophobic African Americans are for gay Americans, whatever their color."

Other journalists countered this. Hendrik Hertzberg, in the December 1, 2008, *New Yorker*, pointed out that "upward of eighty per cent of Republicans, conservatives, white evangelicals, and weekly churchgoers" voted for Prop 8, and "the initiative would have passed, barely, even if not a single African American had shown up at the polls." Yet, both the liberal and the conservative media refused to let go of the idea that people of color are more homophobic than white people. Liberals were puzzled by what they saw as a contradiction: "Aren't we all fighting for civil rights?" Conservatives seized on a reason to praise the African American community—whom they frequently attack and pathologize as disregarding conventional family formations—for upholding "traditional values."

This discussion rests on a series of untrue presumptions in the popular imagination. The first is that the national LGBT community is mostly white. This is false. It is true, however, that much of the LGBT media, including newspapers, magazines, websites,

and blogs, as well as advertising in those places, give the impression that the community is overwhelmingly white. When national and local organizations of color do outreach or promote programs for nonwhite LGBT people, there is often a belief on the part of the white LGBT media that these concerns are, at best, incidental to the presumed, mostly white audience.

The second, very common presumption is that there are a lower percentage of LGBT people in communities of color. In contrast, many LGBT spokespeople have claimed that, while there is no way to actually count who identifies as LGBT in any community, there are probably the same percentage of LGBT-identified people across ethnicities, classes, and races. New polling, however, suggests that there are far more, not fewer, people of color who are openly gay—particularly in comparison with the out, white LGBT population—than studies have previously claimed. A 2012 Gallup poll of 121,290 US citizens showed that, by and large, nonwhite women and men were more likely to identify as LGB than white respondents. For instance, black men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine claimed a gay identity at a rate 56 percent higher than white men in the same age group. Hispanic men answered 49 percent higher than their white cohort. And Asian men of similar ages answered 23 percent higher than their white counterparts that they were gay. Polls simply give us a snapshot of their respondents, so it is important not to place too much weight on these results. However, it is clear that there are a sizable number of women and men who identify as LGBT in communities of color.

The third presumption is that marginalized communities, even when their differences are evident, always have exactly shared interests. This ignores the reality of historical and cultural differences, and leads to the sort of sloppy thinking manifested by Dan Savage. When he feels "hurt" because "the love and support aren't mutual," he writes as though there is an agreed-upon system of support and equivalency between groups.

When there are differences of opinion among groups, such as over same-sex marriage, as evidenced in the African American

vote in Prop 8, they quickly become an occasion for name-calling and recrimination. It would be far more productive if differences marked a time for beginning realistic, if difficult, discussions between communities.

These differences did not appear overnight. The history of interactions between an evolving LGBT movement and an evolving African American civil rights movement is intricate and complicated. Examining it briefly may clarify how some of the connections and differences between them took shape. In the 1920s, there were prominent African American women and men, many part of the Harlem Renaissance, writing and speaking about homosexuality. Writers such as Wallace Thurman, Angelina Weld Grimke, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Claude McKay, among others, were known in their literary circles to be homosexual and often wrote about these experiences in both open and coded ways. They were all involved in the larger project of defining new freedoms for African Americans in the United States. The Harlem Renaissance has been described as a civil rights enterprise masquerading as an arts movement.

The openness of the Harlem Renaissance, along with Harlem's very openly gay and lesbian nightlife, was less reflected in the political organizing of that period. Banking on gaining acceptance through respectability, pioneer activists such as W. E. B. Du Bois fostered a strong politic of fitting in that he hoped would "elevate the race." Du Bois fired his longtime friend and co-worker Augustus Granville Dill from the *Crisis*, the NAACP newspaper, after Dill was arrested for having sex in a men's room. (Du Bois later apologized for this in his autobiography.) Interestingly, many thinkers and writers of the Harlem Renaissance distanced themselves from the great, openly bisexual blues singers Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey not because they were too overtly sexual in their work but because blues was considered a vulgar, lower-class art form. Like many other Americans, many in the early African American civil rights movement may have held religious objections to homosexual behavior, but they also pinned their hopes on assimilation and accep-

tance through imitation of middle-class mores, which prevented a public acceptance of homosexuals. And yet, we know that there were many lesbians and gay men in the civil rights movement. Pacifist and political strategist Bayard Rustin was a confidant of Martin Luther King Jr., and helped organize the 1963 March on Washington. Reverend Pauli Murray was active in the civil rights movement and was the first ordained black woman in the Episcopal Church.

The early gay rights organizations were reformist groups that sought basic protections for homosexuals. While they did not prioritize discussions of race, or what we would now call diversity, many of them had members of color. The Los Angeles-based Knights of the Clock, formed in the late 1940s, focused on the needs of interracial male couples. There were many interracial couples in the Daughters of Bilitis, an early lesbian group formed by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, in 1955. In the late 1960s, the radical Gay Liberation Front, very much a product of the social justice movements of its time, focused on issues of racial justice and sought alliances with groups such as the Black Panthers. The Black Panther Party, very concerned with black masculinity, was not always open to these overtures, although its chairman, Huey Newton, did issue what was essentially a personal, remarkable, and strong statement of solidarity with the struggles of homosexual people. But the radicalism of the Gay Liberation Front was short-lived and quickly replaced by a reformist gay rights movement that for many years did not prioritize and often even ignored issues of racial equality and social justice.

Historically, there have been few official alliances between the major, national LGBT groups and coalitions of people of color. Since the 1970s, however, there have been many LGBT people of color who have attempted to analyze and remedy this situation. Lesbian and gay male activists such as Jewelle Gomez, Essex Hemphill, Barbara Smith, Assotto Saint, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa have written passionately and brilliantly on both the racism of the predominantly white LGBT movement and the homophobia present in various communities of color. In her groundbreaking essay "The

Power to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community." Cheryl Clarke wrote, "Homophobia among black people in America is largely reflective of the homophobic culture in which we live." Her point is not to blame homophobia on mainstream white culture, but to place minority culture in a broader context. She ends the essay by calling for heterosexual African Americans to reach beyond political and religious rhetoric to embrace not only black queer people, but also the goals of the LGBT movement. Clarke argues that not to do so is to "collude with the dominant white male culture to repress not only gay men and lesbians, but also to repress a natural part of all human beings, namely the bisexual potential in us all."¹

African American LGBT people have discussions about homophobia in their communities, organizations, and churches all the time. To write about the African American community as a monolithic group not only ignores the existence of African American LGBT people. It also seriously misrepresents where and how the fault lines between, and within, communities take shape.

Much of the legislation that has addressed LGBT discrimination over the past forty years has been based on antidiscrimination bills that were designed to protect people of color. Most of these were patterned on the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964. Today, more than twenty states, and close to 150 cities and counties, have enacted laws that ban discrimination in jobs and housing because of a person's perceived or actual sexual orientation. While this is a good example of how discrimination against gay and black people has come to be treated similarly by the law, it does not automatically create connections among the people of these communities.

We all have multiple identities that exist simultaneously. They are based on class background, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual desire, physical and cognitive ability, and even physical appearance. This is not a new idea. Political thinkers, particularly W. E. B. Du Bois, have promulgated it for almost a century. And even he could not accept all the identities it is easier to lay claim to today—such as LGB and, more recently, T. In the late 1960s, black feminists used the idea of an individual's multiple identities to explain their lives

and politics. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the word "intersectionality" in the late 1980s as a metaphor for the ways African American women are affected by multiple, overlapping systems of oppression as both women and people of color.² The term subsequently acquired a broader meaning having to do with the multiplicity of everyone's identity.

Intersectionality is not simply a sociological term to explain the complexities of people's lives. It is useful in planning political strategy, as well. Political organizers have learned that political change occurs more quickly and with a firmer and broader base of support if groups with shared self-interests work together. This is called, on a very basic level, coalition building. Intersectionality illustrates the multiple ways and issues around which people can form coalitions.

Nonetheless, if shared self-interest is based on a single identity, such as being gay or black, these identities may become all encompassing and mutually exclusive. Gay people and black people each wonder why the other group doesn't understand their supposed shared conditions of being minorities. But gay and black people may not support each other's causes because other dimensions of their lives, beyond race and sexuality, are, for them, more important to their lived experience. Rather than rely on our traditional understanding of identity politics, it makes more sense to look at how people across groups might connect on a wide range of issues. These might include attention to socioeconomic conditions, health care, or improving access to support programs, such as food assistance, family services, or job training. Working together to attain these goals, which are based on basic human needs, could foster connections between people, or groups of people, that fall outside of the traditional ways of thinking about identity politics.

New forms of social organizing beyond the parameters of identity politics may be needed even more today, at a time of increasing economic uncertainty for so many. For instance, organizing around issues of interpersonal dependency—such as children and the elderly depending upon economically stable adults—would give

us a new way to think about how to restructure lives and cultures.³ Another example, only now being explored by activists or theorists, is how disability status, which every human may eventually claim, might be a useful bond among diverse groups of people, to fight for what all people need for a safe, productive existence.⁴ People in very different minority groups may well support the goals of one another not because of shared interest, but because their understanding of the disadvantage and pain of other groups is based on questions of material survival to which everyone can relate. Can you keep a roof over your head? Can you put food on the table? Who will look after you when you are sick or otherwise unable to care for yourself? How will you pay for the doctor and hospital bills?

Even when there are identity-based coalitions that are working, it is important to acknowledge tensions predicated on conflicting political or religious beliefs. For the past few decades, the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) has been extraordinarily supportive of most of the LGBT antidiscrimination initiatives that have been put forward in Congress, including the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. The CBC's stance on Don't Ask, Don't Tell was at odds with the views of many African American pastors who had stated their theological opposition to many gay rights issues, especially same-sex marriage. Both the "for" and "against" views were rooted in deeply held beliefs and essentially at odds with each other. There is no problem here; any given community can hold contradictory beliefs. In May 2012, the NAACP, a group very sensitive to a broad range of political and religious sentiments in the African American community, came out in support of marriage equality. It looked past theological questions and framed the issue as a matter of simple equality under the law. Just as important, these examples illustrate that politics is a process that draws on numerous people and points of view.

History, shifting political attitudes, popular sentiments, and economic trends all have made coalitions around LGBT freedom a complicated and continuously evolving process. To focus on whether one minority group is "more" or "less" homophobic than others is to sidestep the larger, complex issues of lived conditions.

Empathy based simply on identity, or shared social status, such as in the idea that both black people and gay people are oppressed, cannot alone bridge the very different histories of these groups.

Coalitions have to be purposeful and ongoing. Identity politics have been a mainstay of political life and thinking in the United States over the past half century. They have often been effective in bringing about social justice. Sometimes they have gotten in the way of effective change. Maybe it is now time to think of identity politics as a place from which we can begin and then advance, rather than as our final destination.